UNDERSTANDING PERSISTENCE FACTORS FOR NON-TRADITIONAL BLACK FEMALE DOCTORAL GRADUATES: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

by

Aree E. Robinson

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:

Name and degree, Committee Chair

Name and degree, Committee Member

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in central Tennessee. For the purposes of this research, non-traditional Black female graduates was generally defined as Black females who pursued and completed a doctoral degree at forty-plus years of age and identified with any of the following statuses: 1) parenting dependent children, 2) primary caretaker for elderly parent(s), and/or 3) full-time employee. The Central Research Question was: What are the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in Tennessee? Schlossberg's transition theory and Erickson's psychosocial development theory informed the research regarding the transitional experiences that occur during adulthood, the techniques employed by adults to cope and adjust to the transition, and the influence of social and cultural engagement for overcoming barriers. Interviews were used for data collection. Ten graduates were purposefully selected to participate. The data were analyzed using the process of organizing themes, bracketing, and coding using ATLAS.ti software.

Keywords: non-traditional, doctoral, phenomenological

Dedication

There is no doubt that I stand on the shoulders of so many others who sacrificed for me to have the choice to pursue this doctoral degree. In my prayers, I consistently acknowledge that it is my desire to make my ancestors and elders (alive and deceased) proud; I desire that my mother (Aree 3rd) and brother (Buster) in heaven are proud of me and the choices that I make; God gifted me with parenthood thirty-three and half years ago and it yet matters to me that I make my daughter (Aree'll) proud; I now have a two year old granddaughter (A'maree), it matters to me what she will think of her Nana when she is older so my choices must make her proud; this work is also dedicated to Soni and others who are underdogs, late bloomers, and discarded by society; and although most were unaware of this endeavor, to my fantastic family who prays/prayed for me, particularly Agnes Theodile, Mother, now deceased, who always directed me to complete my undergraduate degree. I always conclude that prayer with the statement: God it is my desire to make You proud, it matters to me that I represent You well in the earth realm.

Acknowledgments

As is disclosed in the body of my dissertation, I meet the demographic requirements for this research. However, unlike the participants that were interviewed, I was not blessed with the abundance of loyal support that many of them received. As such there are only a few honorable mentions that I need to acknowledge. To an unnamed colleague that consistently contacted me to offer encouraging words as she was also navigating the doctoral journey. To my biggest and unwavering fan who also happens to be my favorite (only) daughter/child. Thank you for your unshakeable support and encouragement; thank you for believing in me because my adult life choices are almost always influenced by my desire to make you proud. Had it not been for the participants interviewed for this research, my acknowledgments would have ended with the aforementioned colleague and my daughter. But I received a beautiful surprise from those who had gone before me. Specifically named, I am grateful for the sincere encouragement from Dr. C, Elsa, Faye, Liz, Victoria, and Yogi. You all spoke words that I needed to hear just when my fuel was running low. Last but certainly not least, my dissertation chair and my editor were steadfast. My success is because of God connecting me to you.

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List of Abbreviations

Black feminist theory (BFT)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Predominantly White institution (PWI)

Social closure theory (SCT)

Socioeconomic status (SES)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Pursuing education beyond high school is a daunting undertaking for many students. It can be a greater feat for minority students. The challenges of higher education may increase with educational level and multiple minority affiliations such as the non-traditional Black female. Nevertheless, there is an increase in enrollment of non-traditional students (Caruth, 2014; Kaufman &Taniguchi, 2005; Simi & Matusitz, 2016). Chapter one provides the background, problem statement, purpose of study, significance of study, a central research question, and three sub-research questions, definitions, and summary related to the facilitators and barriers experienced by non-traditional doctoral graduates.

Background

This research expounded on the significance of capital (social, cultural, economic) for successful non-traditional students (Bourdieu, 1986; Brändle, 2017; Kosut, 2006). Brändle (2017) found that capital significantly impacted the timing of traditional and non-traditional student enrollment. Culture is complex and multidimensional, ubiquitous and immersed in many aspects of life and living and it no longer only refers, traditionally, to national identity (Vaughn, 2019, p.2). According to Vaughn (2019, p.2), the term culture has been expanded to include varied aspects of social distinctions including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, and sexuality. Culture comprises multiple factors which encompasses facets of daily life and social influences/factors (Vaughn, 2019, p.2).

Historical Context

Although there has been some progress, the presence of Black women in doctoral programs is uncommon as they continue to be outpaced by other ethnicities such as Asian and

Latina (Bartman, 2015). Review of extant literature revealed research on mature aged (25-64 years), advanced age (62+ years), and Black doctoral students at predominantly White institutions (PWI), but there was scarce literature targeting very mature (40-65) Black female doctoral students. Although the government claims to disaggregate data according to gender and race and designates women and Black individuals as major designated minorities, it is difficult to ascertain the experiences of Black women in higher education because no major effort has been made to reference them. Black women have been disregarded in studies on higher education (Bell-Scott, 1994; Ihle,1986; Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Conducting most studies on middle-aged, middle class White women has been characterized by Johnson-Bailey (2004) as one of the deficiencies in educational literature. Differentiating the experiences of Black women from other women and ethnic minorities (e.g., Latina women, Black men) in higher education is important to guide institutional decisions and to provide respect for Black women's challenges and successes (Bonner & Evans, 2004). Extant literature used several criteria to define non-traditional students which included age, year of secondary graduation, years in the workforce, marital status, mode of study, commuter status, and multiple roles (Chung et al., 2014). The non-traditional students for this study were Black females age 40 or older who completed doctoral programs.

Social Context

Bourdieu (1986), referred to social capital as assets which support social mobility beyond economic means such as style of speech, dress, book or picture ownership, or knowledge of music and art forms. He also defined social capital as the social networks and connections within a group of people. Exposure to literature and access to college educated professionals can be integral to pursuing higher level education such as a doctoral degree. Moore (2004) reported that

social access is advantageous because family background provides a culture that exposes individuals to compulsory tools and resources concomitant with cultural capital necessary for success.

Some non-traditional Black women are asked why they pursue higher education at an atypical time of life, when they may not be supported personally, professionally, or socially. Jindal (2014) reported that non-traditional students may confront a societal disposition that individuals of a non-traditional age may be too old to learn. It is assumed that Black women of a non-traditional age are not intrinsically motivated by growth and advancement to justify pursuing higher education (Coker, 2003). According to Coker, it is often misconstrued that Black females of a non-traditional age are motivated to pursue higher education by external forces such as divorce, job loss, single-parenthood panic, or at the very worst conjecture that Black women are welfare recipients on a special government back-to-school program. Coker added that racist, sexist, ageist stereotypes, and class bias are mischaracterizations that often obstruct a Black women's journey toward intellectual, personal, financial, and political power, which is understood by many to be the hallmark objective of education.

Having adult models such as parents or grandparents is a major social factor for many non-traditional Black females. In terms of cultural capital, Eversole (2021) indicated that when universities focus on non-traditional student needs in the form of scholarships, savings, grants, assistantships, and loans, it aids the development of human capital to support a progressive culture. There can only be a benefit to society when this non-traditional population completes a terminal degree as it impacts their personal and professional contributions to the communities where they live and work. Anderson (2010) reported growing support for institutions of higher learning to develop or expand curriculum options that enable older adults to pursue degrees and

projected that the population of older adults will rise significantly in number and proportion until 2030. Weaver et al. (1998) stated that it will be incumbent upon colleges and universities to create senior-friendly policies, services, and facilities to meet the needs of older adults. Hence, the focus of this study was on the persistence of non-traditional Black women who completed the doctoral process. The delay in pursuing doctoral studies is sometimes related to historical factors and societal limitations when individuals are affiliated with a minority subgroup, ageism, sexism, racism, and classism, that cast them as a non-traditional student. However, once completed, there is an increased opportunity for diversification pertaining to age, race, and gender in professional and bureaucratic arenas. With non-traditional Black women's persistence to succeed in completing doctoral degrees, there will be more visibility and availability of this demographic in academia and positions of power (Owusu-Kwarteng, 2021).

Theoretical Context

Schlossberg's transition theory is an adult development theory focused on the transitions that adults experience throughout life and the means by which they cope and adjust (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Schlossberg et al. defined a transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p.27). During a transition, a process takes place as an individual integrates changes into his or her daily life. Four aspects of a transition affect how well changes are integrated. The aspects (the 4 S System) are situation, self, support, and strategies (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Situation refers to transitional characteristics and its significance to the individual. Self refers to a person's outlook on life, as influenced by personal characteristics (including demographics) and psychological resources. Support refers to available resources. Strategies are defined as actions that individuals take in response to transitions.

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development postulates that the healthy development of personality and the procurement of principles to resolve crises is contingent upon progressing through eight stages (McLeod, 2023). McLeod added that in each stage of development, a person contends with a psychosocial crisis which may result in a positive or negative aftereffect on personality development. It was stated by Erikson (1958, 1963) that the needs of an individual, as exhibited by their thoughts and behaviors, may clash with societal expectations. According to McLeod (2023), the eight stages of psychosocial development are sequential; completing later stages is difficult without finalizing prior stages; however, subsequent resolution of unresolved stages is possible.

The first five stages of human development occur in early childhood. While they are not directly a focus of this study, it is necessary to discuss them. Healthy development in the formative years is critical to an amalgamated, purposeful, and gratifying life (Erikson, 1950; 1964). The eight stages of human development are as follows:

1. The first stage is *trust versus mistrust*. Infants through eighteen months rely on their primary caregivers for the establishment of stability and consistency to form trust and an outlook of hope is formed (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017).
2. The second stage is *autonomy versus shame and doubt*. Caregivers are important in this stage as their guidance is necessary for the eighteen months to three year old child to develop a sense of independence and control through the acquisition of willpower/self-control related to the acceptable thoughts and behaviors of a civilized society (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017).
3. The third stage is *initiative versus guilt*. Children are more assertive when it pertains to their goals to develop a sense of purpose and accomplishment (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017).

4. The fourth stage is *industry versus inferiority*. Children begin to have some awareness of their talents and skills that can create a sense of industry and the social and mental strength of competence (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017).
5. The fifth stage of development is *identity versus role confusion*. It is the most important stage of Erickson's theory. This stage is characterized by adolescents understanding who they are and formulating a sense of self so that the development of fundamental virtue of fidelity allows them to be confident whether identifying shared or dissimilar virtues in others (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017).
6. The sixth stage is *intimacy versus isolation.* It hinges on the ability to develop intimate relationships and the desire to acquire the strength of love according to the social norms (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017).
7. The seventh stage is *generativity versus stagnation.* It applies to middle adulthood (ages 40 to 65 years). See Figure 1. While youth navigate life focused on the present and momentary pleasure, in this stage mortality and legacy preoccupies thoughts which leads to malaise, stagnation, or working toward influencing future generations referred to as generativity, and inspires actions that display a concern for one's contributions to the succeeding generations (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017).
8. The eighth stage is *integrity versus despair*. Reflection is the hallmark of this stage where individuals review their life choices with a sense of satisfaction or regret as they embrace the fundamental strength of wisdom (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017).

Although it could be argued that stage eight, reflection and wisdom, explain the perseverance for non-traditional graduates, it is Erikson's seventh stage of psychosocial crisis that was the focus of this study. The stage of generativity versus stagnation comprises the ages of

the non-traditional participants and solicited the explication of their perseverance to be completers of doctoral programs at an atypical juncture of life.

Problem Statement

There is limited research describing the impediments to pursuing a doctoral degree as a non-traditional Black female. While there have been studies conducted about the plight of Black female doctoral students, it seems prudent to obtain knowledge about the various lived experiences of non-traditionally aged Black doctoral students to inform future studies and offer solutions that will allow institutions and educators to address the needs of this increasing population (Jones & Wilder, 2013). Although universities currently offer social, cultural, and economic resources such as clubs, organizations, and scholarships, the supports are not targeted at the non-traditional Black female student. This presents an opportunity for a novel approach with a specific focus on the needs of Black female doctoral students 40 years of age and older. Nettles and Millet (2006) reported that 30% of 9,000 doctoral students did not have adequate mentorship. Patton (2009) researched the mentor and mentee relationship essential to Black females in doctoral programs and found that minority students have more challenges finding a mentor and maintaining the mentor-mentee relationship. The age, race, and gender of the doctoral students were not a focus of the study.

According to Kearney et al. (2018), individuals from low socioeconomic familial backgrounds and communities, have been thought to lack aspiration. However, according to the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2013), students from disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances often lack understanding of how to achieve goals. The ability to engage and participate at the doctoral level is contingent upon an educational foundation and

although painful, it may require some students to address their educational deficits to succeed (Breihan, 2015).

Full-time employment contributes to the delay of pursuing higher education for many non-traditional students, but the lure of increased salaries has been reported as a source of motivation (Steinhauer & Lovell, 2021). The problem is that there is limited empirical data on the lived experiences of non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in central Tennessee. General barriers to success such as social, cultural, and economic capital along with specific barriers such as age, race, and gender was analyzed. Despite the impediments, the participants were successful in their respective doctoral programs. This research incorporated Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory and Erikson's (1964) psychosocial development theory to better understand the success of non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates.

Significance of the Study

Hermeneutic phenomenology helps elucidate the deeper layers of the human experience that is sometimes beyond consciousness; it seeks to uncover the meaning of actions that are associated with the lived experiences of the individual (Bynum & Varpio, 2018). Canon & Gascon (2013) reported that research pertaining to students returning to educational endeavors is not novel. However, most research is focused on a population between the ages of 25 to 50 without specificity to race, gender, or educational level (Hannon, 2015; Ryan & Bauman, 2016).

This study gave a voice to the understudied non-traditional, Black female, doctoral graduate. In conjunction with prior research, the findings have implications on the accessibility of education for all, at any stage of life. Additionally, there are implications for a greater likelihood of non-traditional Black female professionals in the workforce.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in Tennessee within the past five years?

Sub-Question One

What impact does culture have on non-traditional Black female graduates' pursuit of doctoral programs?

Sub-Question Two

What are the facilitators or barriers experienced by non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates?

Sub-Question Three

How did the non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates engage their facilitators and barriers in order to mitigate Schlossberg's three distinct steps: moving in, moving through, or moving out of the phenomenon?

Definitions

1. *All But Dissertation* (ABD) - The period of time when a doctoral student has completed coursework, a comprehensive examination, and elevated to candidacy (Johnson & Scott, 2023)

2. *Culture* – integrated patterns of learned beliefs and behaviors that are shared among groups which includes thoughts, communication styles, ways of interacting, views of roles and relationships, values, practices, and customs (Berry et al., 2011); a total way of life of people (Geertz, 1973).
3. *Generativity* - Erikson's theory of human development pertaining to the adult stage which concentrates on a model of productivity and creativity related to family, work, relationships, and society to guide the next generation (Slater, 2003; Erikson, 1950, p. 267).
4. *Non-traditional student* - Black females who pursued and completed a doctoral degree at forty plus years of age and identified with any of the following statuses: 1) parenting dependent children 2) primary caretaker for elderly parent(s) and/or 3) full-time employee.
5. *Pure mothering* – a display of morality, thriftiness, and hard work as a matriarch and homemaker to raise children with racial pride and nurture a family.
6. *Stagnation* - Erikson's theory of human development which addresses an adult's feelings of unproductivity and immobility (Slater, 2003).

Summary

Returning to university studies as a non-traditional student is becoming more common. Offerman (2011) wrote that increasing access of doctoral programs to women and to Black people enhances the life of the individual, society, and the body of work about doctorate studies. Howard & Henney (1998) reported higher education enrollees aged 40 years or over grew rapidly between 1970 and 1993 from 5.5% to 11.2%, the fastest-growing age category during that period. They posited that non-traditional students would continue to be an increasingly

significant part of the college classroom. Chapter One addressed the growing presence of non-traditional Black females who completed doctoral programs, their motivation, and their determination to succeed despite obstacles and setbacks. This research is significant for future non-traditional students and institutions may find it beneficial for program development. There is a need to consider unique types of support (e.g., caregiver and/or childcare services, mental health counseling) along with implications for impacting politics and policy pertaining to age, race, and gender.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Age, gender, and race are social dynamics that have been used to exclude others, label individuals as other with the implication of the individuals belonging to the undesirable group and discriminate against the groups according to an identification of what is good, bad, or better (Pompper, 2014). Black female doctoral graduates reported remarkable challenges in their degree programs including racism, sexism, perceptions of inferiority, and the lack of adequate faculty support (Vital, et al., 2023). A review of extant literature is necessary to understand the challenges confronted by non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates and unveil their motivation to graduate. The review of literature also provided insight into the gaps in literature that should be considered for further research. Chapter two provides the theoretical framework, related literature, and summary.

Theoretical Framework

Grand and Osanloo (2014) stated that the theoretical framework is the bedrock from which all knowledge is manufactured (metaphorically and literally) for a research study as it is the foundation and basis for the rationale for the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance, and the research questions. Providing the theoretical framework that informs the qualitative study is consistent with an architect submitting a blueprint for the design of a building according to Grant and Osanloo (2014). Similar to blueprints in construction, the theoretical framework apprises the reader of how the researcher will establish and support the need for the study as it details a systematic approach regarding the philosophical, epistemological, methodological, and analytical components (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The objective of a qualitative research design is to tell a meaningful and illuminating story about a phenomenon

which enlightens and broadens understanding of the phenomenon (Anfara & Mertz, 2014, p. 5). Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory is relevant to this study as it aides in providing insight about an adult's ability to adapt and cope with changing events that may impact roles, perceptions, expectations, alliances, and regimens. Erikson's (1964) generativity vs. stagnation or stage seven psychosocial developmental phase is relevant to this study as it is comprised of the 40 to 65 year old age range.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

As non-traditional Black female doctoral students, it is likely that there were experiences of transitions that required resources and help to cope with what Schlossberg refers to as, "the ordinary and extraordinary process of living" (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 8). It is through the lens of Schlossberg's transition theory that this study explored the experiences of non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates. Transition theory was conceived during a personal experience Schlossberg (2011) had while moving to pursue a job which caused bouts of confusion and anxiety despite the voluntary nature of the move. As a result of her confrontation with change, Schlossberg was inspired to study transitions for more than 35 years. In full transparency, Schlossberg acknowledged that her theory is built upon the research and theories of others that studied transitions and adaptive behavior pertaining to individual peculiarities, stages of life, or chronological age. Erik Erikson was one of many who contributed to Schlossberg's development of transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981).

Schlossberg (1981) posited that people continuously experience transitions. Transitions do not occur sequentially and can be experienced differently due to individual idiosyncrasies. Schlossberg et al. (1995) defined a transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p.27). According to Schlossberg (2011), events

or non-events are classified in one of three ways: 1) anticipated transitions, 2) unanticipated transitions, or 3) non-event transitions. Anticipated transitions are major life events that occur predictably such as graduation from secondary education, beginning a first job, or retirement; unanticipated transitions are not predictable or scheduled such as divorce, sudden death of a loved one, job loss, or diagnosis of a major medical condition; and non-event transitions are transitions that are expected but do not manifest or come to fruition, such as failure to be admitted to college/a specific program, marriage, or parenting (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 159). While non-event transitions are often most disruptive to routines and sense of self, all transitions alter relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. The impact of the transition is determined by the extent to which it alters daily life (Lazarowicz, 2015).

Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) 4 S System is comprised of *situation*, *self*, *support*, and *strategies*. Schlossberg's objective was to provide a means for taking stock of the transition to identify resources that individuals can use to cope (Peila-Shuster, 2016). Coping effectively during a transition is contingent on an individual's assets in the four sets of variables (Gbogbo, 2020). The situation variable refers to transition characteristics and its significance to the individual at the time it occurs. It helps answer questions about the transition characteristics (Anderson et al., 2012). It raises questions about what led to the transition such as triggers, timing of the transition in the context of social norms, aspects of the transition that can be controlled, how roles may be changed, the duration of the transition, whether similar transitions have been confronted, concurrent stress as a result of the transition, and whether the transition is viewed as positive or negative (Anderson et al., 2012, pp. 67-68). The self variable refers to a person's outlook on life as influenced by personal characteristics (including demographics) and psychological resources and addresses inner strength for coping with transition (Schlossberg,

2011, p. 160). Due to individuality, conceptualizing self for coping with transition is complicated because assets consist of positive and negative attributes to life situations. Anderson et al. (2012) reported that it is difficult and complex to gain a sense of self. In an attempt to conceptualize self, key personal and demographic characteristics were identified for coping with transitions including socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, age, stage of life, state of health, and ethnicity/culture (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 73). Key psychological resources identified by Anderson et al. (p. 73) include ego development, outlook, commitment and values, and spirituality and resilience. The support variable refers to available resources at the time of transition. Support can be formal and informal in the form of intimate relationships, family units, friends, institutions that offer mentoring, and community organizations that offer prayer (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 84). Support is vital for the incorporation of the following key elements: 1) *affect*, which refers to expressions of liking, admiration, respect, or love 2) *affirmation*, which refers to expressions of agreement or acknowledgment of the appropriateness or rightness of an act or statement of another person and 3) *aid* (*assistance*), which refers to the exchange of things, money, information, time, and honest feedback, negative or positive (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 85). The strategies variable refers to actions that individuals take in response to transitions. Browne et al. (2018) stated that it may be networking, seeking professional recognition, or developing skills. Three strategies or coping responses include modifying the transition, reframing the meaning of the transition, and reducing stress in the aftermath (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011). Anderson et al. (2012) also discussed four possible modes of coping which included direct action, inhibition of action, information seeking, and intrapsychic. Strategies provide responses that help mitigate the transition, control the meaning of the transition, or manage the stresses derived as a result of the transition.

