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Unmasking Challenges Of African American Women At Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) Unveiling Phenomenological Realities And Prioritizing Well-Being

Alicia C. Perry

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Unmasking Challenges of African American Women at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)
Unveiling Phenomenological Realities and Prioritizing Well-Being

By

Alicia C. Perry

A Dissertation Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the

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2024

Unmasking Challenges of African American Women at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)
Unveiling Phenomenological Realities and Prioritizing Well-Being

By

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Dedication

In loving memory of my dear parents, Alice Bridges Calhoun and Raymond L Calhoun
Though physically departed, your love and wisdom continue to guide me.

To my beloved children,
Walter, L Jackson, Jamel Jackson, Kendrick Baker, Demetrius Perry, Marquis Peppers, and the
twins Nolan and Nalicia Perry.

You are the joy and purpose that colors my world. Your presence makes every day brighter.

*Jamel—For all the “I love you mores”. The answer is NOPE!

My beautiful Grandchildren,
Amiyah, Ceianna, Georgia, Karter, Khalaya, Kendrick Jr, Ma’Kaii, Olivia and Phoenix,
Your smiles are the melody of my heart, and your presence is one of the greatest gifts life has
given me.

To my cherished Soulmate, Partner, Best Friend, My Ride or Die,
Nolan Perry,

Your unwavering support, love, and companionship have been my greatest treasures.
Your internal laughs always lighten my moods.

To my brothers,
Lorenzo and Damon Calhoun,

Though the paths of our lives have diverged, the memories of our shared journey remain
etched in my heart. This dedication is an acknowledgment of the bond we once shared, a bond
that time and distance have not diminished. I hold onto the belief that paths may cross again, and
the threads of our connection may intertwine once more. Until then, I carry the spirit of our

shared experiences with me. Wherever you are, this is a testament to the indelible mark you've left on my journey.

To the ancestors who paved the way, your resilience and strength resonate through the generations. I am a product of your enduring spirit.

And to the Creator, you hear my prayers... thank you.

This work is dedicated to each of you, the pillars of my existence—past, present, and future.

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So, funny story, my role at the University didn't quite make it to the end of the dissertation writing rollercoaster, but here's the twist—I'm still so grateful to my awesome University colleagues. You know who you are. The love and support you threw my way during the epic challenges were like superhero capes. The camaraderie, the allyships, the listening ears, open doors and the pep talks were the glue holding me together during the highs and lows I encountered. I owe each of you a ton of thanks, and I'm holding on tight to the dream of teaming up again someday. As a triple alumna of the University of the Pacific, I stand on your shoulders! Cheers to the journey, the teamwork, and the friendships that made this whole experience a rollercoaster worth riding!

Shoutout to my incredible Oyana sisters! From the original 30+, just a few of you are still rocking it at the University. Your stories, laughs, and shared adventures have turned this journey into something way more interesting and way less lonely. In the midst of all the drama—blood, sweat, and tears, you know the drill—your support was like a burst of inspiration. Having you around during the rough patches not only lightened the load but also reminded me that I had a whole squad backing me up. You were like superheroes with your unique powers, contributing to our shared victories and being the go-to comfort crew during the defeats. Your empathy was the magic balm that healed the bumps, and your laughter? Well, that's the best stress relief ever. A massive nod to the sacrifices you've made, whether it's lending an ear, giving out practical advice, or just being there when things got real. The journey was a rollercoaster for all of us, but with you all, it wasn't just bearable—it became meaningful. For those still at the University, keep your head up! Those who have left ... I wish you all the best on the new journeys your paths have taken. Irrespective of any of your position in life, your generosity, kindness, and remarkable camaraderie have had a profound and enduring impact on my life.

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Unmasking Challenges of African American Women at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)
Unveiling Phenomenological Realities and Prioritizing Well-Being

Abstract

By Alicia C Perry

University of the Pacific
2024

This dissertation addresses African American women's intricate challenges at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), exploring the outcomes of navigating a sense of belonging which eventually affects one's well-being within this professional context. The study employs a qualitative approach to delve into the experiences of those who work or have worked in the environment. By capturing the personal narratives of African American women in various roles at PWIs, the research aims to understand the intersectionality of race and gender dynamics impacting their professional lives. The literature review contextualizes the study by discussing the challenges identified in existing research, including the marginalization experiences and their implications on physical and emotional well-being. With a focus on the ideological hegemony affecting Black women in academia, the review underscores the importance of addressing the challenges that African American women face.

The methodology involves gathering demographic information on African-American women employed or previously employed at a PWI (within the last ten years) utilizing semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis is employed to derive insights from the participants' narratives, emphasizing the significance of capturing the essence of their experiences. The findings are expected to reveal three salient themes: experiencing and navigating challenges African American Women at PWIs Face, the phenomenological realities in their experiences and

the importance of well-being. The dissertation concludes by discussing the study's broader implications for addressing institutional support. It contributes valuable insights to the ongoing dialogue on diversity and inclusion in higher education. It identifies avenues for future research and proposes interventions to enhance the experiences of African American women in various roles within PWIs. Ultimately, this research aims to advocate for a more inclusive and supportive environment for African American women at PWIs, fostering their personal and professional success.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	16
List of Abbreviations	17
Chapter 1: Introduction	18
Introduction to Predominantly White Institutions	19
Background	20
Statement of the Problem	22
Purpose of the Study	23
The Sunken Place	25
Research Question	27
Definitions of Key Terms	28
Chapter 2: Literature Review	29
Key Themes	30
Contextual Background	30
Search Strategy	31
Enchantment: The Power of Hiring Practices	32
What's Done in the Dark	34
Microaggressions: The Unknown Knowns	34
Tokenism	37
Systematic Racism	38
Stereotypes	41
Bias	43

Double Consciousness	45
Intersectionality Woes	47
Navigating Barriers.....	49
Well-Being Among African American Women in Higher Education.....	50
How You Doing Sis?	50
Mental Health.....	51
Navigating Challenges through Coping Mechanisms and Supportive Networks.....	54
Making a Way.....	54
Resilience is Key.....	58
Strength in Solidarity	58
Unity	58
Institutional Accountability	60
Theoretical Framework.....	62
Integration of Frameworks.....	65
Summary	66
Chapter 3: Methodology	67
Introduction.....	67
Research Design.....	69
Participation Recruitment	70
Participation Selection	72
Data Collection	73
Data Analysis	74
Assumptions and Limitations	75

Role of the Researcher	76
Summary	78
Chapter 4: Results	80
Findings.....	81
Theme 1: The Multifaceted Nature of Hidden Labor	81
Layers of Hidden Labor	82
Theme 2: Intersectionality: Race or Gender	85
Shattered Diamonds	86
Tokenism as an Illusion	86
Stereotypes Unveiled	87
Unseen, Unheard, Unwanted	89
Hostile Maneuvers	90
Theme 3: Navigating Identity and Appearance	91
Crown Act.....	92
Navigating Physicality and Professionalism.....	93
Navigating Dress and Identity	94
Fear of the Black Body	95
Unveiling the Impact of Colorism	96
Theme 4: Barriers to Support and Advancement.....	97
Recruitment Realities.....	97
Systemic Obstacles	98
Marginalization and Limited Access	100
Theme 5: Well-being and Professional Identity	101

Mental Health Challenges and Interventions	102
Emotional Toll and Recovery	102
Physical Manifestations of Stress	103
Strategies for Resilience and Self-Care	104
Seeking Solace: The Role of Therapy	105
Theme 6: The Critical Role of Networks and Mentorship	106
Support on campus: Internal Networks.....	106
Off-Campus Support: External Networks.....	108
Theme 7: Pathways to Equity and Inclusion.....	108
Human Resources	110
Transition out of the Sunken Place	113
Summary	116
Chapter 5: Discussions, Recommendations and Conclusions	117
Discussion	117
Revelations.....	118
Boundaries (Limitations)	122
Having Our Say (Comments)	123
Recommendations for Future Research	123
Conclusion	124
Chapter 6: Bonus Chapter	126
References.....	130
Appendices	
A: Email Invitation to Participate in a Research Study	142

B: Infographic	143
C: Demographic questionnaire	144
D: Informed Consent.....	145
E: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter	148
F: Interview Questions	149

List of Tables

Table

1.	Participant Demographics.....	70
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List of Abbreviations

CRT Critical Race Theory

PWI Predominately White Institution

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“There is almost one of us in every building!”