Schlossberg et al. (1989) and Anderson et al. (2012) reported that transitions take place in three distinct steps: *moving in*, *moving through*, or *moving out*. Moving in, is the juncture where a person advances into a new transition. Moving through, is the juncture where a person begins to become aware of the rules, regulations, norms, and expectations of the transition (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 57; Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 15). In this stage, issues are confronted including balancing activities with other responsibilities and learning how to feel supported and challenged during the journey (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 57; Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 16). According to Anderson et al. (2012), this phase necessitates letting go of aspects of self—such as former roles in order to embrace new roles. Anderson et al. (2012) reported that this stage can be long, and individuals may require help sustaining energy and commitment. *Moving out*, is the juncture where a person declares closure and moves to the next transition such as a new job or completion of a doctoral program (Anderson et al., 2012).

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory

Erikson (1964) suggested eight stages of human development, the seventh stage is most relevant to this study**.** Erikson is one of the premier psychoanalytic theorists (Maree, 2021). He acknowledged the influence of culture and history, thereby rejecting the limitations of reductionistic analyses and inflexible rules of interpretation (Slater, 2003). Erickson's perspective on human development includes the stages of childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age (Slater, 2003). The approach is described as holistic, optimistic about human potential, and more focused on psychological health than psychological illness (Slater, 2003).

In the seventh phase of the adult stage of psychosocial development, generativity refers to extensive adulting responsibilities such as family, relationships, work, and society (Slater, 2003). In generativity, Erikson (1950, p. 267) adults focus their attention primarily on decisions that can

aide in establishing and guiding the next generation. Generativity includes the concepts of productivity and creativity which are instrumental in formulating a footprint that enhances the conditions of humanity educationally and civically. Ultimately, one's creations serve as a contribution to humanity and evidence of one's existence in the world beyond mortality (Slater, 2003). It is legacy. According to Slater (2003), generativity (versus stagnation) represents the major conflict of adulthood.

Peterson and Klohnen (1995) reported that there is no theoretical consensus on Erikson's construct of stagnation. In various research, stagnation included descriptors such as rejectivity, authoritarianism, narcissism, self-absorption, and identity inflexibility within a cultural setting and toward outgroups (Bradley, 1997). Bradley's (1997) concept of stagnation, referred to in the seventh phase of psychosocial development, correlated most to this study. According to Bradley (1997), stagnant individuals may exhibit a lack of involvement, minimal inclusivity, little personal energy in work, co-workers, or staff, apathy toward politics or social movements, little sense of responsibility to the community, lack of interest in the needs of others, broad criticism of others and/or their contributions, indifference to children's choices, and general lack of productivity. The stagnant individual seems stuck; they do not display productivity consistently, there is little sense of giving, and self-satisfaction is diminished (Bradley, 1997).

McAdams & Logan (2004) posited that generativity is a psychological construct situated in the psychology of individual lives. They presented ten propositions: 1) generativity is the concern for and commitment to the well-being of future generations, 2) generativity is a developmental challenge for the middle-adult years, 3) generativity may spring from desires that are both selfless and selfish, 4) generativity is shaped by culture, 5) the strength of generativity differs across individuals, 6) individual differences in generativity are related to quality of

parenting, 7) individual differences in generativity predict a range of social involvements, 8) generativity promotes psychological well-being, 9) generativity is expressed in the stories people construct to make sense of their lives, and 10) the life stories of highly generative adults affirm the power of human redemption and renewal.

Additional research expounded on Erikson's eight stages of development with seven new concepts of psychosocial conflict that expounds on the internal turmoil that can be experienced during the stage of generativity vs. stagnation: 1) inclusivity vs. exclusivity, 2) pride vs. embarrassment, 3) responsibility vs. ambivalence, 4) career productivity vs. inadequacy, 5) parenthood vs. self-absorption, 6) being needed vs. alienation, and 7) honesty vs. denial (Slater, 2003). Career productivity vs. inadequacy offers insight about the psychological processes at the core of non-traditional Black women completing a doctoral degree. Slater (2003) reported that most adults in developed societies associate their identities with what they do. Slater (2003) noted that young adults may experience turmoil entering the workforce as they attempt to integrate their adult experience with their youthful dreams. During this period of turmoil, young adults may focus on rising through the ranks whereas older adults may focus on monitoring their impermanence, questioning their self-worth, and assessing their contributions to future generations (Slater, 2003). As such, responsibility vs. ambivalence also has relevance to the persistence of non-traditional Black female doctoral students striving for the culminating degree.

Erikson's (1958, 1964) stage seven, generativity versus stagnation, explains non-traditional Black female scholars' determination to achieve a terminal degree with a focus on legacy. It serves as a framework to explore and describe the experiences of a demographic that has not been the focus of previous studies. The participants of this study experienced some

stagnation, but the study focused on generativity which offered insight about the non-traditional Black female college students who chose to conquer a giant—doctoral matriculation.

The determination to pursue and complete a doctoral degree at an atypical stage of life requires grit, persistence, and adaptability (Cross, 2013). The two theories provide the theoretical framework for this study investigating the lived experiences of non-traditional Black female doctoral degree completers.

Related Literature

Transition during adulthood brings new challenges, roles, and responsibilities (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011). In Cross' (2013) research regarding the grit needed for non-traditional students to reach academic success, it was determined that grit and success were directly related to GPAs and to the number of hours spent studying. Cross also noted that non-traditional adults were more likely to persist to completion, resulting in increased well-being and satisfaction.

Many non-traditional Black female doctoral students identify as being from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Huffman, 2013). Innate strengths of African American families who report identifying with a low-socioeconomic status include strong family connections and the will to succeed (Carter-Black et al., 2011; Chaney, 2014). The one Black female represented in the research of Cumings Mansfield et al. (2010) reported that the lack of family or peers familiar with the complexity of doctoral studies contributed to her feelings of inadequacy based on race, but racial identity was superseded as a source of distress by her identification of being poor. These strengths support the assertion that low-income African American families value the possibility that younger family members may be inspired to elevate their educational ambitions (via intergenerational literacy) through the model of Black female doctoral candidates. Cross (2013) indicated that grit, persistence, and adaptability, are examples of strength required by non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates to demonstrate their will to succeed and to fulfill

their responsibility to model possibilities for their families and communities which is a hallmark concern during the stage of generativity. The positive innate strengths of African American families are seldom disseminated in literature (Carter-Black et al., 2011; Chaney, 2014).

Barriers to Matriculation

Identity

Matsuba et al., (2012) found a relationship between identity maturity, environmental identity, generativity, and environmental engagement. Generativity refers to making positive and enduring contributions to current and future generations (Huo et al., 2022). According to Erikson (1964) generativity is the establishment, the guidance, and the enrichment of the existing generation and the world it succeeds (p. 123). As a multifaceted concept, Newton and Stewart (2012) reported that generativity may be apparent in the family environment, in the workplace, or scholarly endeavors. These visible displays of generativity can involve community involvement or global initiatives such as missionary work in support of the less fortunate and engaging in environmental or political activism. Whitbourne (2016) noted that generativity and identity are powerfully interconnected and salient during middle age. Erikson (1958) stated that generativity is a crucial developmental task in mid-to-late adulthood with particular significance for women. Matsuba et al., (2012) reported the following about more mature individuals: 1) they have a more positive outlook associated with their environmental identity, and 2) in the stage of generativity, which is associated with a mature identity, individuals participate more in environmental engagement.

Greater life expectancy is one explanation for non-traditional Black female scholars choosing to pursue a doctoral degree as a late life goal. For almost 60 years, life expectancy in the United States has increased. From 1959 to 2016, it increased from 69.9 years to 78.9 years

(Woolf & Schoomaker, 2019). As an incidental outcome of people living longer, they are working longer and daring to pursue dashed dreams as they reconstruct their identities.

Racism

Racism is a sociopolitical construct disguised as a biological phenomenon that categorizes people according to a fictional hierarchy which posits that White people are superior allowing the perpetrators to benefit most from the allocation of resources (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Roberts, 2012; & Tayo, 2012). Roberts (2011) stated that race is a biological myth that promotes inequality in a supposedly post-racial era. Reflecting on antebellum, dehumanization of Black people through chattel slavery created a legacy of racism in the American educational system which substantially restricted their scholarly opportunities (Williams et al., 2018). During the pre-Civil War era, many predominantly Black southern states had legislation that prohibited Black people from learning to read and write (Fox-Genovese, 1989). Although there were pre-Civil War higher education institutions such as Cheyney (founded in 1837) and Lincoln (founded in 1854) in Pennsylvania, and Wilberforce (founded in 1856) in Ohio that allowed Black people to enroll, they were still significantly undereducated in the north also (Williams et al., 2018). Even under rare circumstances when Black individuals received enough primary and secondary education to attend college in the antebellum north, they were not able to encourage other Black individuals to enroll in higher education (Moss, 2010). Additionally, Moss (2010) stated that while Blacks who earned a college education in the antebellum north may have excelled educationally and in some instances professionally, they were unable to provide opportunities for other Black college graduates due to prejudice and systemic racism which resulted in limited post-graduate career possibilities despite educational attainment. Regardless of location, Black people of this era desiring an education were confronted with monumental challenges including

questions about their intellectual aptitude, general proclivity, and social and political opposition (Williams et al., 2018). During the antebellum era, many Whites implicitly and explicitly expressed opposition to providing opportunities to Black individuals. Even if they were allowed a college education they were not allowed to apply it to improve their social, economic, and political situation (Fox-Genovese, 1989; Moss, 2010).

Navigating a doctoral program in American society, Black women have dual complexities since they belong to two historically marginalized groups: race and gender (Shahid, et al., 2018). At the intersection of race and gender, Black female doctoral students contend with discrimination pertaining to assumptions that they are incapable of doctoral matriculation (Walkington, 2017). According to Robinson (2013), Black female doctoral students' vocal expressions are often misinterpreted as too opinionated. Passionate expressions are mislabeled as volatile; hearty laughter is viewed as unrefined; and nonverbal gestures such as leaning one's head to the side while speaking may be classified as unpolished or crude. As such, Black women have reported the need to censor their verbal and nonverbal expressions and cope with being treated as if they do not exist (Robinson, 2013). Shahid et al. (2018) reported that stereotypes resulted in college professors and peers reacting surprised at the intelligence of Black doctoral students which left them feeling overlooked and dismissed.

Sexism

The American Psychological Association (2018) defines sexism as discriminatory and prejudicial attitudes, beliefs and practices directed against a person based on their sex and/or gender; often underscored by the belief that the gender, usually women, is inferior.

Prior to 1940-1955, women had restricted access to enrollment in doctoral programs (Crocco & Waite, 2007). Although Black women of this period who achieved doctoral success

experienced marginalization, they worked fervently against the perception of the Black woman's "place" (Crocco & Waite, 2007). Crocco and Waite (2007) defined a Black woman's place as roles and responsibilities that limited their professional and communal leadership opportunities such as providing a proper home as a strong matriarch, having two or three children, nurturing a healthy family, engaging in *pure* mothering through racial pride, and morality by displaying thrift and hard work.

Black women experienced increased stress due to stigma associated with the intersections of identities, particularly race and gender (Szymanski et al., 2016) and often times age in doctoral programs. In the research of Walkington (2017), it was reported that Black female doctoral students currently face racism and sexism without much change since they were first allowed to legally pursue education. Robinson (2013) stated that the double edge of racism and sexism has been exceptionally harmful to Black female graduate students.

Classism

Another challenge which is frequently unaddressed that may influence non-traditional Black female students' sense of belonging within doctoral programs is classism (Rubin, 2012; Felder et al., 2014). Classism is based on family pedigree. The classes are categorized as working class, middle class, or affluent with each representing a designation of status and power affording access to resources (Colbow et al., 2016). Ramirez (2017) studied the doctoral socialization process of minority students of varied academic disciplines and found that working-class students experienced overt and covert classist expressions by staff and injustice from department personnel. For instance, faculty sometimes communicated that students of a certain class lacked the intellectual capability to withstand doctoral-level education. Similarly, in a national case study examining the experiences of 21 working-class female minority doctoral

students, Cueva (2013) reported that students experienced a lack of support from faculty members and frequently contemplated dropping out due to issues associated with their social class status.

Classism in academic settings can result in a low sense of belongingness, negative psychosocial issues, and contemplation of discontinuing the doctoral pursuit (Cueva, 2013; Ramirez, 2017; Walpole, 2008). Disparities can also be created by social class due to working-class non-traditional Black females needing to maintain full-time employment which typically translates into part-time doctoral program enrollment, less faculty and peer engagement, and less involvement in program-related activities such as teaching, mentoring, supervision, and research (Shavers & Moore, 2019).

Perceptions of Inferiority

The remnants of systemic racism and ostracism continue to influence educational endeavors at all levels (Lynn & Dixson, 2022). In their description of expectations to assimilate, Black women reported feeling as though they must change their values, behaviors, attitudes, or overall self-presentation to align with the prevailing societal codes of race, gender, and class which dismissed the unique cultural identities of Black women in doctoral programs (Shavers & Moore, 2014; Strayhorn, 2013). It was further stated by Shavers et al. (2014) and Strayhorn (2013) that this led to feelings of inadequacy and marginality in doctoral candidates and contributed to graduate students' difficulties in establishing a scholarly identity.

Using stereotyping and depictions, there is still a pervasive mischaracterization of Black women by society as lazy and unintelligent (Betrand-Jones et al., 2013; Rasheem, et al., 2018). Another typecast is "*strong Black woman*" which may explain non-traditional Black female doctoral students' reluctance to ask for help when questions arise or when confronting a

challenge (Dortch 2016; Martin 2018). According to scholars, the origin of the strong Black woman concept stems from racism associated with slavery. It is a cultural expectation that one must display strength despite extreme distress in the Black community and, at present, the concept is associated with both racism and sexism in the United States (Donovan & West, 2016; Watson & Hunter, 2016). Nelson et al. (2016) postulated that Black women respond to this portrayal with the belief that they must exhibit strength through being independent, hardworking, selfless, and stoic.

Negative perceptions of students and faculty can lead to a lack of investment in student success (Jones, 2013). Jones et al. (2013) reported that non-traditional Black women in doctoral programs must endure doubts about their intelligence, competency, and legitimacy pertaining to matriculation. To manage and overcome racial and gender biases, Black women, vexed with negative stereotypes, have used resistance to assimilation, and persistence to shape their identity; a coping strategy that can jeopardize mental well-being (Kelly et al., 2021; Moore & Shavers, 2014). Under the pressure to persist, students jeopardize mental and emotional well-being which can also negatively impact their physical health (Moore & Shavers, 2014). Mid-life changes concomitant with being Black and a woman can result in mental and physical debilitation as women in this phase of life experience weight gain, hair loss, loss of memory, diminished self-confidence, loss of height, brittle bones, inferiority, and other pre-menopause symptoms (Etaugh, 2018). These changes, feelings of inadequacy, and the lack of motivation may cause navigating the doctoral demands significantly more difficult. Carter et al., (2013) stated that in the pursuit of equality, Black women feel more pressure to behave in ways that are conducive to societal expectations such as display little emotion and present as demure in lieu of passionate and

opinionated expressions. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2014) stated that this demand can lead to stress, depression, and decreased motivation related to matriculation.

Other barriers to matriculation included unpreparedness for academia resulting in withdrawal (Landry, 2003) that can result from an inequity in cultural capital which Bourdieu (1986) explained was necessary for educational readiness. Mikus et al. (2020) stated that parents from families who understand the cultural norms, established by the dominant class, disseminate cultural capital to their offspring via active socialization (e.g., trips to the museum) and passive role modelling (e.g. reading books) and in turn, the offspring recast their cultural capital into educational results. Kosut (2006) reported that success in doctoral programs is contingent on students' access to resources along with cultural capital. Landry (2003) described another hinderance to matriculation in which faculty members blame admissions offices for admitting weak students perpetuating fallacies about the inability of minorities to learn instead of focusing on adequate resources for the students (Durham, 2001). Diversity at colleges and universities, related to race and gender, began to improve after World War II due to the G. I. Bill, but the acceptance of Black men into colleges and universities was prioritized over Black women based on the student capacity limits and an unjust system of hierarchical delimitation according to primarily race followed by gender (Turner & Bound, 2003).

Social Support

Social support has been examined for varied circumstances but there is scarce research specific to doctoral students (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). The psychological well-being needed for doctoral studies is impacted by social support (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Graduate students with social support from their families, peers, and faculty have less physical and psychological symptoms of stress (Goplerud, 1980). According to Mallinckrodt and Leong, (1992), two

hypotheses explain the benefits of social support. The buffering hypothesis contends that social support is associated with the welfare of those experiencing stress to relieve stressors that could result in health issues. The direct effect hypothesis contends that social support is advantageous regardless of the amount of stress.

Concerns about job security, insufficient pay, role conflict, mentoring relationships, publishing pressure, seclusion, inadequate support systems, and lack of work–life balance can make navigating the responsibilities of life as a doctoral student challenging (Lau & Pretorius, 2019). The combination of these stressors can lead to psychological distress and mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety (Pervez et al., 2021). However, Pervez et al. (2021) reported that social support from a supervisor and from friends may minimize the symptoms. The American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2022) defines depression as a mental illness that causes feelings of sadness lasting two or more weeks. It can include mild to severe symptoms of loss of interest in activities, changes in appetite, trouble sleeping, fatigue, difficulty focusing, and suicidal thoughts (APA, 2022). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders–5* (*DSM-5*) includes several types of anxiety which generally involve the presence of excessive worry about a variety of topics, events, or activities, whereas the worry persists for at least six months (APA, 2022). In addition, high levels of demanding coursework in conjunction with time sensitive tasks, social limitations, and inadequate levels of support implicitly creates a stressful process for doctoral candidates (McCauley et al., 2020, p. 490). Thus, there must be a focus on the influence of social relevance prior to and in the process of matriculation.

There is a sacrifice of time spent with family and friends, sleep, and work which doctoral students are not fully cognizant (Collins, 2015). Collins (2015) also noted that it is not

uncommon for family and friends to feel neglected or abandoned. Academic support is also a necessary resource for non-traditional Black female students (Dortch, 2016).

Lack of Adequate Faculty Support

Interviews from a study conducted on Black all-but-dissertation (ABD) women pursuing doctoral degrees revealed that the intersecting identities of race and gender held by Black women resulted often in dismissive behavior during interactions with graduate faculty, and peers, which created conflict related to the process of graduate school socialization (Johnson et al., 2023). The Black all-but-dissertation (ABD) women of Johnson et al. (2023) research also reported that their adult priorities inhibited time available to focus on studies, especially as writing demands increased. According to Allen et al., (2018) and Dortch (2016), it is not uncommon that Black women experience marginalization, alienation, or isolation in departments experiencing underrepresentation of women and minority affiliation.

Simi et al., (2016) asserted that older U.S. students in higher education reported more experiences of discrimination based on variables associated with their age. Simi et al., (2016) reported that ageism involves any uncalled-for reaction to any age and the components of racism and sexism are not required. The social closure theory (SCT) is used by Simi et al., (2016) to explain that ageism is employed by specific parties referred to as in-groups to deny favorable circumstances to others referred to as out-groups. Silverthorne (2020) explains that diversity is being invited to the party, inclusion is being asked to dance no matter aesthetics or how one identifies, and equity involves providing equal access to the resources and tools to succeed. In a study conducted by Cumings Mansfield et al. (2010), some doctoral students reported that they learned the expectations of the higher education culture through trial and error.