-Oyana Sista

The successes of Black women in higher education occur along a continuum (Ferguson et al., 2021). In 2016, a mere 8% of college presidents were African American women; this figure has only marginally increased by 2% since 2011 (American Council of Education [ACE], 2017). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, a paltry 6.4% of the nearly 837,000 professors, associate professors, assistant professors, instructors, lecturers, and other faculty members are African American women. This stark imbalance extends to women of color, who hold only a small percentage of leadership roles in postsecondary education (Hill et al., 2016). However, the existing data falls short in providing a comprehensive understanding of the specific roles and divisions occupied by African American women at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs).

In this study, the categorization of African American women will refrain from generalization under the umbrella terms "people of color" or "women of color." This intentional choice aims to prevent the amalgamation of diverse racial groups, which could potentially inflate overall diversity figures (Tevis et al., 2020). By specifically focusing on African American staff, administrators, and faculty, the numerical representation experiences a noteworthy decline. It is important to note that while the terms 'Black' and 'African American' do not represent interchangeable concepts, they are frequently used interchangeably in the existing literature and will be employed similarly for the purposes of this study (Jernigan et al., 2020).

Additionally, Black women may identify with diverse ethnic backgrounds, including African, Caribbean, Spanish, African American, or some combination of those identities, and they may speak English, Spanish, Portuguese, or French (Sanchez & Davis, 2010). Recognizing the intricate nature of identity formation and the intersecting forms of oppression faced by African American women in various settings, including educational institutions, homes, religious establishments, and other communities, provides a deeper understanding of the complexities of racism, sexism, and heterosexism (Rider, 2014).

Introduction to Predominantly White Institutions

Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) are universities characterized by a majority of white students and faculty, primarily determined by the racial composition of the student body (Bourke, 2016). Institutions with fewer than 50% minority students were classified as Predominantly White Institutions (Bourke, 2016). The historical legacy of racial segregation is often ingrained in PWIs, reflecting a past where racial barriers were enforced. Harvard College (now the university), the first PVI established in 1636, exemplifies this history as it was originally founded for White men during the enslavement of Africans (Blackshear, 2021). Some PWIs may even bear the designation of being historically or traditionally white, reflecting a time when racial segregation was enforced before the passage of desegregation laws in 1964 (Brown & Dancy, 2010).

While the racial composition of these institutions may have evolved to include a more diverse student body, the faculty composition and prevailing culture within PWIs still predominantly reflect a white demographic. Duran (2022) underscores this by noting that, "the colonial classroom was exclusively a white space; though Black and Indigenous labor built the classrooms, the classroom as a site of learning was inaccessible to them" emphasizing the

historical exclusion of Black and Indigenous individuals despite their significant contributions to building these educational spaces.

Compounding this challenge are tangible reminders on PWI campuses, including buildings, halls, memorials, and statues named after individuals who actively played roles in excluding African American students. As highlighted by Wilder (2014), numerous college campuses bear monuments and structures that echo the legacies of slavery, segregation, colonization, and racism. These echoes range from names prominently displayed on building facades to the collection of artifacts and archives housed in campus libraries.

Interestingly, in recent decades, PWIs have emerged as vocal advocates of affirmative action, asserting that the inclusion of marginalized racial populations, including White females, contributes to diversity and fosters a welcoming environment for all students (McCall, 2021). These efforts align with the requirements for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) set forth by university accreditation committees. Accreditation, a process of external quality review used in higher education for quality assurance and improvement, involves a thorough examination of colleges, universities, and programs (Eaton, 2015).

Background

African American women have made invaluable contributions to higher education; however, many of their achievements have often been overlooked or undervalued (Thomas, 2019, p. 229). One significant aspect of this oversight is hidden labor, which refers to essential work frequently invisible or undervalued within an organization (Garret et al., 2023, p. 535). In the context of higher education, hidden labor encompasses tasks such as mentoring, advising, and emotional labor (Garret et al., 2023, p. 528). African American women have frequently been called upon to perform this work without proper recognition or compensation

due to institutional expectations or their recognition of student needs (Gardner et al., 2014, p. 236).

While formal slavery ended nearly 150 years ago, ethnic minorities still contend with a social and economic environment marked by inequality, which inevitably impacts mental health (Ashley, 2014). The shared experiences among African American women in higher education can be deeply distressing, leading to feelings of isolation, imposter syndrome, and a pervasive sense of not belonging—a sensation akin to being in 'the sunken place.' These experiences are rooted in systemic challenges, such as structural racism and gender biases, which can further perpetuate the invisibility and undervaluation of African American women's labor within higher education. Racism, sexism, and other interconnected oppressions create an outsider-within status for African American women in many predominately White institutions (Collins, 1986).

Understanding and addressing the hidden labor of African American women in higher education is vital for creating a more equitable and inclusive academic environment. By acknowledging and valuing their contributions through mentoring, advising, emotional labor, and other forms of support, institutions can foster an atmosphere that appreciates the full range of their expertise and experiences. Moreover, by recognizing African American women's shared challenges, institutions can work towards dismantling systemic barriers and creating opportunities for them to thrive and advance in their careers within higher education.

In the spectrum of staff and faculty responsibilities, African American women frequently find themselves at both ends — from taking on roles such as mentoring and supporting African American students to actively engaging in diversity and inclusion committees. This critical work is integral to fostering a more inclusive and equitable campus environment, yet it is often not

acknowledged as part of their job responsibilities (Johnson et al., 2020, p.29). Unfortunately, this vital contribution often goes unnoticed and unrewarded. Harley states,

Individually and collectively, African American women at PWIs suffer from a form of race fatigue – the syndrome of being over-extended, undervalued, and unappreciated. Moreover, just knowing that because you are the “negro in residence” that you will be asked to serve and represent the “color factor” in yet another capacity (2008).

Simultaneously, it is crucial to address the outcomes of Harper and Hurtado's (2007) research, which highlighted challenges encountered by minority students, encompassing disadvantages, racial segregation, and dissatisfaction. Acknowledging and comprehending these challenges are essential to advancing inclusivity and equity within academic institutions. Commonly, parents and caregivers of African American students actively seek support and guidance from African American faculty members as surrogate mentors to bolster their children's educational endeavors (Johnson et al., 2020). Many African American women at PWIs are earnestly committed to upholding this responsibility, ensuring a positive educational experience for students. Their dedication not only inspires directly involved students but also significantly contributes to cultivating a diverse and supportive scholarly milieu.

Statement of the Problem

African American women in higher education are valued for their unique perspectives, experiences, and academic contributions (Hill, 2019). They bring diverse insights that enrich academic discussions and research and serve as role models and mentors, especially for underrepresented groups. However, the significant contributions of African American women often come with a cost, as they bear the burden of invisible labor. Invisible labor refers to unpaid

and undervalued work that goes unnoticed due to its exclusion from formal job descriptions and responsibilities.