Alexander-Floyd (2008) reported that Black doctoral women receive less faculty mentoring and support compared to White women enrolled in doctoral programs. In the arena of higher education there is an ongoing shortage of Black female doctoral students' advancement into tenure track faculty positions, despite some recent increases in faculty hires, which limits the selection of Black mentors (Patton, 2009). According to Fries-Britt et al., (2005), the outcome of success of Black doctoral students is associated with the presence or absence of Black professors being accessible as mentors in higher education. Responses from participants of one study supported the BFT theory of dialectical relationship as the participants reported that mentorship provided by an African American female mentor would have the capacity for relating in a unique way and would enhance their experience as a Black doctoral student (Grant, 2012). In a study conducted by Raheem et al. (2018) to explore the relationship between Black female doctoral students and their mentors, the participants reported not having access to formalized mentoring programs which led them to create organic mentor relationships unrelated to the higher education institution. The participants described those mentor-mentee relationships as life altering noting that the relationships provided for an increase in access to opportunities. In addition to exploring why mentorship is so essential to the success of Black female doctoral scholars, Raheem et al. (2018) also explored how its absence can be detrimental to the success of Black female doctoral candidates.

Institutional socialization at the graduate level was reported by Gardner (2008) to positively impact the persistence of doctoral students in their programs. Socialization refers to the understanding and incorporation of customary activities by the new members of the organization (Gardner, 2008). Similar to mentoring, socialization into the doctoral experience

is pervasively viewed as critical in one's ability to persist in doctoral programs (Vital et al., 2023). Models of faculty-student socialization often lack consideration for the consequences of identity, specifically race and gender, on the socialization experiences while enrolled in a doctoral program (Johnson et al., 2023). It was further stated by Johnson et al. (2023) that traditional models of faculty-student socialization fail to consider the institutional structures that mold and standardize some of the behaviors involved in faculty-student interactions. For example, in traditional models of faculty-student socialization, there is an implicit perception of a power hierarchy between the positions of student and faculty. Winkle-Wagner et al. (2020) stated that most doctoral student socialization typically unfolds from a unidirectional socialization approach of faculty introducing the existing norms, whether of a social or professional context, to the degree program students. Because this approach does not permit opportunities for students to present genuinely which cultivates feelings of exclusion and isolation in graduate school, Winkle-Wagner et al. (2020) advocated for the enactment of a two-way socialization process which will allow opportunities to pause and reflect on the needs of Black graduate students. Other attributes of the two-way socialization model proposed by Winkle-Wagner et al. (2020) include more inclusivity and reciprocity for Black students along with decreased rigidity that creates space for both their identities and ideas within academia.

With consideration for race and gender in the socialization experiences of Black doctoral students, Williams, et al. (2018) reported that the power dynamic between faculty and students can be influenced by faculty members diminishing students' academic promise to standardized scores such as the graduate records examination (GRE) and promoting tokenism, acceptance of a few individuals into graduate programs to meet racial and sexual expectations, which likely results in feelings of inaptitude, cynicism, seclusion, and suffering. Johnson et al. (2023)

underscored the importance of access to structured, institutionally supported resources and programs to make certain that students are connected to the capital necessary to complete graduate programs. The Sistah Network is a strategic model that was designed specifically for the purpose of supporting the academic and social success of Black women enrolled in doctoral programs in conjunction with assisting the doctoral students with accessing faculty and staff at the higher education institutions who can serve as mentors and institutional agents (Allen et al., 2018). Emotional well-being of Black female doctoral students is contingent upon these types of structured supports, and it also offers options for fellowship and social support which is essential for successful matriculation (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2018). The presumption that Black female doctoral candidates do not need targeted support is expelled when institutions of higher education offer structured resources to their doctoral candidates and it eliminates the burden placed upon Black women to form their own systems of support (Allen et al., 2018).

Andragogy

Teaching or educating adults is referred to as *andragogy* (Loeng, 2017). Historically, learning was viewed as a process of inquiry with the learner having the primary role. The teacher's role was to guide or facilitate the inquiry (Dobber, et al., 2017). Andragogy derives from the Greek word *andros*, which means "man" or "grownups" (Knowles, 1968, p. 351) or agogus meaning "leader of" (Knowles et al., 2020, p. 59), which is interpreted as the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles, 1984, p. 6). The term andragogy was introduced by Knowles (1968) as the science of teaching adult learners with a focus on their attributes. Knowles underscored the difference between pedagogy and andragogy (Caruth, 2014). Knowles contended that the administration of higher education institutions is responsible for the

implementation of andragogy (Caruth, 2014). Knowles elaborated stating that university administrators often violate the principles of andragogy by focusing on the highest production for the lowest cost despite the adverse impact on learning (Caruth, 2014). Non-traditional learners tend to incorporate knowledge gained from education into real life experiences (Caruth, 2014; Simi & Matusitz, 2016) which enhances their readiness to learn based on their attributes from experience along with their understanding of future practical application.

Purwati et al., (2022, p.86) noted six assumptions about best practices for supporting adult learners to minimize barriers to matriculation.

1. Adults need to know why they are learning new knowledge before they are willing to participate. For instance, adults are motivated when they understand that learning will take them from their current position to a desired future position personally, academically, or professionally.
2. Adult learners consider it important to their self-concept that instructors view them as self-directed and capable in their learning.
3. The value of adult learners' experiences is expected and appreciated. The individual experiences of students provide various perspectives that contribute to learning through multiple lenses.
4. Adults become ready to learn when it aligns with their purpose or developmental stage of life.
5. Orientation learning involves intentional effort to comprehend teachings by attending to the information, analysis of the information for interpretation, and persistence to employ the information. Motivation occurs when adults feel that the information will help with completing a task or solving a problem.

6. Adults are motivated to learn primarily by internal (self-esteem or personal) desires and some external (employment) motivators.

With changing times, many students are adult learners who have more life experiences and desire to understand the why related to what is being taught and take responsibility for initiating their learning (Collins, 2004). Hence, it is important for instructors to know the needs of particular learner groups i.e., adults, and use appropriate educational methods e.g., active participation, visual, audio, and kinesthetic materials (Collins, 2004).

Johnson & Scott (2023) reported that the dominant culture teaching style is another area which results in challenges for Black doctoral students. Caruth (2014) noted a substantial increase of adult students enrolled in higher education and the need for consistent andragogy. Adequate empirical research is lacking on andragogy despite its 40-year history of being considered the predominant model of adult learning (Caruth, 2014).

According to Hathaway (2014, p.3), experts advocate for seven principles that must be considered when students are adult learners:

1) Adults have limitations on the time that can be dedicated to learning due to adulting responsibilities such as work, family, parenting, and civic duties; as such, increased interaction with instructors and peers result in better academic performance.
2) Adult learners are goal oriented; possibly attributed to deferred endeavors and/or the contemplation of death.
3) Adult learners can rely on prior knowledge and exposure (experience).
4) Adult learners process information better when various methods of instruction are employed to help make connections regarding the utility of real-life application.

5) Adult learners are inspired by theoretical applications and practical applications of knowledge.
6) Adult learners should be engaged by the educational material, and it should incorporate opportunities to use a variety of critical thinking and problem-solving skills that meet their learning styles.
7) Adult learners benefit from a variety of learning experiences as it accommodates students with different learning styles and promotes respect for diverse talents.

Economic

Factors that contribute to the financial considerations of seeking a doctoral degree include the field of study, time doctoral students expect to take to complete their degree, amount of borrowing, employment hours, study hours, household income, and part-time study along with fellowship, scholarship, or grant aid (Gillingham et al., 1991). Jones (2013) reported that there is a disparity in the amount of time between degree completion of Black Americans and their counterparts which may be attributed to multiple factors e.g., finances, self-efficacy, lack of faculty and peer support, socialization, and mentorship.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2003) reported that individuals with doctorate degrees have a likelihood of higher earnings and lower unemployment rates than those with bachelor's or master's degrees, but students report difficulties in financing doctoral programs. The National Center for Education Statistics (2018) reported the average loan balances for doctoral graduates increased between 1999–2000 and 2015-2016. The average loan balance for PhD's unrelated to the field of education increased 49 percent from $48,400 to $98,800, and other doctoral degrees (i.e., PsyD, etc.) increased 49 percent from $64,500 to $132,200. They also reported that the

average loan balance for EdDs in 2015–16 was $111,900, 60 percent higher than $67,300 in 2003–04.

Hoffer et al. (2006) illuminated economic disparities based on the program of study and race/ethnicity. When analyzing the data for doctoral recipients of 2006, Hoffer et al. noted that engineering and physical science students were the least likely to borrow while students in social sciences and humanities were the most likely to borrow. They indicated that Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students had remarkably higher education-related debt than Whites and Asians. African American students and their families are likelier to have poorer socioeconomic backgrounds (Leppel, 2002). Other variables contributing to economic inequality were the ethnicity of students who enrolled in a given program of study. Asian recipients of doctorate degrees exceeded Blacks in physical sciences (241 to 84) and engineering (242 to 85) while Black recipients of doctorate degrees exceeded Asians in social sciences (296 to 198) and humanities (172 to 140) (Hoffer et al. 2006). Given that federal research grants and other funding resources are most often associated with science and engineering, a presumption can be made that loans and debt are byproducts of the race/ethnicity of students enrolled in particular programs (Hoffer et al., 2006). Offerman (2011) noted that older female students make higher education choices based on cost and other considerations such as programs of interest. Hoffer et al. (2006) noted that Black and Hispanic doctoral graduates were more likely to have more debt than their Asian and White counterparts in the same program of study, no matter the program of study.

Intersectionality

The intersectionality of race, gender, and social class presented challenges concerning these multiple identities and self-esteem which impacted the Black female experience in doctoral

studies (Cumings Mansfield et al. 2010). Intersectionality theory posits that the combination of multiple social identities including gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, shapes how individuals see themselves and how others are perceived in society which informs how individuals are treated (Collins et al., 2021). In the latter part of the1980s, the heuristic term of intersectionality was introduced to bring attention to discriminatory and unjust actions in society based on various identities (Cho, et al., 2013). Multiple disciplines such as history, sociology, literature, philosophy, anthropology, feminist studies, ethnic studies, queer studies, and legal studies have used the concept to examine gender, race, and other forms of power in social justice, politics, and academic disciplines (Cho, et al., 2013). Andersen and Collins (2020) reported that empirical evidence for intersectionality was collected for more than two decades to examine how race, class, and gender increasingly informed one another, and eventually the research grew to include sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, ability, age, religion, and similar categories.

The interrelatedness of age, gender, and race contribute to the experiences of doctoral matriculation for non-traditional Black women (Lancaster, 2020). There is an impact on their mental and physical coping skills as they work to balance personal, professional, and educational responsibilities (Lancaster, 2020). It was further noted by Lancaster (2020) that understanding this intersectionality is necessary as an analysis of the interconnectedness of multiple identities, but it is fundamentally important to obtain an understanding of the role of institutional structures in power dynamics and vulnerability that adversely impact the success of students in higher education.

Pathways to Matriculation

Persistence

Persistence is understood as the capacity to withstand significant challenges that threaten resiliency, stability, viability, or personal development (Liu et al., 2014; Masten, 2011). African American women account for one of the largest groups of minority students enrolled in advanced degree programs in the United States (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Griess (2014) found that research on the benefits of academia for non-traditional adults that may offer insight to their persistence to pursue doctoral degrees is lacking. In the absence of empirical data, higher education institutions may fail to prepare to serve non-traditional students which could result in dereliction of their needs as they matriculate. (Chen, 2017).

Sogunro (2015) posited that there were eight motivating factors for adult learners in higher education: 1) quality of teaching and curriculum, 2) relevance and pragmatism, 3) interactive classrooms, 4) effective management, 5) progressive assessment and timely feedback 6) self-directedness 7) learning environment, and 8) effective academic advising. Additionally, students reported that participating in a writing group provided academic discourse as well as social and mental support (Dortch, 2016). This depth of support among collegiate peers offers comradery that is often lacking from others who cannot identify with the rigor of matriculation required for a doctoral degree particularly as a non-traditional Black female (Dortch, 2016).

Non-traditional Black females pursuing doctoral degrees often understand that their actions will change their social structure which include perceptions about gender roles, demographics, and their economic stability (Augustine, 2016). According to Liu et al. (2014), older adulthood is rife with changes across physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and motivational domains. Eudaimonia is a concept of well-being posited by Besser-Jones (2015).

The idea is that the greatest life is the life well lived and a life well lived maximizes using personal capacities. Erikson's generativity is the stage of life that implies emphasis on maximizing the personal capacities, redefined by Pedrotti et al., (2014) in terms of successful adaptation to changes (e.g., optimizing gains while buffering losses), efficient emotion regulation, and cultivation of a sense of meaning and acceptance of one's life as a whole. The persistence of non-traditional Black female graduates through a doctoral program is an illustration of adapting well to complete the stages of moving in, moving through, or moving out discussed by Schlossberg (1989).

The faculty-student relationship is one of the most influential relationships in the higher education experience (Cole & Griffin, 2013; McCallum, 2017). According to Trolian and Parker (2017), students who reported adequate support from faculty had a higher-grade point average and found their college experience more gratifying. Othermothering is a term used to describe the cross-familial pattern of care and nurture found in African American relationships without biological ties and is influential for Black female students choosing to pursue doctoral degrees (Flowers et al., 2015). Research does not specify whether othermothering exists only between individuals of the same racial or ethnic background. Students only view faculty-student relationships as positive and supportive when they think that the faculty demonstrates care (Flowers et al. 2015) similar to the nurturing of othermothering. The impression of care requires that the faculty member goes beyond expectations to ensure that students have the resources to be successful (Wood et al., 2010). Engaging with students in the classroom and at university events is expected, but behavior that is considered beyond contractual expectations is seen by the students as most indicative of authentic concern (McCallum, 2020). Bernard et al., (2012) found that positive and supportive faculty-student relationships are also established when faculty

members are involved in academic, career, and personal advising. The participants viewed faculty members who cared enough to be engaged as culturally sensitive, understanding, and sympathetic to their personal and professional needs. When care for the well-being of students was displayed beyond academic endeavors, students began to view the actions of faculty to be similar to extended family members rather than just professors at their school of enrollment (Bernard et al., 2012). As a result, the faculty-student relationships were deemed personal and intimate, and garnered faculty monikers of familial terms such as uncle, aunt, my other mom, or my other dad (Bernard et al., 2012). It was further noted by Bernard et al. (2012) that students were more confident in their ability to pursue and earn doctoral degrees when these faculty members recommended they enroll in doctoral programs. These forms of engagement and expectations of faculty-student relationships by students are considered by researchers to be unique and grounded in the cultural beliefs and values of the African American community (McCallum, 2017; Raposa et al., 2021).

Marsh (2012) indicated that Black identity development and racial integration was linked to the academic success of high-achieving Black women. According to the National Center for Education Statistics regarding gender and race, a higher percentage of Black women are enrolled in college than any other group (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). In a study conducted on the role of family related to Black women pursuing and completing doctoral studies, the participants reported strong familial influence (McCallum, 2016).

The motivation to pursue and persist was also attributed to reflection on the oppression of ancestors who were not afforded the same opportunities and who sacrificed for educational endeavors to be an option for future generations (McCallum, 2016). Pedrotti et al. (2014) discussed the importance of understanding how manifestations of optimal functioning (i.e.,

success as a non-traditional Black female doctoral candidate) may be strengthened by untoward circumstances that lead to growth. Constantine et al., (2006) postulated that there are some stressors which have led to a unique strength-based resilience, which they referred to as "strengths gained through adversity" (p. 231). An example offered by Pedrotti et al. (2014) is the diverse cultural groups within the United States (e.g., African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement) that faced challenges involving race and gender equality and resulted in distinct strengths and virtues.

Consistent with legacy, some researchers cited participants who stated that their parents' educational accomplishments and dedication to the community motivated them to complete their doctoral degrees (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). According to McCallum (2020), non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates reported that their efforts were associated with the importance of potentially becoming a faculty member. They emphasized the importance of increasing the number of faculty of similar race, gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic identities of students as models. The doctoral graduates underscored the significance of the importance of establishing relationships with same-race peers, faculty, and administrators as they matriculated through their programs (Allen & Joseph, 2018; Fries-Britt & Snider, 2015).

Intrinsic Motivation

Boekeloo et al. (2015) stated that intrinsic motivation is self-authored. According to Deci et al., (1991), it is independent of reinforcement; it is related to personal interests and desires. For example, students who are intrinsically motivated to pursue and complete doctoral studies may do so because they find pleasure in the challenge. Deci et al. defined intrinsic motivation as "an individual's desire to challenge themselves and achieve a level of proficiency in a discipline, to exercise autonomy and self-determination and/or to relate to and care for others" (p. 243). Simi

et al. (2016) posited that non-traditional learners are intrinsically motivated because their curiosity for knowledge is laden with focus and determination; education is viewed as a conduit for change in their lives that is typically associated with advancement, thus a better quality of life. Ryan and Deci (2017) asserted that non-traditional students pursuing doctoral degrees possess innate motivation which coincides with happiness and well-being which they consider as an essential factor for personal and professional growth such as autonomy, competence, and connection. Elliot et al. (2017) reported that the development of personal and professional growth requires the internalization and integration of goal-oriented behavior. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation allows individuals to perform consistent with social expectations that results in psychological consistency, honor, and wellness (Elliot et al., 2017). These are necessary characteristics of doctoral candidates if the non-traditional student expects to endure the rigors of successfully completing the doctoral goal (Templeton, 2021). Although Zhou (2014) stated that some extrinsic motivators can be beneficial, intrinsic motivation presents with more sustainability in fostering persistence and achievement. Ryan et al. (2017) noted that intrinsic motivation is considered to have the more impactful influence on the completion of doctoral pursuits as intrinsic motivation is associated with character, personality, temperament, and temper that is manifested in psychological stamina and pertains to an acclimation to learning. Sogunro (2015) underscores the significance of motivation in adult learners using the illustration that if two adult learners are equal in ability and opportunity, the learner who is more highly motivated will likely yield a more productive academic performance because motivation is directly related to effective learning in that it increases and decreases the quality of learning.

Cokley (2003, p. 535) articulated three facets of intrinsic motivation: 1) the motivation of the joy of learning something new 2) the motivation of accomplishing something and 3) the

motivation of having a pleasing sensory experience. According to Patterson-Stephens et al. (2017), the motivation to pursue a doctoral degree was related to viewing the endeavor as a worthwhile goal. In another study examining the lived experiences of two Black female doctoral students conducted by Dortch (2016), the students reported that completing their degree goals would cement their future success and life trajectory. Both participants in the study revealed the significance of having models of the doctoral endeavor as they reported that vicarious experiences of others and verbal persuasion from others who preceded them was substantially influential in their motivation to complete their degree (Dortch, 2016). The Black female students in the research conducted by Robinson (2013) reported identifying as standing on the shoulders of resilient and persistent ancestors who provided a blueprint for future generations which created an understanding of their responsibility to be role models for the community. When passion and drive are not enough, sometimes the motivator of proving others wrong or succeeding due to a fear of failure—as an individual and as a representative of a particular race (identity)—may lead to sustainable persistence (McGee, 2015; Moore et al., 2003). In one study, Black female students reported that responsibility to their community motivated them to persist in their doctoral programs despite barriers such as exclusion, isolation, and marginalization (Moore & Shaver, 2014; Robinson, 2013).

Spirituality

Spirituality and religiosity have been linked to aiding non-traditional Black female doctoral students with stress, and personal faith or spirituality impacts the academic success of female college students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Huffman, 2013). Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2014) found that poverty and other disadvantages could be used for energy to persist in doctoral programs; a faith-based belief is that individuals can be victorious despite their

background and adversities if they diligently pursue their goals. Logan (2013) also reported that students believed that their religious commitment was a factor in their academic success. Regarding the barriers and facilitators of doctoral success for Black women, Patterson-Stephens et al. (2017) noted that study participants reported church to be a supplemental source of support that met their holistic needs as they persisted through a doctoral program. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2014) studied the lived experiences of eight female doctoral students who reported that their intrinsic motivation and faith in God was more important than external motivation. The variable characteristics of the participants included age, culture, socioeconomic differences, and various adult responsibilities. According to Shahid et al. (2018), Black female students who reported experiences of racism and sexism used the coping mechanisms of social support and religiosity to accomplish their goals. Crumb et al. (2020) noted that six of ten participants in their study on the persistence of working-class Black women doctoral students reported that religion or spirituality helped them to be persistent, regardless of their religious affiliation or spiritual convictions.