Cooke (2013) highlighted that African American women in administrative positions within American higher education perceive the least social support on campus and face challenges in advancing beyond mid-level positions. This disparity suggests that African American women are acknowledged for their competence and ability to perform the work, but their contributions are not adequately recognized. Consequently, this issue can lead to burnout and a sense of unfulfillment among African American women in higher education.

Thus, in many cases, the problem at hand at many PWIs lies in the pervasive undervaluation and insufficient acknowledgment of the invisible labor carried out by African American women. This predicament detrimentally affects their overall well-being, impedes professional growth, and diminishes their broader contributions to the academic community. Effectively addressing this issue necessitates a comprehensive understanding of both the root causes and the ramifications of the multifaceted challenges confronting African American women in PWIs. It is crucial to delve into the systemic factors that contribute to the persistent undervaluation of their efforts. By systematically unmasking and addressing these challenges, tailored strategies can be formulated to foster equitable recognition and provide essential support for African American women in higher education. This approach aims to cultivate an inclusive and empowering environment that propels their sustained success and advancement within the academic sphere. The imperative is thus established for dismantling the barriers that hinder the rightful acknowledgment and progression of African American women at PWIs.

Purpose of the Study

This phenomenological research delves into the challenges faced by African American women across diverse roles within PWIs. The study systematically addresses multifaceted challenges, including microaggressions, through the utilization of in-depth interviews and qualitative analysis. It aims to shed light on the nuanced challenges experienced by African American women by examining their impact on professional well-being, sense of belonging, and career advancement within the PWI setting.

In accordance with Hill's observation (2019), "Higher education researchers and instructors who are members of marginalized populations often encounter microaggressions in their chosen profession" (p. 208). By delving into the lived experiences of these women, the study illuminates their unique challenges, perspectives, and contributions that have often been overlooked or undervalued in academic discourse (Harley, 2008). This illumination of challenges significantly contributes to ongoing dialogues surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion. While existing research appropriately highlights challenges faced by African American women, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of acknowledging the diversity inherent in their experiences and encountered barriers (Wallace, 2023). This recognition is vital for fostering a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the varied experiences and challenges faced by African American women in the contexts under examination.

Furthermore, the study explores the pivotal role played by support networks and community-building among African American women at PWIs. It seeks to understand how these women collaborate to share experiences, provide guidance, and seek solace. Insight into the

dynamics of these supportive networks can offer valuable information for developing strategies to enhance the support and empowerment of African American women at PWIs.

Moreover, the research acknowledges the intersection of gender and other social identities in the experiences of African American women in higher education (Stanford News, 2022). The findings will provide empirical data to underscore the unique challenges and barriers resulting from their intersecting identities. By presenting empirical evidence on the experiences of African American women, this research advocates for the creation of supportive policies, practices, and interventions that promote the well-being, advancement, and empowerment of African American women in PWIs (Patitu and Hinton, 2003). The anticipated contributions of this research are poised to significantly advance our understanding of these challenges. These insights are directed towards promoting equity, fostering inclusion, and facilitating career advancement within higher education settings. By amplifying the voices and experiences of African American women, this research aspires to cultivate a more supportive and inclusive environment—one that genuinely values their contributions and prioritizes their overall well-being in the higher education landscape.

Ultimately, the anticipated findings aim to enhance our comprehensive understanding of the challenges experienced by African American women. These results are poised to catalyze leadership and institutional initiatives, fostering improved support and advocacy for the experiences and contributions of African American women within higher education. Furthermore, the research scrutinizes the impact on professional well-being, sense of belonging, and career advancement. The findings offer valuable insights into how leadership can actively

promote a more inclusive and equitable environment, cultivate a sense of belonging, and address systemic issues that perpetuate microaggressions and discrimination.

The Sunken Place

The Sunken Place, a fictional construct introduced in the 2017 horror film "Get Out," directed and written by Jordan Peele (Blum & Peele, 2017), serves as a psychological state experienced by the protagonist, Chris Washington—an African American male—when subjected to hypnosis by his girlfriend's mother (Lithgow, 2018). The Sunken Place is described as a state of complete paralysis and powerlessness, where the victim's consciousness is trapped while they are under the complete and total control of those who have sent them there. (Lithgow, 2018, p.82). In this state, the victim remains cognizant of their surroundings but is unable to move or communicate, effectively confined to a mental prison.

The metaphorical implications of the Sunken Place extend beyond cinematic fiction, resonating with the experience of marginalized individuals in society. This concept has evolved into a cultural reference and meme, used to articulate feelings of entrapment and oppression in various contexts where one's agency and autonomy are taken away, leaving one feeling powerless and trapped.

Moreover, being in the Sunken Place allows events or actions to occur by individuals without being aware of the potential consequences or implications, such as microaggressions. Within the academic realm, the metaphor of the "Sunken Place" holds relevance for African American women, who may navigate a figurative psychological battleground without a complete awareness of potential consequences or implications (Hall et al., 2012). This terrain encompasses subtle yet impactful psychological challenges, including microaggressions, gaslighting, and

instances of racism, sexism, ageism, and other forms of discrimination (Hall et al., 2012). These experiences can lead to confusion, diminished morale, and a sense of being singled out.

Regrettably, such indiscretions may result in further ramifications, including confusion, imposter syndrome, questioning of targeted motivations, and a reluctance to persist within the institution (Patitu and Hinton, 2003). In the realm of higher education, African American women may encounter microaggressions manifesting as misconceptions about their professional roles, assumptions that they represent their entire race in discussions, or unwarranted judgments regarding their intelligence and competence (Hughes and Howard-Hamilton, 2003). The consequences of these encounters underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing the challenges faced by African American women within the academic environment.

Research Question

This study endeavors to unmask the challenges faced by African American women at PWIs, unveiling the phenomenological realities that shape their experiences and emphasizing the critical importance of their well-being. The following research question guides the exploration of these challenges:

How are African American women's professional experiences and well-being in higher education impacted by the hidden labor they perform?

This question constitutes the focal point of the study, delving into the effects of hidden labor on African American women, specifically investigating the emotional and professional consequences of their often-unacknowledged work in mentoring, advising, and providing emotional support to students of color at a PWI. By scrutinizing the impact of hidden labor, the study endeavors to unmask the challenges of African American women at PWIs by unveiling phenomenological realities in experiences and the importance of well-being. This research

question serves as the cornerstone of this dissertation, delving into the intricate issues surrounding the challenges experienced by African American women in higher education at PWIs. Through a comprehensive exploration of this question, the study aspires to contribute to the advancement of knowledge, policy, and practices that foster a more inclusive and supportive academic environment.

Definitions of Key Terms

African American or Black Women. A North American woman of African descent is also called a Black woman (Davis, 1981). The study used the terms African American and Black women interchangeably, as no distinction is made for ethnicity.

Higher education/ Educational institutions/ Higher learning institutions. Learning environments where people of different ages achieve an education.

Microaggression(s). Indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against people who belong to a marginalized group (Willis et al., 2019).

PWI. Universities with a majority of white students and faculty. PWIs may also be historically White institutions or traditionally White institutions due to the segregation by race that existed prior to the enactment of desegregation laws in 1964 (Brown & Dancy, 2010).

People of color. People of ethnic makeup other than white.

White. A group of people of European origin or descent.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

A comprehensive exploration of existing scholarly works is imperative to gain a nuanced understanding of the experiences of African American women in higher education, particularly within PWIs. While prior research has provided valuable insights into the challenges encountered by African American faculty, the predominant focus has often centered on academic barriers such as the attainment of tenure. While these studies offer valuable insights, there exists a notable gap in understanding the broader experiences of African American women across diverse roles within PWIs. It is noteworthy that White women benefit from White privilege, and Black men benefit from male privilege; however, African American women face heightened adversity as they do not benefit from either (Crenshaw, 1991; Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Notably, the intersectionality framework, as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1991), underscores the unique challenges faced by African American women, who navigate the convergence of race and gender without the benefits of either White privilege or male privilege. This intersectionality is further emphasized by Davis and Maldonado (2015), highlighting the heightened adversity experienced by African American women in academic settings. Addressing this gap, this literature review seeks to synthesize existing knowledge concerning the broader experiences of African American women across various roles and contexts within higher education.

Moreover, this literature review aspires to examine existing scholarly works specifically focusing on the experiences of African American women in higher education, particularly within PWIs. Many articles neglect the leadership experiences and 'herstories' of African American women, contributing to an incomplete leadership canon (Alston, 2012, p. 127). This review serves as a foundation for understanding current knowledge, identifying research gaps, and

exploring challenges, intersectional identities, and support systems for African American women at PWIs, irrespective of their roles. It delves into the multifaceted experiences of African American women in higher education, broadening the scope beyond traditional academic barriers. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges these women encounter across various roles and contexts within the PWI landscape.

Key Themes

The subsequent sections of this literature review will explore key themes, methodologies, and findings from pertinent studies, aiming to present a holistic perspective on the experiences of African American women within PWIs. Through this synthesis, the review endeavors to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by African American women within the academic realm and aims to inform future research directions. The literature review focuses on three key themes considered most relevant to this study:

- The Challenges African American Women at PWIs Face
- Phenomenological Realities in Experiences
- The Importance of Well-being

Additionally, this section incorporates insights from the literature concerning organizational policies and practices, providing a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted landscape in which African American women navigate within higher education.

Contextual Background

By analyzing diverse studies, theoretical frameworks, and empirical findings, this study provides a contextual backdrop for understanding the challenges, intersectional identities, and support systems shaping the realities of African American women in higher education. It is noteworthy that research methodologies have not fully recognized the unique needs of African

American female staff, regardless of their title, distinct from those of their White male, White female, and other counterparts.

Moreover, this literature review actively contributes to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting the significance and relevance of investigating the lived experiences of African American women who work or have worked at a PWI. By exploring various themes and perspectives in the literature, this review informs and guides the subsequent chapters of this dissertation, enabling a deeper understanding of the unique experiences of African American women in different roles at a PWI.

Search Strategy

The search strategy for this study commenced with establishing a literature review component outline, guiding the selection of keywords used in search databases. Keywords included, but were not limited to, microaggressions, Black/African American women, higher education, predominantly White institutions (PWI), racism, discrimination, sense of belonging, allyship, intersectionality, private institutions, implicit bias, critical race theory, social isolation, support, and mental health. The ProQuest, ERIC, EBSCOHOST, and SAGE databases were systematically searched, supplemented by information retrieved from Google Scholar.

Sources of information included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government statistics, theses, and dissertations. Over 250 sources with relevant material were identified during the searches. A deliberate inclusion of select older articles, encompassing foundational theories, concepts, or historical developments exhibiting enduring stability over time, was incorporated. This approach underscores the significance of blending older and recent sources, culminating in a holistic and in-depth grasp of the subject matter. Including older sources offers readers insights into the enduring legacy and historical evolution of the topic

RefWorks was leveraged to help identify duplicate material. A subset of the sources retrieved, as listed in the references section of this dissertation, was identified as the most relevant sources for this study and provided the foundation of the literature review.

Enchantment: The Power of Hiring Practices

Institutions frequently express a commitment to embracing diversity, emphasizing the recruitment and retention of racially diverse faculty. However, this dedication is not consistently mirrored in equitable proportions, particularly within the highest echelons of academia (Kelly et al., 2017). In visual representations designed for recruitment purposes, many Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) often incorporate photographs featuring individuals from non-white ethnic backgrounds, commonly categorized as 'people of color,' within their campus visual narratives, as noted by Pippet et al. (2013, p. 262). Intriguingly, certain depictions prominently feature African American women despite their numerical minority status. Paradoxically, within this visual context, numerous photographs often convey an air of antiquity or deliberate staging, aiming to portray the PWi as an inclusive environment for students and staff. However, it is essential to acknowledge that this might not always be the case.

Photographs featuring joyful, brown-skinned women with broad smiles are frequently utilized as a recruitment strategy for employment. As expressed by a respondent, "The university has diversity plastered everywhere, but I have yet to see any real evidence of it" (Harper & Hurtado, 2007, p. 16). Authentic representation holds significant value, serving as a compelling factor that attracts students to the University. When minority students encounter African Americans and other minority faculty on campus, they perceive the potential for success and professional achievement (Patitu and Hinton, 2003), fostering a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, these images can also function as a retention tactic, potentially overshadowing the

varied experiences of many African American women who opted to leave the University. The underlying message in these pictures is, 'How could you not want to work here? She looks just like you, and she is happy!'—creating an image of a happy place versus the “sunken place.”

In the pursuit of understanding the recruitment and retention of African American faculty, Kelly et al.'s (2017) qualitative, critical case study delves into the persistent challenge of attracting and retaining a diverse faculty, specifically focusing on Black faculty members within higher education institutions. The study underscores the barriers faced by Black faculty in the tenure-track processes, emphasizing the consequential lack of institutional support. This deficiency not only impacts the career trajectories of Black faculty members but also deprives students of the valuable opportunity to interact with a broader array of diverse faculty role models.

Drawing from a comprehensive literature review, the authors highlight three key themes. First, the study explores the general commodification of Black faculty, shedding light on how these faculty members may be perceived through a lens of utility rather than as contributors to the academic community. Second, the research addresses perceived credibility threats faced by Black faculty, revealing challenges that hinder their professional advancement. Lastly, the intersecting dynamics of white fragility and the obligation to maintain racial comfort are explored, revealing complexities in interpersonal relationships within academic institutions.

The research underscores the urgent need for updated and targeted investigations to enhance the demographic representation and retention of Black faculty within higher education. One notable gap identified in the literature pertains to the lack of exploration of strategic recruitment or "opportunity hire" programs and the lived experiences of Black faculty. This

echoes the observations of Smith (1991) and Gregory (2001) and underscores the necessity for a more nuanced understanding of these aspects.

It is worth noting that the existing literature predominantly relies on qualitative approaches and is often situated within the context of PWIs. While qualitative research provides valuable insights, future studies could benefit from a more diverse methodological approach, including storytelling and quantitative analyses, to offer a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

In conclusion, Kelly et al.'s (2017) research not only emphasizes the challenges encountered by Black faculty in higher education institutions but also underscores the significance of additional research to address these issues systematically. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on diversity and inclusion within academia, advocating for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the experiences of Black faculty members. Moreover, the phenomenon of tokenism emerges as a consequential response to these biased perceptions. Tokenism involves the symbolic inclusion of individuals from underrepresented groups without addressing deeper systemic issues. In the academic context, this may manifest as the mere presence of African American women without genuine efforts to dismantle the structures that perpetuate bias and stereotypes. In the upcoming sections, we will delve into the various experiences faced by Black women in various roles within a PWI of higher education.

What's Done in the Dark

Microaggressions: The Unknown Knowns

According to the University of Colorado, microaggressions are subtle, often unintentional forms of discrimination or bias that can hurt individuals or groups of people. They can take many forms, including comments, gestures, or actions that communicate a message of inferiority or

exclusion. It is important to be aware of microaggressions and their effects and to work toward creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment for everyone (University of Colorado, 2023).