Summary

Existing literature indicated a variety of personal and institutional variables that were associated with persistence and completion of doctoral programs by non-traditional Black female students. They are affected by the pluralistic identities of gender, race, and age (Collins & Bilge 2016; Collins, 2019). While the presence of Black female students in graduate programs has increased, there is limited research on the experiences of non-traditional Black female students in doctoral programs (Wilkerson et al., 2019).

The most relevant literature discussed in Chapter 2 indicated that non-traditional Black female doctoral students experienced limited institutional support, particularly in the form of

mentorship, once enrolled in doctoral studies along with doubts related to belongingness and their ability to matriculate at the doctoral level (Breihan, 2015; Raheem et al.2018; Vital, et al., 2023). The literature informed the study by highlighting a need for increased support of non-traditional Black doctoral graduates via the mentor-mentee relationship (Raheem et al., 2018). The literature review synthesized the experiences of Black female doctoral graduates' persistence and completion underscoring acceptance into doctoral studies as appropriate and emphasizing the significance of their presence as necessary for diversification and education of future enrollees (Felder et al., 2014; Owusu-Kwarteng, 2021). The tendency of extant research to focus broadly on Black female doctoral students without consideration for age revealed the need to focus on persistence and success, defined as degree completion, of non-traditional Black female students.

The focus of this study was to explore the quest of non-traditional Black female doctoral students by capturing their perspectives. This study adds to existing research and helps schools understand how to recruit Black female students, address attrition, and meet their needs to yield more successful doctoral completion outcomes. Using the theoretical framework of Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory is relevant to this research in that it provides a framework for analyzing the event (doctoral pursuit) of non-traditional Black women that inevitably results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. Erikson's (1964) theory of psychosocial development is relevant to this research in that it provides a framework for analyzing the non-traditional Black woman's decision to pursue a doctoral degree during the phase of generativity versus stagnation. Together, they provide a foundation for exploration into the experiences of non-traditional Black female doctoral degree graduates.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This chapter describes and justifies the methods chosen to develop an understanding of the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs. According to McLeod (2019), qualitative researchers study phenomena in their natural settings and attempt to interpret or make sense of those events in terms of the meanings that people bring to them. Chapter Three includes the design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, researcher's role, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and summary.

Design

Qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological methodology is appropriate for this study as its objective is to capture the lived experiences of non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that qualitative research is an interpretive/theoretical research design appropriate for exploring the meaning of individuals or groups to identify a social or human thread that explains behavior. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method designed to engage in informal interactive interviewing processes to extract personal comprehensive descriptions of lived experiences (Cypress, 2018). A good phenomenological study identifies and narrates the common meaning of several individuals who shared similar lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). There are two approaches to phenomenology: hermeneutic (van Manen, 1990, 1997) and empirical transcendental or psychological (Moustakas, 1994). The hermeneutic approach allows the researcher to mediate between different meanings of the lived experiences as interpretation of the lived experiences are analyzed (van Manen, 1990, p. 26).

Qualitative research is appropriate to determine: (a) the impact of culture on non-traditional Black female graduates' pursuit of doctoral programs, (b) the barriers experienced by

non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates, and (c) the strategies used by non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates to cope with barriers which eventually facilitated their success. Qualitative research will allow the reader to hear the stories and experience the feelings, beliefs, and the lived experiences of non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). An objective of qualitative results is to allow the reader to have the feeling of being there during the lived experience (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Analyzing the lived experiences of non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates will provide understanding of their persistence to begin and complete the ultimate terminal degree despite inherent challenges.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in Tennessee within the past five years?

Sub-Question One

What impact does culture have on non-traditional Black female graduates' pursuit of doctoral programs?

Sub-Question Two

What are the facilitators and barriers experienced by non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates?

Sub-Question Three

How did the non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates engage their facilitators and barriers in order to mitigate Schlossberg's three distinct steps: moving in, moving through, or moving out of the phenomenon?

Setting

The setting for this study was central Tennessee. Participants were recruited from three higher education institutions offering doctoral degrees: Site 1, Site 2, and Site 3. All sites are large, private, faith-based institutions. As faith-based institutions, the faculty, staff, and administrators adhere to tenets of global awareness, social consciousness, and active engagement in the education and preparation of graduates to be effective contributors/leaders in society. The institutions are known for partnering with local school districts to offer recruitment and enrollment discounts and incentives for local educators. With traditional dissertation requirements, the institutions offer accredited doctoral programs. These institutions were chosen because of their history of offering non-traditional students the opportunity to further their education through online and hybrid doctoral programs. Site 1 launched its online doctoral degree program in 2010; Site 2 launched its online doctoral degree program in 2013; and Site 3 launched the option of its online or hybrid doctoral program in 2014 and was once recognized for producing one of the highest numbers of doctoral degrees conferred among African Americans. Site 1, Site 2, and Site 3 are accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). Successful graduates of accredited doctoral programs were recruited regardless of the program of study or professional field. With consideration for confidentiality of the participants, the participants as well as each higher education institution were given pseudonyms.

Participants

In qualitative research snowball sampling is a common method used by researchers who rely on informants to refer participants to the study based on social knowledge and organic social networks (Noy, 2008). Participants were selected using a snowball sample of doctoral graduates within the past five years from central Tennessee colleges and universities. Participants

identified as a parent of a dependent child or children, primary caretaker for elderly parent(s), and/or full-time employee during matriculation, and a very mature (40-65 years of age) Black female doctoral graduate. A sample group was used to assess face validity to ensure the items appeared credible and understandable to the participant. Experts were asked to review the items for relevance to content validity for this study. Face validity is defined as the extent of an instrument's appropriateness to collect the data relevant to the study, whereas content validity is defined as its usefulness in measuring the construct it aims to measure (Alsalamah et al., 2017). Convenience sampling was also used to select participants. Convenience sampling involves easy access to sites for recruiting (Creswell, 2018).

The recommended number of participants for qualitative research should most often range from 6-15 or higher (School of Behavioral Sciences, 2021, p. 24). In addition to meeting criteria, participation was contingent upon receiving signed written informed consent. According to Creswell (2018), participant selection should be discontinued at the point of saturation based on the inability to derive new themes. The sample will include 8 to 12 participants.

Procedures

The objective of this section is to outline the steps of the study with enough detail to enable replication by others. Replication will be possible by following the steps provided in the permissions, recruitment guidelines, and data collection methods.

Permissions

The initial process involved the proposal for research to obtain the approval of Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon approval, three central Tennessee universities were contacted via email for permission (see Appendix A) to distribute flyers (see Appendix B) to recruit participants who meet the criteria of this study. Once approval from the

IRB was obtained and participants were selected, graduates were sent a participant general consent form (see Appendix C) for voluntary participation via email outlining the study's scope, benefits, risks, and alternatives. The email also clarified the central research question based the facilitators and barriers of the non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates' lived experiences.

Recruitment Plan

A snowball sampling is a repetitive process, widely used in qualitative research in the social sciences among various disciplines, in which informants refer the researcher to other informants who have knowledge of or access to others who are aware of participants who may be appropriate candidates for a given study (Noy, 2008). Upon obtaining approval from the IRB, Interview questions (see Appendix D) were submitted to experts in the field for review and then the interview was piloted with a small sample of participants that were not included in the study sample to ensure clarity of questions and wording. After approval was received from Liberty DOE, the Chair, and the IRB, the official recruitment process began by sending an email to graduates who fit the selection criteria to inform potential participants of the purpose of the study and to provide a link to the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix C) and Contact Information Form (see Appendix E). Of their own volition, if a graduate met the required criteria and chose to participate, participants were accepted until the sample size of 8 to 12 was met. After participants returned the consent form (see Appendix C), interviews were scheduled.

The Researcher's Role

According to Creswell (2013) the researcher is the key instrument in the qualitative research process. As the key instrument, Patton (2015) stated that the researcher is responsible for collecting the data, making observations, asking interview and follow-up questions, taking field notes, and interpreting responses. As a result, it is incumbent upon the researcher to

"carefully reflect on, deal with, and report potential sources of bias and error" (Patton, 2015, p. 58). In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, as the researcher, I was required to acknowledge any experiences or biases that may influence the data analysis. This was relevant as Creswell (2013, 2015) and Creswell & Poth (2018) stated that the researcher must decide how and in what manner one's personal understanding will potentially be introduced into the study. In addition, the researcher's role includes the following: 1) protect the confidentiality of participants by using pseudonyms (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018); and 2) safe storage of the collected data for at least three years in accordance with Liberty University's IRB guidelines.

In full disclosure, for every degree that I obtained I was a non-traditional student according to age. Currently, I am a non-traditional student pursuing a doctoral degree. I am a very mature Black female from a low SES; I was homeless when I graduated from high school. Therefore, I unequivocally identify with the theories of this study and the plight of navigating educational endeavors at an atypical age and stage of life. An undeniable diegesis for my deferred endeavors can be constructed pertaining to the void of capital—social, cultural, and economic.

I was 37 years old when I returned to higher education to complete my undergraduate degree. It had been fourteen years since I was a student. The abrupt discontinued matriculation was underscored by my failure to properly withdraw from the university which resulted in passing grades with high marks to failing grades that became a permanent stain on my undergraduate transcript. Once the undergraduate degree was obtained, I immediately enrolled in graduate school to pursue a master's followed by an educational specialist degree. Then, several years later I enrolled in this doctoral program.

There was never a lack of ability to matriculate. Factors which contributed to the delayed endeavors included a) a failure to understand the purpose and benefits of a college education, b) funding including the impact of declined financial assistance due to the failure to withdraw properly from undergraduate studies, and c) limitations of time related to work and single parenthood which made in-person attendance unfeasible. Once stable employment was secured with an acceptable salary because of professional degrees, I was in a position to pursue the culminating degree that God placed on my heart. The motivations for pursuing the doctoral degree include a) having gained educational accomplishment, God placed it on my heart, in my spirit, to persist toward completion of the pinnacle, b) making a remarkable contribution to the family legacy was another inspiration for pursuing the culminating doctoral degree, and c) aspirations to serve at the collegiate level so that I can inspire and motivate others as they matriculate. Understanding the barriers and persistence, the aim of this study was to ascertain the challenges and determination to persist experienced by other non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates.

Data Collection

Using data collected from multiple sources, this study used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative research. Data collection methods consisted of the following: individual interviews.

Interviews

The dissertation handbook states that for most qualitative designs, the only required data collection method is interviews (School of Behavioral Sciences, 2021, p. 24). In phenomenological studies, in-depth interviews are the primary method of data collection because it allows the researcher to focus on describing “the meaning of the phenomenon for a small

number of individuals who have experienced it" (Creswell, 2013, p. 161). Researchers can use open-ended questions only or the open-ended questions can be combined with other interviewing techniques such as conversational interviews to explore topics in detail, to obtain an understanding of processes, and to identify potential explanations of phenomenon that are related (Weller et al., 2018). In conversational interviewing, interviewers are expected to provide as-needed clarification to respondents to make certain that they comprehend the intent of the questions (Davis et al., 2023). Standardized interviewing involves the precise scripting of questions that the interviewer will ask all respondents in an effort to control for errors (Boyle et al., 2017). Similar to standardized interviews, in conversational interviews the question is initially read by the interviewer exactly as worded but in conversational interviews the interviewer is expected to determine if the respondent needs clarification and the interviewer responds by rephrasing the question so that it is better understood (Davis et al., 2023). It was further noted by Weller et al. (2018) that open-ended questions may produce lists, short answers, or lengthy narratives and it is recommended that the collection of lists, short answers, and narratives using interviews continue until *thematic saturation*—the point where the analysis of qualitative data, such as interviews, produces minimal to no new ideas, themes, or codes (Weller et al., 2018).

Turner III (2010) stated one of the most critical components of the interview design is creating constructive and coherent research questions. Because interview questions serve as a roadmap for the journey participants are asked to embark upon, Benlahcene and Ramdani (2017) stated that creating the proper interview questions requires careful attention to the intention of the research study with consideration for potentially sensitive topics in order to avert offending the participants or gathering artificial answers which are irrelevant to the objective.

This study did not use questions from a standardized instrument. However, a combination of predetermined open-ended questions (see Appendix D) and conversational interviewing was used to collect data relevant to this research study. Interviews with participants included both in person and virtual settings, for initial and follow-up interviews. With participants written authorization, all interviews were recorded regardless of the setting.

Standardized Open-Ended Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What is your name?
2. Do you wish to use a preferred pseudonym?
3. What is your age?
4. What is your gender?
5. What is your race?
6. What is your highest level of educational achievement?
7. What age were you when you enrolled and completed in the doctoral program?
8. What was your year of graduation from the doctoral program?
9. Please list any other roles you assumed while enrolled in the doctoral program (e.g., parent, employee, caregiver, etc.).
10. What economic class best describes your historical status?
11. What is the highest level of education completed by your parents?
12. What area of study did you obtain a doctoral degree?
13. Why did you decide to pursue a doctoral degree?
14. Where did you complete your doctoral degree?
15. Where did you grow up?
16. Tell me more about where you grew up.

17. When reflecting on your formative experiences what had the most impact on your development?
18. What role did those experiences have on your decision to pursue a doctoral degree?
19. When did you first encounter someone who achieved a doctoral degree?
20. Tell me about the level of support you received while in the doctoral program.
21. What support facilitated matriculation?
22. How would you explain your reason for waiting until you were at an atypical age to pursue your doctoral degree?
23. What challenges or facilitators did you experience as a non-traditional Black female doctoral student?
24. Please explain how you engaged the facilitators and challenges to mitigate moving in, moving through, or moving out of the doctoral program?
25. What advice would you give to a non-traditional peer about higher education specifically, enrolling in a doctoral program?
26. Maturity inspires a great deal of reflection, is there anything else that you would like to share that has not been covered in these interview questions?

According to Hoogesteyn et al. (2023), establishing rapport is of great significance for the best outcome of interviews. Multiple verbal and non-verbal behaviors are utilized to build rapport (Hoogesteyn et al., 2023). Kelly et al. (2013) stated that verbal establishment of rapport may include identification of common ground in which interviewers discuss shared interests with the respondents, using language that is easily understood by the respondents, and engaging in self-disclosure. Establishing non-verbal rapport may include greeting the respondent with a warm gesture such as a handshake upon meeting, displaying empathy by

showing kindness and respect, positioning one's body toward the respondent to demonstrate attentiveness, and engaging in active listening through eye-contact and affirmative responses such as nodding (Abbe & Brandon, 2014). The initial two questions were constructed for the purpose of establishing rapport. Questions three through nine were designed to further document the participants' identification with the phenomenon. Formative experiences such as travel experiences, interacting with role models, etc. affect attitudes, values, and behavior in later life which correlate with pursuits in later life (Raja & Carrico, 2022). Questions ten through twenty-four were designed to elicit an understanding of the barriers and persistence to matriculation along with obtaining an insight about what the participants identified as contributors that resulted in their success. Question twenty-five was designed to determine if the participants would make any changes to their decision to pursue a doctoral degree as a non-traditional graduate and whether they would encourage others to pursue a doctoral degree. Question twenty-six was designed to prompt more in-depth reflection so that participants could share any relevant information that they were not inspired to disclose by the established interview questions.

Data Analysis

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis

Ho et al. (2017) noted that hermeneutic phenomenological analysis also known as thematic analysis provides an interpretive strategy to identify themes in transcribed interviews and this type of analysis is also good for proposing similar meanings of transcribed interviews. The data analysis began with collecting and analyzing the lived experiences of non-traditional graduates according to notes of my thoughts and perceptions from engagement with the participants. The next step involved intentional focus on the commonality of barriers and

persistence of the participants. Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals in an attempt to identify the world as experienced by individuals according to their life and world stories (Briscoe et al., 2022). As suggested by Creswell (2013), the researcher's lived experiences pertaining to the phenomenon was documented in the Researcher's Role section in the effort to accurately capture the unbiased lived experiences of the participants.

Coding Software

Further coding and analyzing of the information took place once the data from the recorded interviews are collected. Coding is a process used in the analysis of qualitative research based on labeling and creating categories related to the dataset (Stuckey, 2015). The three steps that help to facilitate this process according to Stuckey (2015) are as follows: 1) reading through the data and creating a storyline, 2) categorizing the data into codes, and 3) using memos for clarification and interpretation. In this study, the categories related to the phenomenon are barriers and facilitator to complete the doctoral degree. The ATLAS.ti software program created by Scientific Software Development GmbH was used in this study to code the data. "Coding is the process of analyzing qualitative text data by taking the data apart to see what it yields before putting the data back together in a meaningful way" (Creswell, 2015, p. 156).

Trustworthiness

Pilot & Beck (2014) stated that trustworthiness or rigor of a study refers to the degree of confidence in the collected data, the interpretation of the data, and the methods used to ensure the quality of the research. Trustworthiness is akin to validity and reliability in a quantitative research design. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), trustworthiness should be evaluated by looking at credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

In qualitative research, Polit & Beck (2014) stated that credibility is the most important criterion as credibility ensures confidence in the data collected for the study and the findings based on the analysis of the data. Credibility is considered to be comparable to internal validity in quantitative research (Connelly, 2016). Techniques that were suggested by Connelly (2016) to establish credibility are as follows: 1) prolonged engagement with participants, 2) persistent observation if appropriate to the study, 3) peer-debriefing, 4) member-checking, and 5) reflective journaling along with iterative examination of the data multiple times. In this study, the extensive interview with each participant along with follow-up(s) as needed satisfied the suggested prolonged engagement. Participant checks were also used to confirm that the conclusions reached by the researcher are valid. In addition, the researcher engaged in reflective journaling after each interview along with journaling prior to each interview for an accurate analysis of the data.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability is akin to reliability in quantitative research as it focuses on stability of the data over time and over the conditions of the study (Polit & Beck, 2014). The procedure suggested by Connelly (2016) to establish dependability includes maintenance of the researcher's notes of all activities that happen during the study and decisions about aspects of the study such as whom to interview and what to observe. Akin to objectivity in quantitative research, confirmability assures that the findings are consistent and could be replicated (Polit & Beck, 2014). The procedure suggested by Connelly (2016) for the maintenance of confirmability includes researcher's detailed notes of all their decisions and the analysis of data as it progresses.

Transferability

Largely akin to generalization in quantitative research, transferability addresses the propensity to which findings can be used in other settings (Polit & Beck, 2014). Establishment of transferability can be accomplished with a robust, elaborate description of the context, location, and people studied, and by being forthright about analysis and trustworthiness (Connelly, 2016). Amankwaa (2016) noted that transferability occurs when researchers provide a graphic picture that informs and reverberates with readers.

Ethical Considerations

In addition to the core components of trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, the ethical implications of a study also affect its integrity and usefulness (Connelly, 2016). The researcher must be aware of and prepared for potential ethical issues as Creswell (2013) stated that ethical issues can occur at any period during the research process. Connelly (2016) stated that recruiting procedures are essential to obtaining participants who can articulate their experiences. The pilot interview was conducted to ensure that relevant inquiries was conducted for the ease of establishing rapport with the participants prior to the semi-structured interviews. Privacy and protection of data along with confidentiality of participants are ethical considerations that were addressed by keeping data securely locked in an office or password protected computer along with assigning each participant with a pseudonym. Largely, ethical considerations were minimized by completed informed consent forms (see Appendix C), which provided participants with the stated purpose of the study, including the acknowledgment that participation was voluntary and a statement that they would not be placed at undue risk or suffer negative consequences for opting out.

Summary

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach provided the foundation for describing the essence of the lived experiences of non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates. The role of the researcher was to collect data and facilitate the study according to IRB approved procedures for data collection and analysis. The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. In Chapter Three, the purpose of the hermeneutic phenomenological study was restated and the type of research design, procedures, research questions, setting, participants, data collection and data analysis procedures, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations were discussed.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in central Tennessee. Chapter Four presents participant responses to the interview questions describing the barriers and facilitators during matriculation, the results in the context of themes and research questions, and a summary.

Participants

Table 1 depicts relative demographic information.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Survey

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	Degree	Age at Graduation	Year of Graduation	Institution
Andra	52	F	AA	EdD	48	2020	Site 3
Dr. C	47	F	AA	EdD	44	2020	Site 3
Elsa	49	F	AA	EdD	46	2020	Site 2
Faye	64	F	AA	EdD	63	2023	Site 1
Kraus	54	F	AA	EdD	50	2019	Site 3
Liz	50	F	AA	EdD	48	2022	Site 2
Sasha	50	F	AA	EdD	49	2023	Site 1
Tabitha	50	F	AA	EdD	48	2019	Site 3
Victoria	55	F	AA	EdD	55	2023	Site 2
Yogi	50	F	AA	EdD	49	2022	Site 3

The following individual portraits provide a rich description of each participant's experiences related to doctoral matriculation. Interview quotes have been recorded verbatim which accounts for grammatical errors.

Andra

Andra was a 52-year-old Black female. She earned her EdD in 2020 at the age of 48.

Andra left the corporate sector after eighteen years of employment with one company to work in the field of education where she was a classroom teacher for three years before pursuing a doctoral degree. Upon enrollment in the doctoral program, Andra was married and had two boys. One was starting his first year of college and the other was in high school.

Andra was a full-time teacher at an elementary school. As a result of the decreased salary working as a teacher, she also held a part-time job at night. Andra reported being very active with her church. She also reported being actively involved with her sorority. Her parenting duties included chaperoning her sons to athletic activities. Additionally, as an only child Andra reported obligations of caring for and supporting her aging parents.

Andra's mother attended college for one semester. Andra's mother earned $27, 000 a year after retiring from a hospital after 20 plus years. Her father also attended college but did not graduate; he went into the military. Andra described her father as a blue-collar worker, taking different types of jobs to make ends meet. Although her mother refused government assistance, Andra reported that she grew up very, very poor. Shortly after starting the doctoral program, Andra faced divorce. Andra stated that the pay scale for teachers, even with cost-of-living increases, was insufficient for the lifestyle that she and her family were accustomed to based on the two incomes that she previously experienced. The change in income along with her childhood economic status influenced her interest in obtaining a doctoral degree. She reported always wanting a doctoral degree and that she was the first in her family to achieve one. Andra obtained her doctoral degree in educational leadership. Andra stated, "being an African American in particular, you do not get very far in the field of education if you do not have a doctoral degree" adding, "in the county where I live, I was told that if you are White, you do not need one." Andra reported in that county, being Black and female were barriers to promotion.

She gave an account of a female in her cohort who secured a position as a principal after completing an EdS who reported, “I do not need a doctoral degree.” Andra also stated that she wanted the doctoral degree for her family and because she knew that she needed it if she wanted to go further. Andra reported that although her mother did not finish college, her mother’s brothers and sisters did and were educators. As a result, Andra believed education was “in her blood,” but she avoided it for years. Andra said she was inspired to complete a doctoral degree because of what her mother did not accomplish. She stated that her mother valued education but used to say about herself, “I am not smart.” Andra reported that her first awareness of a Black person with a doctoral degree was during her sophomore year of college. It was a female, business law professor. She described her lectures and delivery as spicy and spirited. The professor was one of only two Black professors that Andra had as an undergraduate. Andra reported receiving support from the Black Cultural Center during her undergraduate years. Andra also reported having only two Black professors in the doctoral program, both female.

Barriers for Andra included raising two children alone with demanding schedules due to travel sports and stipulations on the number of days doctoral students were allowed to miss during the program. Andra also reported that most of the people in the program who looked like her did not come from a family with terminal degrees. She added that the members of her cohort were all first so there was a lot that they did not know and had to learn through “hard knocks.” She reflected that they did not know what a dissertation should look like and where to begin. She reported that the writing was the most intimidating piece reflecting,

> People who did not look like me did not have those struggles and they weren’t always willing to share either and so it’s kind of like how life is which is a lot like this country

where they know a whole lot that we do not know, things that are common to them that are not common to us.

Facilitators included mentorship provided by a professor, the cohort model, clearly written guidelines for writing the dissertation, and the requirement to write chapters while simultaneously completing coursework. Andra's advice to potential non-traditional Black female doctoral students is to embrace going to institutions that do not identify as a historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) and have discipline along with dedication and a commitment to finish.

Dr. C

Dr. C was a 47-year-old Black female. She earned her EdD in 2020 at the age of 44. Dr. C was currently an exceptional education interventionist in a public school district. Her professional experience had always been in education starting with her undergraduate degree in special education child growth and development. Although she completed a master's degree in public service management, she continued teaching in the public sector. Dr. C reported other roles she assumed while in the doctoral program as follows: mother, wife, first lady of her church, caregiver for her mother, teacher, youth director at church, head of step team at previous school, and an events coordinator.

Dr. C stated that she grew up middle class in a rural county in Tennessee and that she was an only child. Her mother was a high school graduate, and her father discontinued his education in the 7th grade. Her paternal grandparents lived in poverty with 18 children, so her father quit school to get a job to help his parents. Dr. C reported that her development was influenced by growing up in a rural county where few people who looked like her worked in professional fields. She added that a lack of African American people in her school district, especially

women, influenced her educational decision to pursue a doctorate which was necessary for advancement in the county where she resided and was employed.

Dr. C shared that there was also a married couple from the same county in her EdS program who chose not to pursue a doctoral degree. Dr. C said that the wife of the couple stated unequivocally, “I do not need to get a doctorate, I already got my job” which was an assistant principal position. Dr. C reported interviewing in the county for an administrative position but got only one interview. At the time there were no African American people in leadership positions in the county.

Dr. C first encountered someone with a doctoral degree in kindergarten or first grade. Her maternal uncle became a pathologist sharing, “I can remember asking what my uncle did when he would visit from Washington D.C. I said oh he's a pathologist but at that time I didn't know what that meant it wasn't until I became older that I found out what a pathologist was so then it became more and more evident then, like wow he had to be intelligent. He was very well versed and educated. He went to Howard, but he also had some ties to Meharry, and he spoke very highly of Meharry medical school.” Dr. C reported that after being raised in Wilson County, her uncle went to the military and that is where he got his education. According to Dr. C, her mother’s side of the family valued education. However, although Dr. C’s paternal grandfather owned 100 acres of land, her father and his siblings were fortunate if they finished high school. Dr. C reported her uncle’s success made her realize that college was an option.

Barriers to matriculation reported by Dr. C included test anxiety, self-doubt, historically being a B and C student, a reading comprehension disability, having to repeat a statistics course twice, her mother’s health, her father’s health (prostate cancer), a professional lawsuit resulting in educational licenses being under review, resignation, and finding and adapting to a new

employer. The change of employers also resulted in losing access to dissertation participants and character assassination where she formerly worked.

Facilitators included the cohort model, a friend who served as proofreader, two Black female mentors from the doctorate program who had obtained their degrees, not quitting as a model for her children, prayers and words of encouragement from her husband, a blind maternal aunt who served as a model of overcoming challenges and who provided verbal words of encouragement. “My aunt, she would always, even though she was blind, she would encourage me, she was constantly encouraging me saying you can do it.” Dr. C reported additional facilitators such as her mother’s words about potential professional jobs, financial support from her Sunday school class and father, and her faith in God.

Dr. C advises that non-traditional peers considering enrollment in doctoral programs begin by researching schools and determine the best program model for their learning style, online or in-person. She elaborated,

> Develop a strong support system (your life will not be your own, people miss important, sentimental events such as weddings, birthday parties), access your higher power, be clear and true to your purpose, and most of all, do not get discouraged—acknowledge that it is going to be hard and persevere.

Dr. C shared that although grown, she wanted to make her mom and dad proud, especially her mother who always pushed education. She stated that the difficulties were worth it and that she

would do it again for her mother. Dr. C shared that although her mother died in 2022, her dad still tells her that she was proud.

Elsa

Elsa was a 49-year-old Black female. She earned her EdD in 2020 at the age of 46 in curriculum and instruction. At the time of this study, Elsa was a director of special education. While pursuing her doctorate she transitioned from special education coordinator to her current position and was also a special education coach at the start of the doctoral program. She was an active in her sorority was caregiver to her mother who had dementia. Elsa reported that because of her various roles, she suspended the dissertation process three times.

Elsa was born in Jackson, Tennessee, but due her father's military career the family moved every two to three years. Her mother earned a bachelor's degree and her father retired from the military after twenty-six years of service. She thought that he may have obtained an associate degree while in the military. Their economic status was middle class. Elsa reported that she really enjoyed relocating to various places until her high school years. Then, she lived with a friend and her mother to continue at the high school she started. Elsa shared that she would not change her military upbringing. She credited the travel opportunities for shaping an open perspective about differences which she considered important for school system unity.

The first Black doctoral graduates Elsa encountered were two high school teachers. She said seeing professionals in high school and in different sororities impacted her development. Elsa stated, "They were beautiful Black women and I said, okay so I can do that." Seeing the professional educators in high school and attending a college homecoming inspired Elsa to say,

"college is definitely for me." Elsa refers to herself as a lifelong learner and stated that since high school she wanted to get her doctoral degree.

Elsa reported that seeing several friends with doctorates also motivated her. Elsa received support from these friends and her doctoral chair during matriculation. She was also supported by her mother when she began the program before her mother's health deteriorated. Elsa said her dad is still bragging about her doctoral degree.

The barriers Elsa faced included aspiring to advance to a coordinator position, the pressure of trying to accomplish the goal without neglecting her responsibilities at school of being a teacher and being involved in student counsel, the prom, cheerleading. She commented, "I did not have a great student—professional balance . . . having to help my dad take care of my mom with things such as going to doctor's appointments and staying with her so my dad could get out." Elsa discussed navigating moving in, moving through, and moving out of the doctoral program; "Even during the times when I was not in school, I knew that I was going back—my goal was to be like the women in my high school because I wanted to be like those women. I did not want to feel like a failure, and I learned to stop sharing that I was enrolled in a doctoral program due to questions about when are you going to finish."

Facilitators for her success were her dissertation chair, professors, friends who completed doctoral programs, and favorable work and school schedules. Her advice to non-traditional doctoral candidates was, ask yourself if it is something that you really want to do, research different programs to determine the right fit, look at program and school reviews, and meet the professors rather than just accepting others' opinions. Elsa shared the advice of a professional colleague who stated that in ethics of dissertation writing class, candidates are taught that the

doctoral journey should equip them to tell a story of the matriculation experience, what it means to obtain a doctoral degree, who it will motivate, and who they are as a result.

Faye

Faye was a 64-year-old Black female. She earned her EdD in 2023 at the age of 63 in curriculum and instruction. At the time of this study, Faye was a director of special education. While pursuing her doctorate degree she also assumed roles of mother, wife, sorority member, church member, and volunteer. She was also caregiver for her sister-in-law with breast cancer, 90+ year old mother-in-law, daughter who was injured in an accident, and nieces who had recently lost parents. The family's economic status was reported as mostly middle class depending on whether her parents were separated. Faye stated that she grew up on the east side of Detroit, MI. After the 1968 riots, the family moved to the northwest side which was a Jewish area. It had a private Catholic school, lots of children, and most people had a college education. Professional neighbors included teachers, a senator, Gates Brown of the Detroit Tigers baseball team, and physicians. In addition to the Black neighbors who were medical doctors, Faye reported that her husband's uncle obtained a doctorate and was a professor at a university. Faye reported that her mom was an anomaly because she was a meat packer. Although integrated, Faye noted that there was a lot of classism and snobbish people. Faye's dad was self-employed nearly all his life in a variety of businesses e.g., property owner/landlord. Unlike her five siblings who attended a HBCU in Tennessee, Faye's mother did not get to go to college. However, Faye reported that her mother challenged her children to go to college. Faye reported that during her formative years she was influenced by her mother encouraging her to do good and by always wanting to prove the naysayer wrong when they said she could not do a certain thing. Faye reported that she was the first in her family to graduate from a four-year college. Getting a

doctorate was always something that she wanted, and she was encouraged by a friend, her husband, and daughters to resume the endeavor after a 10-year hiatus. She shared a list of goals that she made for herself which indicated that she would obtain her doctoral degree by the age of 50 and reported that of all the goals on the list, the only goal that she had not achieved was the doctorate degree. Faye also revealed that she enrolled in a doctoral program three times before completion of the doctorate degree. Her support system consisted of her husband who is not a college graduate, a colleague who obtained a doctorate as a non-traditional Black female, and her direct supervisor where she worked. Faye attributed work and the cost of a doctoral degree to be the primary reason for her delay and the responsibilities of parenting and caregiving for family members. Barriers included losing a childhood friend, who was an only child, and the loss of her friend's mother within weeks resulting in multiple trips to Detroit from Tennessee where she then resided. Faye noted that this happened during her first year in the doctoral program. Other barriers included APA writing and formatting expectations and reacquainting herself with previously learned material. Facilitators included a synchronous online program, support from professors and peers, attending a Christian school, timely feedback and responses to questions, and conferences with professors. Faye's advice for non-traditional peers considering enrollment in a doctoral program was, "It is not a race it is a marathon—be patient, pace yourself, conquer one goal at a time, enjoy it." She added, "It is not about being smart, knowing a lot of information, or just reciting information and you will not be a walking encyclopedia after graduating." Faye's final comment was, "There were younger people in the program who seemed to have a harder time because they lacked experience." She advised, "Lean into the

experience and apply it." It is noteworthy that Faye now has two daughters in a doctoral program.

Kraus

Kraus was a 54-year-old Black female. She earned her EdD in 2019 at the age of 50 and was employed as an executive in a public school district. She began her professional experience as a special education teacher, then school counselor, followed by assistant and executive principal. Kraus reported other roles while in the doctoral program as wife, and church secretary. During childhood, Kraus reported her family's economic status was lower class. Kraus grew up in a small town in Tennessee where she attended school and resided for most of her life. Her mother completed high school and her father completed 10^{th} or 11^{th} grade. Kraus reported that her development was influenced by growing up in a small town with little diversity; "My schools predominantly was, well, were White as opposed to a lot of African Americans." Education was something Kraus valued early in life. She did not want to work in a factory like so many in her community. Kraus stated that she always knew that she wanted to obtain a doctoral degree and set a personal goal to complete it by the age of 50, which she accomplished. Delays to pursuing the doctorate were attributed to employment. Kraus first encountered someone with a doctorate in college. Her first encounter with a Black person with a doctorate was during her master's program. Barriers included difficulty with statistics, test anxiety, ADHD, technology, APA formatting, and the cost. She added that there were younger people in her cohort who did not appear to have the same challenges with technology and statistics. Facilitators included the cohort model, a thirty-two-month accelerated program, professors, an advisor who lived nearby, and support from her parents, friends, and husband. Kraus offered advice for non-traditional peers considering enrollment in a doctoral program, particularly women of color, to pursue a

doctoral degree because it opened professional doors such as a being college professor. Kraus concluded by sharing that she told her husband, “I do not need this, I have a master’s plus, I really don’t need this,” after becoming frustrated with statistics. Her husband responded, “I did not know that I married a quitter.” Kraus said his challenge turned her frustration into fuel which ultimately led to her successfully completing the doctoral degree.

Liz

Liz was a 50-year-old Black female. She earned her EdD in 2022 at the age of 48. At the time of this study, Liz was employed as an administrator in a public school district. Other roles she had while in the doctoral program were wife, mother, caregiver to her father and husband (who both passed away during that time), duties as an administrator, and responsibilities related to being the oldest of ten children. She reported that the family’s economic status was lower class, poverty level. Liz grew up in Memphis, Tennessee in an all-Black community named Orange Mound, the oldest Black community in the United States. She said Orange Mound was a very tight knit community where people worked hard and were very family oriented. Liz, however, reported that the people in the community did not put a lot of focus on postsecondary education. The focus was on the military even though there was no military base nearby. Liz added that the people in the community did not believe in the kids in the neighborhood, even those who were working in schools. She stated, “so very few of us from my graduating class went to college.” Liz added, “I found out about college through a magazine I was reading one day.” She emphasized, “[there] wasn't a lot of emphasis on postsecondary education as much as

it was the military pathway and that is where I was going until I found out about college." Her parents completed high school.

Liz reported her formative years were influenced by the struggles she saw in her neighborhood; "There was a lot of substance abuse and there was a lot of violence." She stated, "I knew that was not how I wanted to live. The struggle was very present, and I just knew that was not, I could not live the rest of my life in that situation."

Liz stated that the culture in Orange Mound did not encourage her to pursue her doctorate and commented, "I did not ever think I was smart enough to get the doctorate." She added, "high school really didn't prepare me for college." As she journeyed through the bachelor, master, and educational specialist programs she asked herself, "why not just continue?" Delays to pursuing the doctorate included the lack of support in which Liz stated, "that is probably what took me so long, the program that I was in everyone was independent when it came to the writing stages." Liz first encountered someone with a doctorate degree when she was an undergraduate. It was Dr. Ford, her readers theory teacher, at Fisk University who was a Black female. Liz recalled the following: "She would always say, you know, everybody here is smart enough to go beyond a master's, go beyond this." Liz credits Dr. Ford with planting the seed for her doctorate. She said barriers to matriculation included, "driving back and forth to Memphis every other weekend because father was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer before he passed away, along with losing my husband shortly after while enrolled in the doctoral program, being residentially displaced, the design of the program did not fit my learning style, there was no guidance as it related to writing the dissertation which was discouraging and challenging, and finding the time to dedicate to writing along with organization." Liz stated that her doctoral completion was facilitated by a Black professor from Florida A&M who took her under her wing. She elaborated, "We started

from like ground zero and it was her support that got me through the writing stages of the program." Liz stated that others who started the program with her were ABD. She also reported recalling her dad's advice when she was growing up, "Life is not picking on you, you just have to keep going."

Liz offered the following advice for non-traditional peers considering enrollment in a doctoral program,

> Do it and to stay focused on the journey because it is such a small chunk of your life that can make a big difference in your life. Make certain to organize and rely on family and work support, engage in self-care, dedicate time to the journey. When obstacles are encountered, think about the opportunities that await, do not be afraid to ask for help and know that you are not on the journey alone.

Liz said that her external motivation for completing her doctorate was,

> One day I want to own and operate my own charter school, I am very interested in curriculum design and what is best for Black and Brown kids, curriculum framing and what students need to in order to be better readers and thinkers has always been an interest to me.

Sasha

Sasha was a 50-year-old Black female. She earned her EdD in 2023 at the age of 49. At the time of the study, Sasha was employed as an administrator in a public school. She began her professional experience as a teacher. Sasha reported other roles she had while in the doctoral program as mother, wife, dean of instruction, classroom support for an English III class,

intermittent caregiver for her mother who became ill when she was halfway through the doctoral program, and caring for her grandmother.

She reported the family's economic status as upper middle class. Sasha stated that she grew up in Nashville, Tennessee and was one of five children. Her mother obtained a bachelor's degree and became an English teacher and her father attended Meharry Medical College to become a dentist. Sasha said that her formative years were influenced by growing up around education as her mother taught at a private school. She added,

> My parents always made sure to give us experiences so that we were well rounded such as basketball, piano, ballet, and tap, and my father always told each of us that we were going to college, so there was never a question of the importance of education in our family, especially having a mother who's an educator. I am a third-generation educator, my grandmother was also an English teacher. We spent our summers completing

> workbook pages and reading books at the Bordeaux Library, so all of those things just shaped my perspective of education.

Sasha reported preparing for retirement as the motivation for pursuing her doctorate. She elaborated,

> As an adjunct professor at a college and in leadership, my role has always been with curriculum and instruction, I knew that after retiring from my current employer, I still wanted to do something related to curriculum and instruction, probably around teacher training so the doctorate made sense for that next phase of my educational career.

She added, “Whether or not I do it at the college level or as a consultant for other schools, having the credentials, it's just important in terms of integrity and educational experience to link with professional experience.”

Other than her father, Sasha’s first encounter with a Black person with doctorate was in high school, a private school. The only barrier she reported was the impact it had on family time. She said that she did not experience self-doubt or a lack of confidence about her ability to matriculate at the doctoral level. Facilitators were reported as cohort and colleagues, a friend who was a semester ahead in the doctoral program, her dissertation chair, and church members who prayed for her family. Sasha offered the following advice for non-traditional peers considering enrollment in a doctoral program; “Explore the program design, seek the support of family, and remember that the process of research is perfectly imperfect.” Sasha concluded by sharing,

> I think pursuing a doctorate at the 40 plus level has benefits that one does not consider at an earlier age. You are better at learning how to pivot and how to adjust, you do not have the added responsibility of raising children and having to steel time from them to do the

writing, so I don't think doing it in your older years robs you of an experience that will enrich your life, just like with everything, there is a time and a season.

Tabitha

Tabitha was a 50-year-old Black female. She earned her EdD in 2019 at the age of 48. At the time of the study, Tabitha was employed as an administrator in a public school. She began her professional experience as a teacher, and she reported that she is still passionate about teaching. Additional roles she had while in the doctoral program were mother, assistant principal, and in the last year of the program, principal.

She reported that the family's economic status was lower class, "poverty, we did not have a lot." Her mother and father graduated from high school. Tabitha grew up in a small town in Alabama. Her mother raised her and her sisters while working as a temporary part-time employee. As a result, they were forced to move in with her grandparents.