The term "microaggression" underscores the recurring nature of these incidents and their interpersonal character, encompassing subtle and unintentional slights, insults, putdowns, invalidations, and offensive behaviors. Individuals from marginalized groups frequently encounter these dynamics in their daily interactions, highlighting the importance of recognizing and addressing these subtle yet impactful forms of discrimination (University of Colorado, 2023).

African American women in higher education are particularly vulnerable to experiencing microaggressions due to the intersection of their race and gender. Microaggressions can occur based on multiple categories of identity, necessitating an intersectional analysis (Willis et al., 2019). Navigating academic spaces, African American women encounter a myriad of hurdles that have tangible impacts on their experiences. If the experience of racial microaggression is encountered within the workplace, they may not feel comfortable sharing their encounters (Collins, 2015). Many issues have been swept under the rug, and others have been poorly handled by leadership (Heifetz and Linsky, 2004, p.33).

Zambrana, et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study that revealed experiences of racial discrimination at a PWI. The encounters with discrimination varied based on the respondents' race/ethnicity and gender. The study also highlighted the challenges the participants faced in articulating racist encounters. The qualitative data uncovered three themes that provide insights into perceived discrimination: (1) different forms of racism ranging from blatant to insidious; (2) the devaluation of scholarly contributions, merit, and skillset by colleagues and administrators;

and (3) the burden of 'representing minorities' or a 'racial/ethnic tax.' The findings suggest universities can enhance campus culture and climate by implementing specific measures. These include investing in leadership development, creating safe spaces for professional skill development, and establishing mentoring committees. This commitment should be conveyed verbally, reflected in university policies, and embedded in the institutional culture. The importance of expressing these commitments within the university and in the public eye is underscored. This research reveals the multifaceted nature of racial discrimination in PWIs. These authors provide actionable recommendations for institutions to create more equitable and supportive environments, contributing to ongoing efforts for diversity and inclusion in higher education. Moreover, Zambrana et. al offered recommendations for creating more welcoming environments and establishing safe spaces for professional development, aiming to mitigate the adverse effects of discrimination, which is a form of microaggressions on campuses.

Similarly, in West's comprehensive study involving 10 African American women employed in student affairs roles at PWIs, the participants openly discussed the tangible difficulties and emotional consequences of their underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization within their professional contexts (West, 2015). This research specifically delved into the self-conceptualizations of terms like microaggressions, elucidating the experiences of African American women in student affairs positions at PWIs. Participants in the study articulated both the physical and psychological dimensions of their experiences of being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized within the academic setting. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the often intangible and intrinsic factors that significantly contribute to their personal well-being and professional success. In conclusion, the research provides valuable insights into the experiences of an underrepresented group, offering a nuanced exploration that illuminates

both observable challenges and the intricate emotional aspects of African American women in student affairs roles at PWIs. These findings contribute meaningfully to the ongoing discourse on diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education, underscoring the need for further research and informing practical implications for the field.

Tokenism

Tokenism is a well-established concept. Kanter (1977) defined tokenism as the sentiments and encounters of being an individual or part of a small number within a group, where they represent the extreme minority, such as the scenario of Black women in higher education. Tokenism in the workplace, particularly in higher education, can manifest in various ways (Chance, 2022). It might involve hiring a minority person solely based on their race or ethnicity or an organization showcasing its 1% minority population on its website to create an illusion of diversity. Tokenism is psychologically, physically, and professionally taxing and damaging and is marked by microaggressions (Thomas, 2019, p.97). Patton (2016) notes that “Diversity is espoused in higher education, but not sufficiently enacted” (p. 332).

Moreover, Chance’s 2022 study, utilizing phenomenology, delved into the adversity and lived experiences of Black women in higher education leadership. Specifically, it explored how these women navigate challenges related to intersectionality, stereotype threat, and tokenism. The study reveals that many Black women in leadership face adversity, including limited role models, the concrete ceiling, and the intersectionality of racism, sexism, and tokenism.

The findings stressed various codes associated with discrimination, the intersection of challenges with identity, cultural diversity, belonging, resilience, and leadership callings. The study emphasizes that their strength through adversity is driven by resilience, manifested in motivation factors such as family and relationships, mentorship and sponsorship, as well as

support for cultural identity and diversity. The study concludes that Black women in higher education leadership overcome stereotypes and intersectional discrimination, surpassing challenges like limited role models, the concrete ceiling, and tokenism with resilience.

Adversities serve as speed bumps, not roadblocks, on their path to success. Resilience, social support, and leadership development contribute to their climb. The participants suggest strategies for Black women to succeed in higher education senior leadership, including educational preparation, self-awareness, mentorship, coping mechanisms, and a commitment to supporting others. The study highlights that those shared adversities, whether minor or significant, do not break the spirit, drive, and resilience of these women. Moreover, it adds to the existing body of knowledge by offering a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Black women in higher education leadership, ultimately advocating for positive change, equity, and support within academic institutions.

Ironically, many African American women are affected by tokenism, with their pictures being used to portray contentment in their roles (Chance, 2022). This tokenistic inclusion, in turn, is often part of a larger systemic problem—systemic racism. Systemic racism, as illuminated by scholars like Collins (2004) and Gregory (2001), involves deeply rooted discriminatory practices and structures embedded within societal institutions. In the academic setting, this can translate into inequitable opportunities, biased decision-making processes, and a perpetuation of stereotypes.

Systematic Racism

Bonilla-Silva states that systemic racism refers to the pervasive and entrenched patterns of discrimination that exist within the structures and institutions of society, perpetuating disparities and disadvantages based on race (1997). Unlike individual acts of racism, systemic

racism operates at a systemic or structural level, impacting various aspects of life, including education, employment, housing, and criminal justice (Alexander, 2010). This concept is deeply rooted in historical injustices and inequalities, particularly in societies with a legacy of slavery, segregation, and discriminatory policies. The historical context shapes the current structures and practices, contributing to the continuation of racial disparities (Bonilla-Silva, 1997).

Johnson and Delmas (2022) conducted a mixed-method study to investigate the professional experiences of Black women in higher education, focusing on perceptions of career advancement and encountered barriers. Participants identified specific factors contributing to the underrepresentation of Black women in senior administrative roles. The research also explored these women's perspectives on gender and race representation and their views on career advancement, revealing negative perceptions. The study addressed three main research questions: 1) Perceptions of career advancement among Black female professionals in colleges and universities; 2) Career advancement experiences of Black female higher education professionals, including barriers and aspirations; 3) Perceptions of Black women regarding their representation in senior-level administrative roles. A survey method incorporated closed-ended items for scaled responses and open-ended questions for richer data.

The study's findings indicated a greater perception of racial discrimination compared to gender-based discrimination, indicative of an ingrained organizational culture. In such a culture, Black women face the challenge of having to work harder to be considered competent, held to higher standards than White men and even higher standards than White women, though not as high as those set for Black men. Moreover, the research underscored the findings that perceptions of career advancement among Black, female, and higher education professionals remained consistent across demographics, including professional classification, educational

attainment, and years of experience. This uniformity suggests a shared set of experiences and challenges related to career progression within this group, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and support across various demographic categories.

The impact of systemic racism on career trajectories is a pertinent concern within the realm of higher education administration, as evidenced by the observations of Gardner et al. (2014). This study accentuates the prevalent underrepresentation of African American administrators in this academic sphere, attributing a significant hindrance to career advancement to discriminatory practices. Discrimination, as conceptualized by Gardner et al. (2014, p. 236), involves behavioral biases directed towards individuals based on their group identity.