Tabitha reported that her formative years were influenced by church, saying, "Growing up in a small town you learned quickly that you want out, you want to see more of the world." She stated, "We knew just based on television that there was more to life." Tabitha noted, "In my town, you either participated in sports or band as kind of your way outside of the city limits," adding, "My mom was very adamant that her girls will go to college and so with that being a focus for us, probably for as long as I can remember, I understood that you go to school, you get good grades, and you go to college."

Tabitha stated that she did not plan to pursue a doctorate. She attributes God using a friend to plant the seed noting that her friend persuaded her to take advantage of a program being offered to the employees of the local public school district at a substantially reduced rate. She

embraced the opportunity to obtain a doctorate to better position herself economically as a single parent.

In 2001, Tabitha first encountered someone with a doctorate. It was her first employer, a Black female principal. Tabatha said that barriers to matriculation included having to navigate writing, obtaining IRB approval, and choosing and obtaining approval for a tool that aligned with her work. Tabitha noted that she was well supported by a friend as she mitigated moving in, moving through, and moving out of the transition. Facilitators included affordability, Saturday classes, an accelerated program, the professors, accessibility of her advisor, support from her parents, sisters, and best friend along with cohorts at work. Tabitha offered the following advice for non-traditional peers considering enrollment in a doctoral program; “Go for it, write down deadlines and do a little bit of work every day, and ask for help if you are struggling with something.”

Victoria

Victoria was a 55-year-old Black female. She earned her EdD in 2023 at the age of 55. At the time of this study, Victoria was employed full time as director of graduate admissions at a local university. Other roles she assumed while in the doctoral program were wife, mother, grandmother, and community activist. Victoria reported the family’s economic status as lower class. She grew up in a small town in Nashville doing fun things that did not cost a lot such as skating, community games, and family gatherings. Her mother and father completed high school. Victoria reported that during her formative years her development was influenced by going to church, exposure to community services, reading, and going to the library. She added, “My dad loves to read, he is the one, the reason why I love school . . . I mean, my mom enjoys reading too, and that was an impact that always encouraged my learning along with going to the library a

lot because there was always something to do at the library." Victoria said that she was encouraged to pursue her doctorate degree by her mentor and was persuaded to lead by example. She stated that there was no direct connection between her developmental experiences and the decision to obtain a doctoral degree as she was a first-generation college student and the only person in her family to earn a doctorate. Delays to pursuing the doctorate were attributed to her desire to have her daughters to finish college before she returned for a terminal degree. She noted that she enrolled in the doctoral program after one of her daughter's completed her master's.

Victoria first encountered someone with a doctorate in high school, a Black female principal that she described as a classy lady, and a music teacher. Victoria reported barriers as statistics, understanding the process of research (such as choosing a problem statement), and having to forgo other activities. Facilitators included a church ministry referred to as Saving Our Daughters, the online format, affordability, access to advisors, support from other doctoral students at different universities, and resources such as librarians whom she referred to as the best librarians in the world, and the writing hub. Victoria offered the following advice for non-traditional peers considering enrollment in a doctoral program; "I would definitely advise them to find a person that they can connect with that is in the program so that they can work together and hold each other accountable and take advantage of the available resources." Victoria concluded by encouraging that doctoral students find and stay in contact with a mentor with a stick to it attitude, until completion.

Yogi

Yogi was a 50-year-old Black female. She earned her EdD in 2022 at the age of 49. At the time of this study, Yogi was an itinerant in education. She reported other roles she had while in the doctoral program as full-time employee, notary public, independent contractor, mother,

and intermittent caregiver for her mother who was diagnosed with cancer. Yogi reported the family's economic status as middle class. She was the youngest of four children and grew up in Flint, MI. She recalled traveling with her family and being involved in activities during elementary, middle, and high school. Her mother completed high school and secretary school, but she did not obtain a formal degree. Her father completed high school and then served in the military. He had some community college but did not graduate. Although she felt loved and reported having a wonderful childhood, Yogi shared that during her formative years she was influenced by feeling as though she was different, perhaps less than others. She noted that she had a lot of lonely days and because she was quiet, her identity was attached to family members such as her sister who was outgoing or her dad who was a well-known band member. Yogi stated, "Based on my developmental experiences, I felt like had to do more, to do better, challenge myself, excel, and to prove that I was not different, or if I was different, my difference was worth being recognized." She added,

> I love education, my sweet spot or my happy place is sitting in the classroom and learning . . . I always wanted the highest-level degree. I never wanted the reason for me being denied something was because I did not have the education or the experience that would keep me from accomplishing that.

Yogin continued,

> A huge motivating factor for me, it wasn't just for me that I got the doctoral degree, I got it for all of the people that came before me that was not able to get it, but yet they, the ancestors, opened up doors so that I could do so.

Delays to pursuing the doctorate included, "raising a son and he was the priority, I didn't want anything to compete with me raising him." Yogi's first encounters with people with

doctorates were her cousin (a veterinarian), and “in sixth grade, I had a tall, thin, no nonsense Black lady as a teacher who had a doctoral degree.” Yogi shared that having a teacher with a doctorate in sixth grade was likely related to it being a fine arts school where you had to test and be accepted to attend. She shared that she overheard the teacher informing her parents that based on testing, she should attend the school for the gifted referred to as ATP (academically talented people).

Yogi shared barriers, “I initially enrolled in a doctoral program at one university and writing presented as a significant barrier which led to the instructor suggesting that I sit out the next semester and get some writing classes.” After withdrawing from that institution, she said that due to feelings of discouragement, self-doubt, and a lack of confidence in her writing skills, she faced the barrier of getting mentally ready for the rigors of the doctoral program upon enrollment at the second institution. She also noted that the mental preparation was more difficult when her mother’s cancer returned.

Facilitators included the cohort model, family, positive experiences with professors, an organized schedule of course assignments including due dates for each assignment and chapter of the dissertation, accessibility to advisors for asking questions, and proofreaders. Yogi added that her cohort held video conferences on a weekly basis to talk about assignments, offer encouragement, hold each other accountable, pray, discuss celebrations, challenges, and goals, and work collectively on assignments. The strategies employed by Yogi to navigate moving in, moving through, and moving out of the doctoral program included, “getting a second opinion on my writing and utilizing the writing center.”

Yogi offered the following advice for non-traditional peers considering enrollment in a doctoral program; “Pray and do it and manage the negative little thoughts coming through that

remind you of bad or negative experiences which can get in your way such as the difficulties I had with writing my thesis which resurfaced as I wrote my dissertation." Yogi concluded,

> It is important to think about how to use the degree to help someone else or change the system, embrace the title of doctor because some people will not happily receive your accomplishment, recognize that the accomplishment is about more than you as an individual, and attempt to understand the purpose of God allowing you to be the one to complete the terminal degree.

Results

The interviews captured the lived experiences of non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates. Multiple themes emerged.

Themes

Faith

Roughly 80% of the participants indicated that faith was important in their childhood (see Table 2). All the participants admitted to thanking God, going to church, or something else that indicated faith was important to them. Dr. C said, "For me my higher power was my backbone I had to continue to keep my faith."

Family and Importance of Education

Roughly 80% indicated that family bonds were strong in their childhood (see Table 2). However, about half the participants indicated that they grew up in a less than ideal environment and 30% mentioned being exposed to abuse or neglect (see Table 2). Liz stated that she grew up in a community where there was not much focus on postsecondary education. She stated, "They focused on going to the military, the mindset of even the people who worked within the school didn't believe in the kids in the neighborhood." Dr. C shared,

> My mother always poured into me that I needed to go to college but even if you don't, you have to get a trade because she didn't want me to be like her and work in the factories working really hard for pennies. Now my father's side they were in poverty. There were eighteen children and that's why my father only has a 7th grade education because he quit school to work so he could support himself and to send home money to his mom and dad to help with the younger children.

All the participants indicated that perseverance was a cultural value in their families helping them overcome adversity. Sasha reported, "My father always told each of us that we were going to college, so there was never a question of the importance of education in our family, especially having a mother who's an educator" adding, "I'm a third-generation educator."

Eighty percent of participants indicated that education had been important to them since childhood and was an instilled value (see Table 2). Ninety percent of participants were first time terminal degree holders in their families, and 70% were first generation college graduates (see Table 2). In reference to her cohort members, Andra stated, "Most of the people that crossed my path in this program that looked like me came from a family of first to pursue a doctoral degree." Faye reported, "My mom instilled in all of her children, get an education and a love for reading books."

Mentorship and Networking

Mentorship was mentioned several times as a key to success for obtaining the degree and in other areas of life as well. Ninety percent of participants indicated that they had a Black female mentor (see Table 2). Victoria credited her mentor for planting the seed for her to pursue her doctorate and she noted that her mentor offered support throughout the program. Being part of a network and/or cohort was mentioned by several participants as key for dealing with the

hardships of coursework and life during their program. Several participants emphasized the benefits of the cohort model. Andra shared,

> I loved getting up to go see my cohort because we had such a good time, we'd get lunch as a group, study as a group, and there was a cohort member that had three children who was fighting to the end saying I'm not gonna finish but we didn't let her quit, that's the benefit of having a cohort.

Yogi reported that her cohort met weekly with an agenda that started with prayer. She noted how they encouraged one another, shared celebrations related and unrelated to the program, and held one another accountable.

Challenges

Eighty percent of participants said adapting to the rigor of a doctoral program was difficult and 80% said holding multiple life roles was challenging (see Table 2). Managing loss or severe illness were other major barriers that were faced by participants. Yogi reported that her mother's cancer returned as she completed her doctoral degree. Liz stated, "I was a caregiver to my dad and my husband, who both passed away during this journey."

Time management was mentioned as significant (60%) but to a lesser degree (see Table 2). Fifty percent of participants did not think they could achieve a doctoral degree and 30% indicated that they struggled financially (see Table 2). Dr. C revealed, "I am a horrible, horrible test taker. I have test anxiety." Liz stated, "I didn't ever think I was smart enough to get the doctorate."

Motivations

Faith, family, and setting an example for other Black people were the highest motivators for participants. Faye spoke of modeling perseverance through the doctoral journey for her daughters who are now in graduate programs. Dr. C commented,

> My momma was the first person I called when they called me and said I successfully defended. I could hear her shout and thanking God all over that phone because she had been praying for me, when I tell you that woman prayed for me, in every aspect of my life she has prayed for me especially through my educational journey and when we had to make a decision for her to be able to pass on, I knew that she had seen what she wanted to see, what she needed to see.

Career advancement (30%) and personal growth (40%) were mentioned to a lesser but significant degree (see Table 2). Andra and Dr. C described the importance of having a doctoral degree to improve their opportunities for advancement in a rural TN county which had few Black people in leadership roles.

Research Question Responses

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in Tennessee within the past five years?

Participants reported their motivation was related to career advancement and personal growth. Approximately 50% of participants reported external motivation for influencing their decision to obtain a doctoral degree (see Table 2). Andra stated, “In the county that I live in, African American people didn't get very far in the field of education if you didn't have a

doctoral degree." She also stated that having the doctoral degree allowed her to get back to an income that was consistent with her corporate salary. Sasha stated,

> I am closer to the retirement stage of my career and I knew that after retiring from my current employer I still wanted to do something with curriculum and instruction, probably around teacher training so the doctorate made sense for that next phase of my educational career.

The other participants reported internal motivation for influencing their decision to obtain a doctoral degree. Yogi explained,

> To get this education that a lot of our people were not able to and it wasn't that they were incapable of the work, it was just that the opportunity was not allowed. So for me to be in a position to pursue this and to complete it, was a huge motivating factor for me. So, it wasn't just for me that I got it. I got it for all of the people that came before me that was not able to get it, but yet they opened up doors so that I could so.

Academic demands were reported by approximately 63% of participants as a barrier to matriculation (see Table 3). Tabitha stated, "I told my advisor that I was overwhelmed by the writing portion of the dissertation." Academic demands also complicated the challenges associated with her life as a single mom.

Personal barriers were reported by approximately 52% percent of participants (see Table 3). Andra, Dr. C, Elsa, Faye, Liz, Sasha, and Yogi reported acting as caregivers for at least one relative, usually a parent, during their program. Elsa said, "My mom was diagnosed with dementia, so I was helping my dad take care of my mother during that time." Only 20% of participants disclosed barriers pertaining to discrimination (see Table 3). Andra and Dr. C gave an account of a White counterpart who secured a position in administration without a

doctoral degree in a rural Tennessee county where both Andra and Dr. C applied but was declined offers despite having an exceptional work history. They reported that their decision to pursue doctorates was influenced by the experience.

Approximately 73% percent of participants reported childhood cultural experiences to be an influence on their doctoral decision (see Table 3). Liz said,

> I saw the struggles in my neighborhood. There was a lot of substance abuse. There was a lot of violence. I knew that's not how I wanted to live. The struggle was very present, and I just knew I couldn't live the rest of my life in that situation.

Facilitators reported by participants were support from family, friends, and professors, the cohort model, and collaboration. Ninety percent of the participants stated that mentors facilitated their success (see Table 3). Dr. C reported that she met the person who became her mentor when she was in grade school, a counselor at that time. Dr. C shared her initial perception of her doctoral mentor:

> She was one of the only Black women that I saw in Wilson County schools, I just went to a little rural county school so I saw no one you know that look like me other than the students and then we were all cousins. To see her come into the school and she would always dress real pretty, real snazzy and I would be like wow because of the way she dressed and the way she carried herself. I looked up to her and was like wow she’s the only person that looks like me, I want to be like her.

Approximately 53% of participants credited networking as a facilitator (see Table 3). For future non-traditional Black doctoral candidates, Victoria advised,

> Find a person that you can connect with that's in the program so that you and the person can do it together and hold each other accountable. So you're not doing it by yourself, it's so much easier when you have someone that you can lean on for support.

Personal support was identified as a facilitator by 50% of participants (see Table 2). Kraus shared a story of reversed psychology employed by her husband which ignited a renewed energy of perseverance. In an episode of venting her frustration about a statistics assignment with, "I do not need this, I have a master's plus, I really don't need this," her husband responded, "I did not know that I married a quitter." Of the ten participants, 20% reported their doctoral journey as a learning opportunity (see Table 2). Tabitha reported, "I love the fact that I could get to research and learn about a topic that was of interest to me."

Sub-Question One

What impact does culture have on non-traditional Black female graduates' pursuit of doctoral programs?

The interviews generated explicit themes pertaining to cultural influences. Family as a source of support and encouragement reflected the cultural impact of family and community. Sasha stated, "My family was incredibly supportive throughout my doctoral program." Some participants' desire to overcome challenges to prove doubters wrong could be associated with cultural values of resilience and perseverance. Elsa said, "I wanted to prove to myself and others that I could achieve this goal." Most participant's families valued education, faith, and perseverance. Tabitha reported, "My mom was very adamant that her girls will go to college that was a focus for us, probably for as long as I can remember, you go to school, you get good grades, and you go to college." Many participants came from poverty and at-risk backgrounds. Tabitha identified her family's economic status as "poverty, I would say lower

than poverty, yeah, we didn't have a lot." Andra and Dr. C asserted that discrimination in employment practices and promotions inspired their doctoral journey.

Sub-Question Two

What are the facilitators and barriers experienced by non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates?

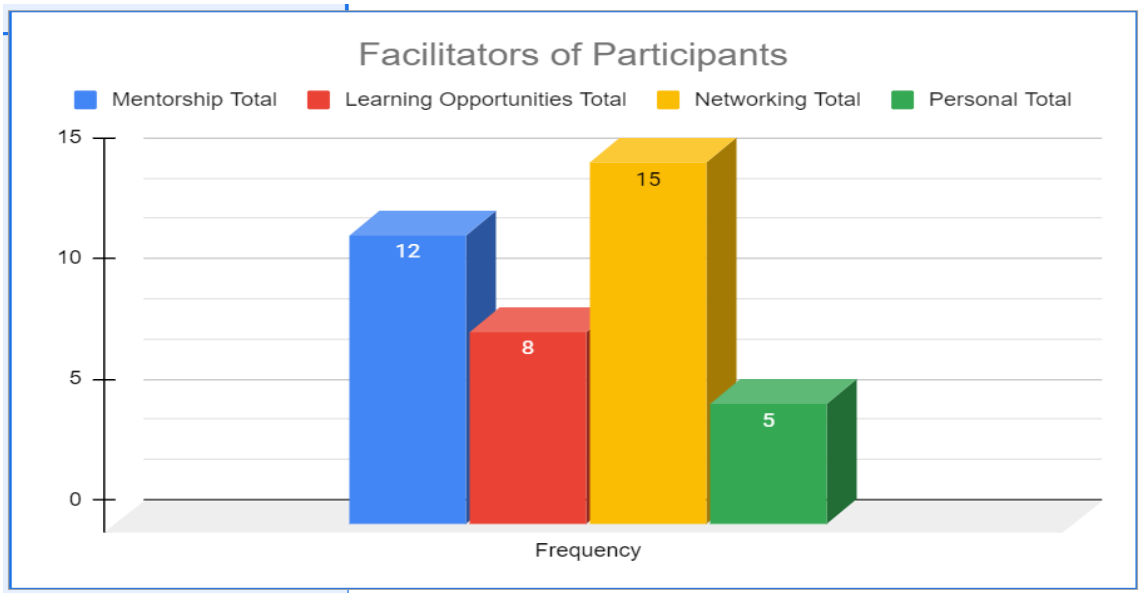
The participants were explicit about their facilitators and barriers. A supportive network consisting of family, friends, the cohort model, and professors was a consistently identified theme. Dr. C shared,

I remember sitting in a statistics class one day and all of my cohort members had gone to lunch and I cried, and I cried, and I called home. My husband answered the phone and I said to my husband, who is a pastor, I can't do this, I cannot do it, I'm struggling, what have I got myself into. He said, pull yourself together, you will be fine, you can do this, God did not bring you this far to leave you now. I hung up knowing that I wanted to display a spirit of perseverance for my children.

Having access to a mentor was also identified a facilitator. Victoria said, "Have a mentor you can call when you're ready to quit, call somebody so they can help you off that ledge." Table 3 shows that learning opportunities and personal objectives were less frequently mentioned as facilitators.

Figure 2

Facilitators of Participants



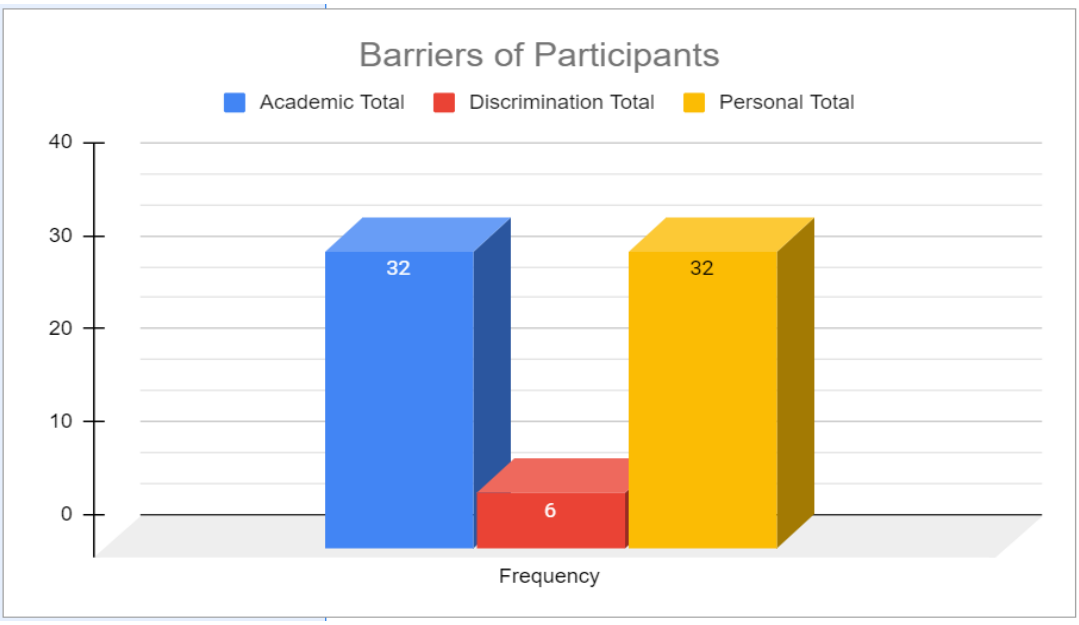
Ironically, family was identified as both a facilitator and a barrier. In addition, balancing work and studies, financial constraints, academic and personal challenges were also barriers. Most of the participants held multiple roles that made navigating doctoral studies more difficult. Dr. C reported assuming the role of mother, wife, first lady of her church, caregiver for her mother, teacher, youth director at church, head of step team at previous school, and an events coordinator.

Tabitha shared, “My son was in his first year of college so I had to figure out his financial aid stuff while trying to, you know, figure out my own.” Kraus reported cost as a barrier. In terms of academic barriers, Yogi reported being so discouraged by a professor’s feedback related to her writing skill that she withdrew from the initial university where she was enrolled in the doctoral program. Andra expressed difficulties pertaining to dissertation writing due to a lack of knowledge about scholarly writing.

Liz reported a personal barrier of lacking confidence in her ability to obtain a doctoral degree. Other personal barriers involved work related stress as Dr. C reported a change of employers during her doctoral journey along with her professional licensure being jeopardized related to the job change. Dr. C also reported having a history of test anxiety and a reading disability. Test anxiety was also reported by Kraus along with inexperience related to APA formatting and technology. The most extreme personal barrier reported by the participants was the illnesses of loved ones and some participants even reported loss of loved ones while in the doctoral program. Liz disclosed that her father was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer before he passed away and that her husband died shortly after her father while she was enrolled in the doctoral program.

Figure 3

Barriers of Participants



Sub-Question Three

How did the non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates engage their facilitators and barriers in order to mitigate Schlossberg's three distinct steps: moving in, moving through, or moving out of the phenomenon?

Participants did not report doubts of age-related matriculation. When age was mentioned as a barrier, it was associated with younger students. When age was associated with the non-traditional students, the participants thought their age could be harnessed for perseverance. Faye said, "There were younger people in the program who seemed to have a harder time because they lacked experience." Sasha shared, "I think pursuing a doctorate at the 40 plus level has benefits that one does not consider at an earlier age."

Facilitators were varied and revisited to move participants in, through, and out of the phenomenon. Liz stated that her doctoral completion was facilitated by a Black professor from Florida A&M who took her under her wing, starting from ground zero she got her through the writing demands of the program. Several participants referred to the support of their faith. As it pertained to enrolling in the doctoral program, Tabitha said about her friend who planted the seed of a doctoral degree, "God just always plant people right there in your viewpoint to help you see the things that sometimes you aren't thinking about." She elaborated, "and so while I know that my friend had this conversation with me, I know that He [God] spoke to her so that I can hear it."

Kraus said, "I relied on my husband, my family, and friends." Elsa recounted being contacted by her mentor during a period of disenrollment who said, "I am about to retire, what are you going to do about finishing this doctorate degree?" Elsa stated that this was the push that ultimately led to her completion of her doctoral degree.

Barriers were mitigated through perseverance using similar sources of faith, family, and mentors. Barriers were also allayed using resources such as writing centers, changing schools, cohort support, and a focus on the advantages of a terminal degree. Andra stated, "Being an African American in particular, you do not get very far in the field of education if you do not have a doctoral degree." Yogi reported, "I took my writing to the writing center to get a second opinion." The advantages of the cohort model were underscored by many of the participants as a facilitator and a means to confront barriers. Yogi reported meeting with her cohort on a weekly basis via video conference to talk about assignments, offer encouragement, accountability, prayer, celebrations, challenges, goals, and work collectively on assignments. Yogi stated, "When I reenrolled at the second university, being able to pray with my cohort, having that spiritual, connection being around other believers made a difference."

Summary

Chapter Four provided a detailed description of the results. Themes emerged from the data derived from the four research questions. Participants provided information about facilitators and barriers to successful completion the doctoral degree. The data revealed facilitators such as a supportive network which included family, friends, the cohort model, professors, and mentoring. Barriers included balancing work and studies, family, finances, academic and personal challenges.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in central Tennessee. Chapter Five contributes to the literature by providing a summary of the findings while synthesizing extant research and implications related to the theoretical framework. Methodological and practical implications are also discussed along with delimitations and limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates in central Tennessee who successfully completed doctoral programs within the past five years. As the participants were interviewed, an unanticipated phenomenon emerged. Many of the participants shared their lived experiences in awe of the facilitators and barriers they confronted. The implication is that there was an element of dissociation or depersonalization as they gave an account of their doctoral journey. It was as if they were listening to someone else tell their story. In analyzing and categorizing the in-depth interviews of the non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates, major themes emerged from the lived experiences of the participants. All ten of the non-traditional Black female participants shared a variety of facilitators and barriers experienced during their doctoral journey. The facilitators included family, friends, the cohort model, professors, and mentoring. The barriers included balancing work and studies, family, financial constraints, academic and personal challenges. Four research questions guided this study aimed at capturing the lived experiences of non-traditional Black female doctoral completers in central Tennessee.

The central research question was: What are the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in Tennessee within the past five years? In spite the barriers of balancing work and studies, family, financial constraints, academic and personal challenges, participants reported that family, friends, the cohort model, professors, and mentoring were external influences that facilitated their ultimate success of completing the doctorate degree which positioned them for career advancement opportunities in leadership or administration. The participants acknowledged the contributions of the facilitators in helping them to overcome personal challenges and to prove doubters wrong, particularly pertaining to societal limitations. Surprisingly, participants did not see age or gender as limitations. According to the lived experiences of the participants, the societal limitations were implicitly related to race and academic readiness.

The first sub-question was: What impact does culture have on non-traditional Black female graduates' pursuit of doctoral programs? With regard to complexity and multiplicity of the modern definition of culture as explained by Vaughn (2019), the participants conveyed explicit and implicit cultural impacts that contributed to their doctoral journey. Some participants reported that the terminal degree was necessary for career advancement, particularly in education, due to their race as they observed non-Black counterparts advance without doctorates. Social class was a theme that also emerged which motivated several participants to pursue doctorates to overcome the poverty-ridden circumstances of their childhood. Several participants emphasized that their affiliation with faith-based or religious cultures was a source of support. From the accounts of the participants lived experiences, an implicit influence related to gender can be inferred as the participants most often identified models of professionals and their mentors as Black females, rarely was a male mentioned by any participants.

The second sub-question was: What are the facilitators and barriers experienced by non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates? Participants clearly and consistently articulated family, friends, the cohort model, professors, and mentoring were facilitators. The emotional support, encouragement, and practical assistance from loved ones such as friends and family were a bedrock conveyed by all 10 participants. The supportive and collaborative learning environment of the cohort model with peers facing similar challenges was preferred by most participants. Some participants reported support and encouragement from colleagues and church members. Professor and university support was acknowledged by participants in the form of guidance, mentorship, and resources such as the writing center and proofreaders. Other facilitators were mentioned such as the online format, affordability, employer assistance, and flexible schedules.

Balancing studies with work and family commitments was reported by participants as a primary barrier. Some participants reported financial responsibilities related to living expenses and the cost of the program while simultaneously addressing the expenses of a child in college. Academic barriers were reported by participants related to a lack of preparedness for statistics, scholarly writing, APA formatting, and research methodologies. There were unexpected personal barriers such as illness, family emergencies, and death which disrupted studies. Other personal barriers reported by participants included a reading comprehension disability, test anxiety, and ADHD.

The third sub-question was: How did the non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates engage their facilitators and barriers to mitigate Schlossberg's three distinct steps: moving in, moving through, or moving out of the phenomenon? Moving into the phenomenon, for some participants, was engaged through obedience after being spurred to enroll in the doctoral

program by a friend or to re-enroll by a mentor who was preparing to retire. The advice that the participants offered to potential non-traditional Black female doctoral candidates was that engaging facilitators and addressing barriers is accomplished by identifying "the why" pertaining to the decision to pursue a doctorate. Participants referred to reflecting on "the why" when the demands of the program became overwhelming. Engaging the facilitators and barriers to move out of the phenomenon took place in the form of prayer for some participants, a challenge by a participant's husband, a desire to please parents, modeling for children, and persevering to accomplish what elders and ancestors did not have an opportunity to achieve.

Discussion

The purpose of this section is to discuss the study findings in relationship to the empirical and theoretical literature. The themes that emerged from this study describe the phenomena of the experiences of non-traditional Black female doctoral completers. Based on the in-depth interviews of all ten participants themes were generated pertaining to faith, family and the importance of education, mentorship and networking, challenges, and motivations.

Empirical Reference

The literature targeting (40+) Black female doctoral graduates was scarce. Extant literature included research on women of mature age (25-64) and advanced age (62+) without specifying race or education and research on Black doctoral students enrolled at predominantly White institutions without specifying gender or age. Studies on Black women in higher education have been disregarded (Bell-Scott, 1994; Ihle,1986; Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Johnson-Bailey (2004) stated that conducting most studies on middle-aged, middle class White women represents a deficiency in educational literature.

Coker (2003) reported that it is assumed that because non-traditionally aged Black women are not intrinsically motivated by growth and advancement is one explanation that few pursue higher education, instead they are motivated by divorce, job loss, single-parenthood panic, or by being welfare recipients on a special government back-to-school program. The participants of this study were established professionals. None of the participants reported divorce, job loss, or government subsidy as external motivation. The participants reported motivation pertaining to learning opportunities/personal growth or career advancement.

The participants encountered multiple barriers during their doctoral journey yet persevered. This study makes a novel contribution to the field by providing a qualitative exploration of the lived experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates. Participants did not identify age as a barrier to matriculation. Race and social class were only implicitly referenced as barriers as they pertained to academic readiness and writing skills. The participants offered insight that challenges the societal disposition reported by Jindal (2014) that non-traditional students may be too old to learn.

Theoretical Reference

Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory and Erikson's (1964) theory of psychosocial development provided the theoretical framework for this study investigating the lived experiences of non-traditional Black female doctoral degree completers. Grant and Osanloo (2014) stated that the theoretical framework that informs the qualitative study is analogous to an architect submitting a blueprint for the design of a building.

Transition theory. Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory applied to this study of the doctoral journey of non-traditional Black female graduates illuminated how the participants employed the 4 S System of situation, self, support, and strategies to identify resources to help

them cope with their transition. Gbogbo (2020) noted that an individual's capacity to cope effectively during a transition is contingent upon assets in the four variables. All of the participants of this study mitigated aspects of the situation variable such as determining the significance to the transition – obtaining a doctoral degree. In their transition participants reported assuming many roles, the duration of the transition was impacted by the participants' perseverance to remain continuously enrolled and engaged in the program expectations, the participants were confronted with the need to manage foreseen and unforeseen stress while simultaneously engaged in the rigors of the doctoral program, and their perception of the transition as positive or negative was integral to completion. Psychological fortitude and tenacity make up the self variable. Despite many barriers during childhood and adulthood, the participants of this study exhibited and outlook on life that equipped them for coping with the transition. While Anderson et al. (2012) reported that it is difficult and complex to gain a sense of self, the participants exhibited some characteristics of grit such as resilience, determination, commitment, values, and spirituality that resulted in their successful transition – doctoral completion. The demonstration of unwavering and consistent support during the transition was provided to the participants in form of supportive church members, prayers, monetary donations, mentoring, and encouragement from friends, family, cohort members, and colleagues along with university resources. In an effort to cope with the transition the participants employed various strategies which were suggested by Browne et al. (2018), networking, seeking professional recognition, or developing skills. Some participants accessed networking opportunities through sororities while others sought recognition of their professional development through promotions.

The primary purpose of the participants employment of the 4 S System was to maneuver through what Schlossberg et al. (1989) and Anderson et al. (2012) referred to as the three distinct

steps of a transition: moving in, moving through, or moving out. Participants reported moving into the transition through the encouragement of a friend or mentor, pursuing something that was always an objective, and seeking to be better prepared when applying for leadership roles and positions in higher education. Participants reported experiences of moving through the transition by eliminating some roles they assumed prior to matriculation, adapting to the rigors of coursework, dedicating time to learning scholarly writing, and sacrificing time with loved ones with the understanding that all were requirements to conquer the transition. The participants stories of moving out of the transition was conveyed with relief and excitement. Several participants gave an account of their lived experiences in awe of the barriers that they overcame to complete the doctoral program. Many participants commented that the doctoral journey was one of the hardest things they ever had to do.

Psychosocial development theory. Erikson's (1964) theory of psychosocial development, particularly the seventh phase of the adult stage of psychosocial development referred to as generativity versus stagnation, applied to this study of the doctoral journey of non-traditional Black female graduates provided an understanding of the participants focus on decisions that can aide in establishing and guiding the next generation through their choices of productivity and creativity which are instrumental in providing a blueprint that enhances the conditions of humanity educationally and civically. Slater (2003) stated that one's creations serve as a contribution to humanity and evidence of one's existence in the world beyond mortality. Faye and Dr. C expressed concern for modeling completion of their doctoral degree for their daughters. Yogi expressed a selfless concern for completing the doctoral degree as bigger than oneself in terms of honoring elders and ancestors who sacrificed so future generations could take advantage of the higher education opportunities. Liz and Tabitha cited

conquering a culture of poverty as the inspiration for perseverance. Sasha hailed from a pedigree of generations of educators which resulted in her being poised for strength and wherewithal for the doctoral journey that was dissimilar from the accounts of other participants. Parented by educated, uneducated, or undereducated parents did not affect participants' generativity. All of the participants reported supportive and encouraging parents regardless of their parents' educational backgrounds, social-economic statuses, or employment. Faye reported that focusing on the goal assisted her psychologically as she grappled with the loss of loved ones while in the midst of her program. The lived experiences of the participants illuminate the monumental accomplishments of a generative adult including the power of perseverance to reenroll on three times as expressed by Elsa. In terms of generativity springing from a selfish desire, the expanded concept of psychosocial conflict, inclusivity versus exclusivity, offers some insight on Andra and Dr. C's determination to graduate. Andra and Dr. C gave accounts of being denied opportunities in leadership and administration due to not having a doctoral degree. The psychosocial concept of pride versus embarrassment was implied by Elsa when she stated that she stopped telling people that she was pursuing a doctoral degree because of the repeated questions about when she was going to finish. This study adds to the literature by elucidating how generativity during the seventh stage of adult psychosocial development facilitated the doctoral completion of non-traditional Black female candidates. Cross (2013) stated the determination to pursue and complete a doctoral degree at an atypical stage of life requires grit, persistence, and adaptability. The participants shed new light on the interests and will of non-traditional Black females to achieve the pinnacle of educational and professional goals as role models for their racial and socioeconomic communities.

Implications

This section addresses the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study. Based on the findings, there are multiple implications and recommendations for stakeholders.

Theoretical Implications

Despite multiple enrollments and a change in universities by some participants, they completed their doctoral programs. Transition theory (Schlossberg, 1995) and psychosocial development theory (Erikson, 1964) was the lens used to understand the phenomenon. The findings indicated that the tenacity of non-traditional Black female doctoral candidates is undefeated by barriers such as balancing work and studies, family, financial constraints, academic and personal challenges particularly in the presence of facilitators such as family, friends, the cohort model, professors, and mentoring.

According to Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory, people experience transitions continuously (events or non-events that result in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles). The participants acknowledged the transition of enrolling in a doctoral program. The participants gave an account of how their doctoral journeys resulted in changes in personal and professional relationships in the context of not being available to attend significant events (e.g., birthday or anniversary celebrations) or having an unexpected job changes. Participants shared how scheduling activities centered around academic demands and responsibilities. A change in roles while pursuing a doctoral degree was sometimes related to their profession or assuming the role of caregiver.

The seventh stage (generativity vs. stagnation) of Erikson's (1964) psychosocial development theory postulates that culture and history influences development. Slater (2003) noted that generativity refers to extensive adulting responsibilities such as family, relationships,

work, and society. The participants shared lived experiences about their childhood, family background, and culture which impacted their pursuit and perseverance despite of delays and barriers while on their doctoral journey. As non-traditional Black female doctoral candidates, the participants conveyed a heightened sense of determination and resilience in the context of their responsibility to finish what they started for their families, for others, unknown and known such as colleagues, who needed a model of what they too could accomplish. One participant persevered despite barriers to honor the present; a time when it is an option to pursue a doctoral degree. There was a time when it was unacceptable for Black people to even learn to read.

Empirical Implications

In the context of historical factors and societal limitations, affiliation with a minority subgroup such as age, gender, race, or economic class can delay matriculation. Historically, society defined the Black woman's role as homemaker and matriarch, having two or three children, nurturing a family, engaging in pure mothering through racial pride, and morality by displaying thrift and hard work (Crocco et al., 2007). It limited educational endeavors and professional opportunities. Some of the participants reported delaying matriculation until their children graduated from college or rushing to complete the program before their children began college. The use of discrimination for leadership or administrative roles influenced some of the participants. Affordability impacted matriculation for others.

As societal limitations and discrimination disperse, doctoral studies is becoming more common for non-traditional Black females. It is also noteworthy that life expectancy has increased, affording second careers after retirement. It is significant to note that some participants touted their age during their doctoral journey as a benefit in the context of life and professional experience and the option to be selfish with their time. In the context of life

expectancy and longevity in the workplace, the participants conveyed a desire to train novice educators in the field, work at the university level, or start a charter school focused on novel approaches to educating Black and other minority students.

Practical Implications

Unrelated to age but at the intersection of race and gender, Black female doctoral students contend with discrimination pertaining to assumptions that they are incapable of doctoral matriculation (Walkington, 2017). Considering the context of age, race, and gender, the lived experiences of the participants of this study dispel the notion of inabilities of this demographic to engage in and complete doctoral endeavors. Therefore, there are practical implications for stakeholders such as higher education institutions, students, staff, faculty, administrators, and employers. Barriers related to isms are not going to deter the non-traditional Black female candidate who has a constitution of self that is healthy and stable. The contributions of very mature individuals in higher education, thus the workforce, offers experience and temperance that cannot be accomplished with a largely monolithic demographic.

Delimitations

Delimitations include the following: a) a phenomenological design selected to utilize the informal interactive interviewing processes to extract personal, comprehensive descriptions of lived experiences (Cypress, 2018), b) targeting Black females 40 years of age or older, and c) the requirement of participants to have completed a doctoral program from a central Tennessee college or university within the past five years. These parameters were selected due to the limited information that is available regarding recent doctoral completers of this demographic. Additionally, an unintended delimitation was that the lived experiences of doctoral completers of

this study were limited to the field of education which may not be consistent with the experiences of doctoral completers in other programs of study e.g. engineering.

Limitations

Findings were limited in scope due to the sample size, the selection of participants from a specific geographic area, and the study was restricted to doctoral completers within the past five years.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in central Tennessee. Recommendations for future research are as follows:

Topics

Since specific types of doctoral degrees were not a condition for participation, researchers may want to differentiate between types (e.g., PsyD, EdD, PhD, MD**).** Delimitating the field of study will help control variables and ascertain their impact on successful doctoral completion for non-traditional students. Other topics that were not addressed through the research questions were the personal and professional impact of completing a doctoral degree and plans for utilizing it.

Populations

Participants were Black female doctoral graduates 40 years of age and older in the central Tennessee area and all the participants graduated from a faith-based college or university. Researchers could expand the geographic area and include individuals who attended non faith-based institutions.

Designs

This study employed the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in central Tennessee. Given the participants' depersonalization and dissociative accounts of their lived experiences, researchers may want to consider the theoretical framework of Strong Black Woman Schema (SBWS) in future studies on non-traditional Black female doctoral graduates. SBWS is a cultural expectation for Black women to exemplify traits of extreme emotional strength by suppressing their emotions while displaying determination and caretaking abilities in the midst of facing adversity (Abrams, et al., 2019). According to Collins (2000), SBWS has its roots in slavery.

Researchers should consider the appropriateness of the transcendental phenomenological approach. Transcendental phenomenology is designed to explore the intrinsic aspects of consciousness that leads to the essence of the human experience (Greenidge et al., 2023). Hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes interpretation of phenomena while transcendental phenomenology emphasizes description of phenomena (Creswell, 2018). In addition to other qualitative methods (case study, ethnographic, grounded theory, and narrative), researchers may want to consider the appropriateness of a quantitative or mixed methods design.