Previous studies on the adversities faced by African American women (Chance, 2022; Hill, 2019) have indicated that, despite being a less-explored area, there are numerous shared experiences in higher education. These studies illuminate the perspectives and encounters of African American women, providing readers with vivid experiences and findings to inspire academic professionals not to lose hope. While these studies shed light on the experiences of African American women in higher education, there is a compelling need for more comprehensive research encompassing these women regardless of their title. Scholars propose that African American women's increased exposure to racism in predominantly White spaces may elevate psychological distress (Ashley, 2014; Walton and Boone, 2019). Hill (2019) attests that African American women working in higher education often confront 'double marginalization,' making it challenging to discern whether mistreatment is due to race, gender, or both. These shared experiences underscore the urgency of fostering resilience and support for African American women in academia.

These collective findings emphasize the urgent need to foster resilience and support mechanisms tailored to the unique challenges faced by African American women in academia. The literature collectively calls attention to the multifaceted nature of navigating racial and gender-based challenges, highlighting the necessity for concerted efforts to create environments that empower and uplift. The implications extend beyond individual experiences, resonating within the broader academic community. They accentuate the critical importance of systemic change to dismantle discriminatory barriers and cultivate inclusive spaces, aligning with the ongoing call for increased diversity and equity within academia. Considering this, future research endeavors and actionable strategies are imperative to dismantle systemic racism and ensure a conducive environment for the success of African American women across various roles in higher education.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes, as discussed by Collins (2004) and Gregory (2001), can give rise to biased attitudes and behaviors, perpetuating preconceived notions about capabilities and roles. Unfortunately, these stereotypes can potentially reinforce the marginalization faced by this population. Expanding upon earlier research, Merriwether (2019) delves into the challenges and stereotypes African American women face in academia, emphasizing their detrimental impact on professional growth, performance, and overall well-being. The study introduces the concept of "Ontological We," rooted in shared experiences, as a strategy to counter discrimination. Merriwether advocates for an honest acknowledgment of oppressive realities, courage to challenge stereotypes, and a communal responsibility to foster a supportive environment. Merriweather proposes practical measures such as directly confronting issues, embracing cultural heritage, and creating brave, safe spaces. While commendable, the study could benefit from

additional empirical studies or practical examples to bolster its suggestions. Moreover, it falls short of providing a comprehensive roadmap for institutions to facilitate such spaces or actively dismantle systemic racism and sexism. The "Ontological We" framework holds promise for advancing future research by extending its application to encompass various marginalized groups within academia. Merriwether's study offers a pivotal perspective on the experiences of female Black faculty members. Additionally, while acknowledging the potential limitation of not providing a comprehensive roadmap for institutions to cultivate brave spaces or actively decode systemic racism and sexism, the "Ontological We" framework's impact could be further enhanced through expansion to include other marginalized groups within academic research. This extension is essential for a more inclusive understanding of diverse experiences within academia. In the context of stereotypes, Tavis et al. (2020) shed light on lived experiences within the university-industrial complex, emphasizing damaging narratives about Black women in academia. The authors highlight the incongruence between institutional commitments to diversity and the underrepresentation of racially diverse faculty in prestigious positions. Challenges faced in key roles, such as limited power and being 'underpaid and overworked,' are underscored, with a call to disaggregate understanding to avoid over-generalizations. Employing an autoethnographic method, the study affirms the existence of racist social images within higher education.

The collective narratives of African American women striving to overcome adversities and stereotypes are pivotal. Despite enduring historical hardships, many are now actively demanding fair treatment. An essential aspect of this demand is challenging perceptions of behavior in professional settings. Apugo (2019) points out the luxury denied to African American women in expressing perceived weakness, as actions such as calling out racism may

unfairly label them as 'angry' or 'whining.' The 'angry Black woman' stereotype perpetuates false assumptions about behavior, leading to negative labeling and potential professional repercussions.

Historically, African Americans have contended with negative stereotypical beliefs about their identity (Barnes, 2017). Black women often wear invisible masks. Those who express anger in response to social injustice may be responding assertively and authentically but are perceived as unfeminine and unacceptable (Mena, 2016). On the other hand, those who remain silent might gain acceptance for their stoicism, but if internally incongruent, their self-worth is negatively affected. This dynamic creates archetypical polarities between the angry Black woman and the stoic, nurturing, silent Black woman (Ashley, 2014). It is essential to recognize that these elements are interconnected, and their impact is often intertwined.

In the quest for equal treatment, African American women face the challenge of dispelling stereotypes that unfairly cast them as angry or irrational (Ashley 2014; Greene, 2020). This myth has real consequences in professional settings, contributing to negative labeling and, in extreme cases, individuals being unfairly 'canceled' in their workplace. The demand for equal treatment is not rooted in anger but in a legitimate desire for fairness. Challenging and debunking such stereotypes is paramount for fostering an inclusive and equitable professional environment.

Bias

African American women may experience implicit bias, another occurrence that is challenging to prove. Implicit bias is typically a negative way of thinking about a group of people or a person, often done unconsciously (Hawkins et al., 2023). This type of bias may play a role in the route to promotion or tenure for African American women due to myths and stereotypes (Wendy, 2014). Implicit bias may also be detrimental for staff and administrators

seeking growth at the University. It could be a barrier even if someone desires to transfer to a different division or department. Regrettably, demonstrating implicit bias can be challenging, as individuals with biases may reference interactions with other people of color as a means to diminish allegations.

The experiences of Black women student affairs administrators are relatively underexplored in the existing research literature (West et al., 2021). In a previous study, Gardner et al. (2014) explored the lived experiences of successful African American student affairs administrators at PWI and the factors that serve as enablers and barriers to their career success. This was significant because they used a phenomenological approach that accounted for the unanticipated and 'surprising' issues identified by the research participants through their lived experiences as African American student affairs administrators at PWIs. This aligns with the present study by using consensual qualitative research. This study also breaks down adjustment issues, institutional factors, and career dynamics.

The study found four significant factors considered enablers of career success. Three of those enablers of success were as follows: (a) healthy self-image and motivation, (b) social network and family support, and (c) undergraduate participation in student affairs. The fourth factor, compensation, work conditions, and resources, were recategorized from being a barrier to success to being an enabler of success based on study participant input. The participants in the study were delimited by institutional type, race, length of time employed by the institution, and position. Only a few works in the literature demonstrate divisional breakdown; however, this study included African American males, which, in contrast, my study focuses on African American females. The question then naturally arises: the subject of microaggressions and how the African American female participants coped.

Double Consciousness

This section examines the manifestation and implications of double consciousness among African American women in PWIs, shedding light on the intricate interplay between identity, representation, and academic engagement. Double Consciousness is a concept introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois in his 1903 work, "The Souls of Black Folk." It refers to the psychological challenge of reconciling an African heritage with a European upbringing and education (Merriweather, 2019). DuBois (1903) speaks of a double consciousness theorized to exist for African Americans because the world "yields him no true self-consciousness ... It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others" (p. 2). According to Merriweather (2019):

The concept of double consciousness lays a foundation for understanding how identity markers relate to Western notions of ontological being. From a Western perspective, only one soul is thought to exist, and it exists in a decontextualized, ahistorical form. For the oppressors, this is sufficient to guarantee integrity of their being but for the oppressed, it limits their integrity of being (p.76).

Specifically, the concept revolves around the experience of simultaneously identifying as both African and American, which often requires adopting different behaviors in different situations. Double consciousness refers to constantly being aware of how others perceive oneself, leading to a divided identity and internal conflict between personal and societal identities (Eze, 2011, p. 888).

At PWIs, African American women staff frequently encounter double consciousness as they navigate their roles while preserving their cultural identity. They may feel compelled to conform to mainstream norms while remaining true to themselves. This duality can manifest in

various ways, such as switching between African American Vernacular English and Standard English or adjusting one's behavior based on social expectations (Babb, 2005).

The experience of double consciousness among African American women in PWIs is a multi-faceted journey shaped by their intersecting identities, institutional environments, and societal pressures. Recognizing and understanding this phenomenon is vital for higher education institutions to foster inclusive environments that affirm African American women's identities and empower them to navigate the complexities of higher education while embracing their authentic selves. As we delve deeper into the implications of double consciousness, we gain insights that can inform policies and initiatives to cultivate a more equitable and supportive educational landscape for African American women in PWIs.

W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness" encapsulates the duality of identity experienced by African Americans—a sense of always viewing oneself through others' perceptions (Allen, 2002, p. 227). In 2021, Ferguson et al., conducted a qualitative study to explore the experiences of three Black women faculty members teaching in graduate education programs at a PWI, seeking to comprehend how they navigate their identities within organizational structures. Grounded in Black feminism and the Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning Model, the theoretical framework identified three primary themes: roles and responsibilities, resistance, and limitations within the academy.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform targeted support mechanisms and preparatory measures for Black women in higher education. Understanding their experiences and the identified themes can lead to developing more effective strategies for fostering an inclusive and supportive environment. Moreover, it contributes to ongoing discussions on diversity, equity, and inclusion within academia, promoting awareness of the

unique challenges Black women face no matter their role on campus. Ultimately, the research advocates for proactive measures to enhance the experiences and professional well-being of Black women faculty at PWI from the institution.

This complex interplay creates a distinct lived experience characterized by a constant awareness of being perceived both as a racial minority and as part of a gender minority group. This awareness often extends to academic, social, and professional spheres (Behar-Horenstein et al., 2012). The environment of PWIs can exacerbate the experience of double consciousness. With limited representation of African American women in faculty, administration, and curricula, these institutions can inadvertently reinforce feelings of marginalization and "otherness" (Johnson-Bailey, 2010). African American women are frequently placed in positions where they must navigate between conforming to dominant cultural norms and expressing their authentic selves. The phenomenon of being a double minority can significantly impact academic engagement and performance amongst African American women in higher education in any role (Thomas, 2019). African American women may feel the pressure to excel academically to defy negative stereotypes, yet simultaneously struggle with imposter syndrome due to the pervasive sense of not truly belonging (West, 2019b). Negotiating these conflicting feelings and expectations can create added stress, affecting their academic pursuits.

Intersectionality Woes

As stated earlier, the Intersectionality theory, pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw, offers a nuanced understanding of how intersecting social identities, such as race and gender, shape individual experiences and influence broader structures of power and privilege. Unfortunately, many African American women in higher education do not experience the same success as other women and deal with issues such as microaggressions within their divisions. An often-

unacknowledged part of Black women's struggle for relevance and success in the academy is the fact that postsecondary educational spaces were not created to serve or support them (Garret et al., 2023, p. 538). The intersection of both race and gender interlocks the oppression Black women may encounter within the workplace (Stanley, 2009), which includes gender and race cannot be viewed separately. Consequently, these indiscretions can lead to confusion, diminished morale, questioning of motives, and even a reluctance to continue working within the institution.

Mena, (2016) utilized critical ethnography as the research method, incorporating intersectionality theory to explore and understand the lived experiences of Women of Color (WOC) in academia. In the study, WOC encompasses a broad category that includes African American women along with other racial and ethnic minorities. This inclusive term allows the research to address the intersectional experiences that may be shared across different groups of women of color, including African American women, thus acknowledging the diversity within WOC and the specific, as well as shared, challenges they face in academia due to race, gender, and other intersecting identities. This approach allowed for a deep, nuanced examination of the participants' experiences, highlighting the complex interplay of race, gender, and other identities in shaping their academic and professional lives. The study examined cultural practices and beliefs aiming to understand the power dynamics, inequalities, and social injustices experienced. specifically examining how their intersecting identities affect their professional lives and experiences within PWIs. The study's findings highlighted the challenges faced by Women of Color in academia, including questioning of their credibility and competence, and experiences of overt and covert oppression. Despite these challenges, it was found that these women employed various coping strategies both within and outside the academy, fostering professional

perseverance. These insights underscore the complex nature of intersectionality and the resilience of WOC in navigating the academic environment.

In conclusion, the study highlights the importance of intersectionality in advancing diversity and inclusion in academia. It significantly contributes to the literature by providing an in-depth analysis of the multifaceted challenges faced by WOC, particularly African American women, illustrating that their experiences cannot be simplified to mere discussions of diversity. By amplifying their voices, the study enhances our comprehension of the obstacles encountered, offering critical insights for creating more supportive and inclusive educational environments.

Navigating Barriers

Within the realm of higher education, the experiences of African American women are undeniably intricate, marked by the intersection of challenges stemming from their dual identities as both African American and female. Scholars such as Collins (2004) and Gregory (2001) have eloquently shed light on the historical oppression associated with these intersecting identities, contributing to a standard set of multiple marginalizations. Women have encountered numerous trials and tribulations in their journey in leadership. Barnes speaks of a “concrete ceiling,” symbolizing the challenges African American women face in ascending the corporate ladder (2017). The concrete ceiling is more formidable to break than the glass ceiling we are familiar with, and Barnes contends that the glass ceiling is now being scaled down.

Despite many ongoing challenges, the concrete ceiling remains a persistent barrier. African American women are steadily leading initiatives to dismantle this obstacle, symbolically chipping away at it and revealing a fragile, breakable stained glass that signifies their gradual progress in overcoming barriers (Barnes, 2017, p. 47). Patitu and Hinton (2017) published an article focusing on a comprehensive study of African American women in administrative roles

within higher education, supplemented by insights from Patitu (2002). The goal was to explore, “What has changed for African American faculty and administrators in higher education?” Their findings reveal that the issues discussed in their research have endured over time for the respondents, leading the authors to conclude that little has changed for these African American women. This speculation extends to the broader context of African American female faculty and administrators. Their research concludes with insightful recommendations aimed at enhancing the appeal and receptiveness of institutions of higher learning to African American women administrators and faculty members.

Well-Being Among African American Women in Higher Education

How You Doing Sis?

In examining the landscape of higher education, it becomes apparent that African American women face significant underrepresentation in leadership positions. In positions of higher education administration, particularly for Black women, progress toward change and social inclusion has been slow (Tevis et al., 2020). Ambitious and educated Black women leaders remain severely underrepresented with ratios less than 1.0, while Whites are overrepresented with representation ratios greater than 1.0 (Jackson, 2004). Black women in leadership roles at PWIs are often held to different expectations than their White male or female counterparts. They fare worse than either Black men or White women because they possess a dual—rather than single—subordinate identity, according to Sesko and Biernat (2010). Leadership roles at a university include President/Chancellor, Provost, Deans, Department Chairs, Vice Presidents, CFO, Chief Diversity Officer, CIO, Admissions Director, and Human Resources Directors.

Mental Health

In the context of African American women navigating higher education at PWIs, an essential area of consideration is the impact on mental health. The intersectionality of race and gender within the academic environment can give rise to unique stressors and challenges. Extant research has shown that microaggressions, although they are seemingly small and innocent offenses, can take a real psychological toll on the mental health of their recipients. This suffering can lead to anger and depression and even lower work productivity and problem-solving capabilities (Thomas, 2019, p. 5). Dealing with issues of racism and inequality, while not feeling supported within the workplace, may cause work-related stressors, which can cause this population to cope in silence (Hall et al, 2012). Research indicates that African American women may experience heightened levels of psychological distress, attributed in part to the cumulative effects of racial and gender-based microaggressions, feelings of isolation, and stereotype threat.