Summary

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates in central Tennessee. This research design was appropriate to gain insight about facilitators and barriers to completion. The objective was to capture the lived experiences for the encouragement of others who dare to challenge themselves with a similar endeavor during generativity versus stagnation. Through the lens of the participants, a better understanding of life transitions transpired. The participants experienced

voluntary and involuntary transitions. Their successful mitigation of moving in, moving through, and moving out correlated well with Erikson's (1964) seventh stage of adult psychosocial development of generativity. For example, Liz experienced the loss of her father and husband while pursuing a doctorate, yet persevered. Dr. C reported a combination of circumstances included a reading comprehension disability, test anxiety, and jeopardized employment. The implication was that she was an atypical doctoral candidate, yet she persevered. The participants demonstrate that age, race, and gender are not predictors of success or failure in doctoral studies; success is contingent upon one's will to finish the course.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Email

January 10, 2024

Keith Chapman
Director of Auxiliary Services
Belmont University
1900 Belmont Blvd.
Nashville, TN 37212
keith.chapman@belmont.edu

Dear Mr. Chapman,

As a graduate student in the Department of Counseling Education and Family Studies School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is Understanding Persistence Factors for Non-traditional Black Female Doctoral Graduates and the purpose of my research is to explore the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in central Tennessee.

I am writing to request your permission to circulate flyers by on campus postings and/or direct distribution to individuals on campus to recruit participants for my research by utilizing student and staff referrals.

The participants will be asked to contact me so that they can be provided a contact information form for the purpose of scheduling an interview. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval or respond via email to the researcher's email address: _____.

Sincerely,

Aree E. Robinson
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix A: Email

January 10, 2024

Kathy Meadows
Executive Assistant Student Development
Lipscomb University
1 University Park Dr.
Nashville, TN 37204
kathy.meadows@lipscomb.edu

Dear Mrs. Meadows,

As a graduate student in the Department of Counseling Education and Family Studies School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is Understanding Persistence Factors for Non-traditional Black Female Doctoral Graduates and the purpose of my research is to explore the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in central Tennessee.

I am writing to request your permission to circulate flyers by on campus postings and/or direct distribution to individuals on campus to recruit participants for my research by utilizing student and staff referrals.

The participants will be asked to contact me so that they can be provided a contact information form for the purpose of scheduling an interview. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval or respond via email to the researcher's address: _____.

Sincerely,

Aree E. Robinson
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix A: Email

January 10, 2024

Krista Bellomy
Associate Director of Graduate and Adult Education
Trevecca Nazarene University
333 Murfreesboro Pike
Nashville, TN 37210
KWBellomy@trevecca.edu

Dear Ms. Bellomy,

As a graduate student in the Department of Counseling Education and Family Studies School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is Understanding Persistence Factors for Non-traditional Black Female Doctoral Graduates and the purpose of my research is to explore the experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in central Tennessee.

I am writing to request your permission to circulate flyers by on campus postings and/or direct distribution to individuals on campus to recruit participants for my research by utilizing student and staff referrals.

The participants will be asked to contact me so that they can be provided a contact information form for the purpose of scheduling an interview. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval or respond via email to the researcher's address: _____.

Sincerely,

Aree E. Robinson
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B: Flyer

Research Participants Needed

UNDERSTANDING PERSISTENCE FACTORS FOR NON-TRADITIONAL BLACK FEMALE DOCTORAL GRADUATES

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your race?
4. Have you completed a doctoral degree?
5. What was your age at the time of enrollment in the doctoral program?
6. At what age did you graduate with your doctoral degree?
7. What was your year of graduation from the doctoral program?

If your response to the questions listed above identifies that you are a 40+ year old Black female doctoral graduate, you may be eligible to participate in a research study.

The purpose of the study is to explore the lived experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in central Tennessee.

Participants will be asked to do the following:

1. Complete, sign, and return the following forms
   a. Informed Consent (15 minutes)
   b. Contact Information (5 minutes)
2. Participate in a one-to-one interview (1.5 hours)
3. Participants will be asked to confirm the accuracy of the descriptions of posts (1.5 hours)

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include potential increased resources provided by higher education institutions to meet the needs of an aging population of doctoral students who choose to pursue dashed educational dreams and opportunities.

If you would like to participate, please contact the researcher at the phone number or email address provided below.

A consent document will be given to you at the time of the interview, or it can be emailed prior to the initial interview.

Aree E. Robinson, a doctoral candidate in the Community Care and Counseling Department
School of Behavioral Sciences
at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Please contact Aree E. Robinson at _____ or _____liberty.edu for more information.

Liberty University IRB – 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515

Appendix C: Consent

Title of the Project: Understanding Persistence Factors for Non-Traditional Black Female Doctoral Graduates

Principal Investigator: Aree E. Robinson
Liberty University
Doctoral Candidate
School of Behavioral Sciences

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be Black, a female, and have completed a doctoral degree between the ages of 40 to 65 years old from an accredited Middle Tennessee college or university within the past 5 years. 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.

The purpose of the study is to explore the lived experiences of non-traditional Black female graduates of doctoral programs in central Tennessee. This study aims to research the barriers and persistence pertaining to completion of a doctoral degree as a non-traditional graduate.

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

1. Complete, sign, and return the forms listed below:
    a. Informed Consent (15 minutes)
    b. Contact Information (5 minutes)
2. One-to-one interview (1.5 hours)
    a. Participants will be given the option to interview in-person or via TEAMS or some other form of videoconferencing.
    b. With participants' permission, the interviews will be digitally recorded.
    c. Adhering to confidentiality requirements, all information will be stored on a password protected computer.
3. Accurate Interpretation Review
    a. Participants will be asked to confirm the accuracy of the descriptions of posts (1.5 hours)

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include potential increased resources provided by higher education institutions to meet the needs of an aging population of doctoral students who choose to pursue dashed educational dreams and opportunities. This study may also provide indirect benefits of inspiration to younger females in the Black community along with potentially equipping more Black females with the educational attainment to be considered for faculty positions at colleges and universities, thus an increased in Black mentor options.

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

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

Participant responses to survey(s) will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

Electronic data will be stored on a password-locked computer and hardcopy data will be stored in a locked file cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and all hardcopy records will be shredded. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study. Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address or 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.

The researcher conducting this study is Aree E. Robinson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at _____ and/or _____@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Yulanda Tyre, at _____@liberty.edu.

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 IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is 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.

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 me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Signature & Date

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Aree E. Robinson

Interviewee:

1. What is your name?
2. Do you wish to use a preferred pseudonym?
3. What is your age?
4. What is your gender?
5. What is your race?
6. What is your highest level of education completed?
7. What age were you when you enrolled and completed in the doctoral program?
8. What was your year of graduation from the doctoral program?
9. Please list any other roles you assumed while enrolled in the doctoral program (e.g. parent, employee, caregiver, etc.).
10. What economic class best describes your historical status?
11. What is the highest level of education completed by your parents?
12. What area of study did you obtain a doctoral degree?
13. Why did you decide to pursue a doctoral degree?
14. Where did you complete your doctoral degree?
15. Where did you grow up?
16. Tell me more about where you grew up.

17. When reflecting on your formative experiences what had the most impact on your development?
18. What role did those experiences have on your decision to pursue a doctoral degree?
19. When did you first encounter someone who achieved a doctoral degree?
20. Tell me about the level of support you received while in the doctoral program.
21. What support facilitated matriculation?
22. How would you explain your reason for waiting until you were at an atypical age to pursue your doctoral degree?
23. What challenges or facilitators did you experience as a non-traditional Black female doctoral student?
24. Please explain how you engaged the facilitators and challenges in order to mitigate moving in, moving through, or moving out of the doctoral program?
25. What advice would you give to a non-traditional peer about higher education specifically, enrolling in a doctoral program?
26. Maturity inspires a great deal of reflection, is there anything else that you would like to share that has not been covered in these interview questions?

Appendix E: Contact Information Form

1. Name:

2. The best times that I would be available for an interview are:

3. My preferred method of contact to set up the interview is:

    a. Email

    b. Phone

4. My email address is:

5. My phone number is:

Appendix F: Researcher's Journal

01-30-24

Andra

Before:

While a bit nervous, as this is my first interview, I am excited with anticipation about what I am about to learn from this participant's lived experiences related to matriculation as she has an impressive resume. It will be quite interesting to hear her share what prompted and sustained her decisions to pursue and complete a doctoral degree.

After:

That interview was so enlightening. Although many of the participant's aunts and uncles (her mother's siblings) were already educators during her grade school years, she did not embrace a path to a doctorate degree by way of the field of education until she was 48 years old. Despite a lack of formal education, her mother consistently influenced her learning by enrolling her in constructive activities such as sewing, typing, etc. The participant stated that her mother seemed to invest in her development as a byproduct of what she was never able to do e.g. attend college. The participant also reported that while she protested her mother's decisions during her youth, she employed the same parenting practices of enrolling her sons in constructive activities e.g. travel sports, 4 week engineering camp, etc.; one son has graduated from college and the other son is a freshman in college.

02-03-24

Dr. C

Before:

According to communications about my research based on snowball sampling, there is an intrigue among potential potentials. It seems that there is an eagerness to share the experiences of the doctoral journey. While I most often felt confident that this was stories that needed to be told, my excitement for capturing this information continues to increase.

After:

There were some technological issues but we managed it sufficiently. Hearing another account of a doctoral journey underscores the significance of telling these lived experiences. The barriers and facilitators to success are as unique as the individuals. Two particularly remarkable revelations from this participant were that she has a reading comprehension deficit and that she experiences self-doubt which I propose explains her test anxiety. She provided some stunning information about how she has been impacted, historically, by these characteristics: she had to take a certification test for licensing 7 times and repeated a doctoral statistics class 3 times after getting a C twice. It was quite emotional to hear this participant speak of a desire to make her parents,

particularly her mother, proud as a daughter in her 40s with children of her own. Dr. C's final comment was "be sure to contact me after you graduate so that we can celebrate your journey."

02-04-24

Elsa

Before:

Thus far, the interviews have been intriguing. I am looking forward to the next one as you can never no an individual's story just from one's perception of their current presentation and station in life.

After:

This participant was not eager to talk about herself or to tell her story. Her obvious hesitancy prompted me to ponder the reason since she enthusiastically volunteered to participate. I considered two options: there was a preoccupation with some other matter but she proceeded with the interview as agreed or she was not accustomed to being interviewed/given a voice and/or platform to talk about her lived experiences. As the interview progressed, she relaxed and became more comfortable to transparency and vulnerability related to the experiences that shaped her life and catapulted her doctoral journey. It was yet another reminder of how important this research is and can be to others futuristically because telling the experience of others is not only influential to those in pursuit of accomplishment of any kind but it is also liberating for the one who has accomplished the fete.

02-04-24

Faye

Before:

As a sexagenarian, I am anxious to hear the life experience and unfolding of this participant's doctoral journal. Wisdom is what come to mind in my anticipation. What a role model and a remarkable accolade to attach to your legacy, not only that you pursued it but you completed it at a non-traditional stage of life…young people have no excuse and that does not apply only to obtaining a doctoral degree!

After:

Faye, although jubilant about her accomplishment, presented with the least amount of emotion about her journey. She had a resoluteness about her story of moving in, moving through and moving out as though there was no doubt that this goal would be completed like all her other goals even though she attempted it three times with several obstacles during the final attempt of doctoral matriculation.

02-05-24

Kraus

Before:

Given the previous technological problems my thoughts were focused on an alternative plan in the event there were problems again. I also spent a lot of time thinking about the logistics of travel time between location to make certain that I was on time for the interview along with allowing time to eat since the interview was scheduled for dinner time.

After:

The participant contacted me to ask for a later start time. As it turned out, she needed the extra time to prepare dinner for her husband. I was grateful that she took time away from her routine to be interviewed particularly since she also shared that her workday got off schedule. Again, there were some difficulties connecting on TEAMS but the issue was quickly resolved. While the participant was engaging, she seemed in a hurried as she did not elaborate as much as other participants. Unlike the other participants, her story of choosing a doctorate seemed to have minimal, if any, significant barriers. Kraus concluding the interview by stating that she wants to interview me after I graduate. This prompts me to think about how others may want to continue this research. I am thrilled.

02-06-24

Liz

Before:

Since initial contact this participant has expressed enthusiasm about this research project by agreeing to be interviewed along with expeditiously and efficiently using the snowball method to solicit more participants. Given her supportive disposition, I am eager to hear her story.

After:

This participant is tenacious and a giver without awareness of these attributes as it comes so natural for her. I am confounded by hearing this participant state that she never thought she was smart enough to matriculate. I saw humility as she seemed to listen to herself give account of the barriers she encountered but still managed to be a completer of a doctoral degree. My impression is that her disconnection from her story prevented her from providing details that would make her lived experiences even more profound.

02-07-24

Sasha

Before:

In the process of scheduling this participant has presented with a no-nonsense disposition which has me a bit intimidated. My hope is that this intimidation that I am experiencing does not interfere with me conducting a thorough interview.

After:

As a humorous anecdote, I shared with the participant my pre-interview feelings of intimidation. She shared that there is someone who refers to her as a warm demander. I confessed that she does continue to present with a no-nonsense disposition but was not as intimidating as I thought. Sasha was the first participant that I interviewed whose parents attended and completed college. She was surprised at the report. This participant was the first to provide a narrative of social, cultural, and economic capital.

02-07-24

Tabitha

Before:

This interview will take place shortly after another interview so I will be making a concerted effort to document my after-thoughts from the interview prior very quickly as to not blur the comments from the two interviews. This will require more mental flexibility, but I feel the need to accommodate the busy schedules of the participants. Typically, I do not agree to back-to-back meetings.

After:

This participant presented as calm as she spoke and humble about her accomplishments. She often spoke of her desire to help others achieve their goals, whether students or staff that she leads or others that she encounter outside of the workplace. As a result, she reported encouraging staff that report to her to broaden their education, pursue promotion even if it results in an assignment outside of her supervision/building. Tabitha's accomplishments as a small town Black female prompted a discussion about whether or not she has returned to visit the schools she attended. She reported that she has not which I conveyed to be surprising. The discussion continued about how the students of her former schools may be so inspired to see/meet her which aligns with her passion to encourage other to pursue dreams and to go beyond the circumstances and surrounding of their developmental years.

02-10-24

Victoria

Before:

Who is Victoria is my primary thought after having the honor of hearing the lived experiences of all the other participants. Will Victoria share a novel experience pertaining to her doctoral journal? What, if any, similarities will she have to the other participants? I have not grown weary of hearing the individual stories.

After:

This participant was the most laid back of all the participants. Victoria communicated her pre & post doctoral completion passion to be community service and any opportunities to help others. This resonated with me as I hope to have a future filled with volunteerism. Victoria's path to the onset of the doctoral degree, influenced by a friend, prompted me to think of the quote iron sharpens iron. If Victoria (being iron) had been in the company of plastic wear, there is a possibility that she made never have considered such and endeavor – terminal degree. Similar to another participant, Victoria conveyed a preparation meets opportunity mindset to her purpose for achieving the culminating degree.

02-10-24

Yogi

Before:

Based on this participant being a former colleague, I was slightly concerned about being a good steward of time for this interview. Additionally, Yogi has historically had a reputation of conducting thorough interviews so I am eager to ascertain, according to her feedback, whether or not the interview questions captured what, in her opinion, relevant information regarding the lived experiences of the doctoral journey.

After:

Yogi's interview offered nuances of lived experiences that were not expressed by other participants such as prayer with cohort members at their interval meetings. This participant also gave a more clearly articulated expression of the influence of ancestors in her diligence to succeed and the purpose for God allowing her to be one of the few who have achieved a terminal degree.

Table 1

Demographic information

Participants' Demographic Survey

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	Degree	Age at Graduation	Year of Graduation	Institution
Andra	52	F	AA	EdD	48	2020	Site 3
Dr. C	47	F	AA	EdD	44	2020	Site 3
Elsa	49	F	AA	EdD	46	2020	Site 2
Faye	64	F	AA	EdD	63	2023	Site 1
Kraus	54	F	AA	EdD	50	2019	Site 3
Liz	50	F	AA	EdD	48	2022	Site 2
Sasha	50	F	AA	EdD	49	2023	Site 1
Tabitha	50	F	AA	EdD	48	2019	Site 3
Victoria	55	F	AA	EdD	55	2023	Site 2
Yogi	50	F	AA	EdD	49	2022	Site 3

Table 2

Code Occurrences and Detailed Frequencies

Category	Subcategory	Percentage of Participants	Code
Challenges	Academic	50.00%	Low Confidence in Ability
		60.00%	Lack of guidance in the dissertation process
		80.00%	Adapting to rigor
	Discrimination	10.00%	Sexism
		30.00%	Racism and microaggressions
	Personal	20.00%	Lack of family support
		30.00%	Financial Difficulties
		60.00%	Time management
		70.00%	Loss and Illness
		80.00%	Multiple life roles
Cultural Impact	Childhood	30.00%	Substance Abuse encountered
		50.00%	Grew up poor
		70.00%	First Generation College Graduates
		80.00%	Furthering Education Importance
		80.00%	Importance of Faith
		80.00%	Importance of Family
		90.00%	First Generation Terminal Degree
		100.00%	Cultural value of perseverance
Facilitators	Learning Opportunities	20.00%	Attending professional development
		30.00%	Immersion in research problems/literature
	Mentorship	90.00%	Mentorship from Black female faculty
	Networking	50.00%	Building a supportive network of professionals
		50.00%	Finding community within the Black academic network
		60.00%	Working with other black students to achieve goals (Cohort Model)
	Personal	50.00%	Family support during degree
Motivators	External	40.00%	External Influences
		50.00%	Desire to set an example for other POCs
		50.00%	Improving outcomes for other POCs
	Personal	30.00%	Advancement in Career
		40.00%	Personal Growth
		60.00%	Doing it for their family
		100.00%	Faith-Based Motivation

Table 3

Code and Category Percentages

				Approx. Percent Respondents Mean
Cat_Code	Challenges	SubCat_Code	Academic	.63
			Discrimination	.20
			Personal	.52
	Cultural Impact	SubCat_Code	Childhood	.73
	Facilitators	SubCat_Code	Learning Opportunities	.25
			Mentorship	.90
			Networking	.53
			Personal	.50
	Motivators	SubCat_Code	External	.47
			Personal	.57

Figure 1

Erik Erikson's 8 Stages of Psychosocial Development

Stage	Psychosocial Crisis	Basic Virtue	Age
1.	Trust vs. Mistrust	Hope	0 – 1½
2.	Autonomy vs. Shame	Will	1½ – 3
3.	Initiative vs. Guilt	Purpose	3 – 5
4.	Industry vs. Inferiority	Competency	5 – 12
5.	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Fidelity	12 – 18
6.	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Love	18 – 40
7.	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Care	40 – 65
8.	Ego Integrity vs. Despair	Wisdom	65+

Figure 2

Facilitators of Participants

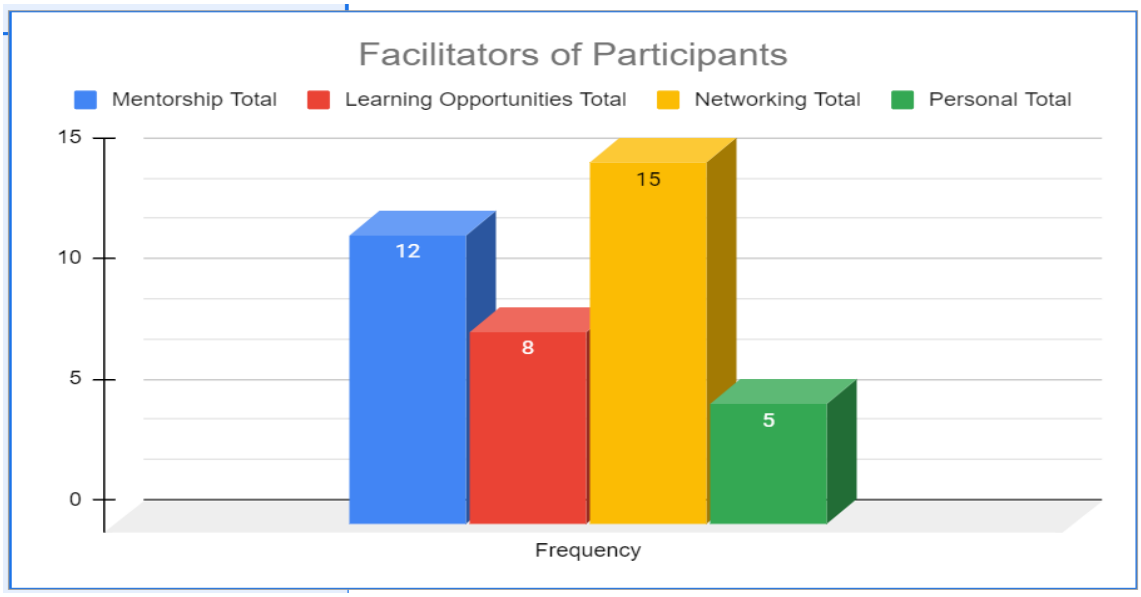

Figure 3

Barriers of Participants