The emotional toll of isolation and a lack of belonging can significantly affect one's performance. Holmes (2003) conducted a qualitative study that significantly contributes to the existing literature by providing in-depth insights into the nuanced experiences of mid- through senior-level Black women student affairs professionals within PWIs. The research serves as a critical addition to the literature on workplace dynamics, focusing specifically on the challenges Black women face in student affairs roles within PWIs, with a particular emphasis on feelings of alienation and isolation. This study offers a detailed examination of the unique obstacles encountered by African American women, addressing the intersectionality of race and gender in their professional experiences. A primary theme that emerged from Holmes' study revolves around the intricate dynamics Black women encounter in PWIs. Navigating social landscapes and addressing microaggressions become significant aspects of their professional journey. These

challenges, in turn, divert their attention from their core job responsibilities and duties, engendering an environment marked by heightened stress and emotional strain.

The findings of Holmes' study lay groundwork for further research and plays a pivotal role in informing the development of strategies aimed at fostering more equitable and inclusive environments within higher education institutions. This research underscores the importance of acknowledging and addressing the distinct stressors faced by Black women in PWIs, contributing to ongoing efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education settings. The consequence of these stressors extends beyond the immediate workplace challenges. African American women in this context may experience a decline in self-confidence, grapple with imposter syndrome, and witness a diminishing sense of motivation. This negative cycle, once initiated, has the potential to hinder professional growth and excellence, creating a self-perpetuating and detrimental loop. Holmes' findings underscore the intricate interplay between the social dynamics faced by Black women student affairs professionals in PWIs and the subsequent impact on their well-being and job performance. The literature suggests that the stressors these professionals face extend beyond the professional realm, influencing their psychological state and, consequently, their ability to thrive in their roles.

Research conducted by Hall et al. (2011) delves into work-related stressors experienced by African American women in the workplace, focusing on how they cope with issues of racism and sexism. Utilizing an exploratory design with grounded-theory methods, five key themes emerged, shedding light on stressors such as hiring and promotion challenges, defending one's race, code-switching, coping with discrimination, and facing isolation/exclusion. The findings indicate that African-American women employ both emotion- and problem-focused coping

strategies to manage workplace stress. The study emphasizes the significance of social support, spirituality, physical activity, professional guidance, and acknowledging the resilience of Black women in navigating workplace challenges. It contributes to the literature by providing insights into coping mechanisms and offering practical implications for addressing the issues faced at PWIs. Despite its strengths, the study acknowledges limitations and calls for future research to include a broader examination of workplace stressors among various racialized groups of women, promoting a culturally inclusive understanding of their experiences. The current study will address these gaps by contributing to a deeper understanding of the mental health challenges and resilience strategies among African American women, informing interventions that acknowledge and address the complexity of their experiences.

Moreover, a study by Wallace et al. (2023) contributes a strengths-based approach to mental health and wellness by investigating the impact of cultural systems, sociohistorical factors, and the intersectionality of race and gender on the well-being of African American women who identify as strong Black women (SBW). Addressing gaps in the existing literature, the research conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups to explore how these women make sense of their experiences with wellness. Utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis, the study revealed themes indicating that the SBW archetype, internalized during childhood, influences participants' perceptions and prioritization of self-care—a crucial aspect of wellness. The findings underscore the moderating effects of this archetype on wellness and identify sociocultural factors hindering its attainment. The research did not focus on African American women at PWIs; however, it holds significance for assessment, treatment, and counselor education, providing valuable insights for developing interventions that consider the

unique experiences of African American women who embody the strong Black woman archetype, thereby advancing culturally competent mental health practices.

In summation, understanding the nuances of the mental health landscape for African American women is critical for fostering a supportive academic environment at PWIs. The dearth of representation in academic and leadership roles further compounds these challenges. Addressing mental health concerns through targeted interventions, support networks, and culturally competent counseling services is imperative to ensure the holistic well-being of this demographic within the academic sphere. This study will support this mission by targeting mental health interventions and culturally sensitive counseling practices to address the unique mental health needs of African American women, contributing to a more supportive academic environment at PWIs.

Navigating Challenges through Coping Mechanisms and Supportive Networks

Making a Way

Within PWIs, the pursuit of higher education by African American women is marked by a multitude of challenges arising from intersecting identities and prevailing racial disparities. Apugo (2019) asserts that negative labels imposed on African American women, rooted in a lack of awareness about their historical contributions, subject them to constant stigmatization. Navigating this intricate landscape necessitates employing coping mechanisms reflective of the resilience and determination characterizing African American women. Thomas states, "Black women are likely to use coping strategies to manage feelings related to the lack of respect and microaggressions they experience in the academic setting" (2019, p. 97). This section explores the strategies, illuminating their pivotal role in mitigating stressors and fostering successful experiences.

In support of this exploration, West et al. conducted a comprehensive study that utilized the metaphor of "walking the tightrope" to capture the experiences of co-participants in higher education (2021). The research unfolded across three phases, each involving focused group discussions. These discussions were guided by semi-structured interview protocols developed collaboratively based on the analysis of bio-narratives and preceding focus group conversations. Employing a collaborative autoethnographic methodology, the study aimed to identify emerging themes from the co-participants shared narratives and discussions.

This approach proved effective in uncovering the multifaceted experiences of Black women in higher education. Through collaborative autoethnography, co-participants had the opportunity to articulate their stories and identify shared experiences, a crucial aspect in comprehending their journey and challenges. The study revealed that Black women in higher education embraced their predecessors while maintaining authenticity, actively worked to combat Imposter Syndrome, reframed fear and impossibility, and established their own safety nets. Importantly, they acknowledged that not all individuals of their race were allies and underscored the significance of avoiding condescension, connecting with fellow "funambulists," and constructing bridges to replace metaphorical tightropes. Additionally, participants leveraged their positions to enhance conditions for other Black women in higher education.

While the study exhibited thoroughness through multiple focus group discussions and in-depth bio-narrative analysis, a notable limitation lies in its confinement to a single institution. This restriction may impede a comprehensive representation of the experiences of Black women across diverse educational settings. Enriching the findings could be achieved through a more diverse sample, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the study's insights.

Davis and Maldonado (2015) completed a research study to delve into the intersectionality of race and gender in the leadership development of African American women, focusing on their lived experiences in academia. Employing a qualitative phenomenological research method, the study aimed to uncover the essence of participants' stories and illuminate the commonalities in their experiences. The results highlighted that race and gender significantly shaped the leadership development of the women involved, leading to the emergence of five distinct themes.

Despite facing obstacles such as inequities, negative assumptions, and doubts, the participants demonstrated skillful leadership in an environment where they constantly had to validate their abilities. The findings underscored the resilience of African American female leaders, who, despite adversity, exhibited tenacity and the ability to overcome challenges. The study emphasized the dearth of research on the impact of race and gender on the leadership development of African American women in academia, positioning itself as a valuable framework for understanding their unique experiences and addressing cultural barriers that impede their upward mobility.

The research shed light on the crucial role of resilience, integrity, intrapersonal characteristics, and social skills in the career progression of African American women within their organizations. Notably, those who cultivated strategic relationships and secured mentorships or sponsorships were likelier to ascend the leadership ladder. The study proposed that aspiring African American women leaders should venture beyond their comfort zones to establish diverse networks with individuals holding higher ranks or positions, gaining access to advanced promotions and career opportunities.

The inquiry process of the study centered on understanding how individuals construct and interpret their personal experiences, aligning with a theoretical framework of intersectionality that addresses race and gender in organizational and leadership practices. The urgency of studying intersectionality was emphasized, allowing researchers to transcend individual perspectives and fostering a deeper understanding of the worldview of African American women. The work of scholars like Collins (2004), Crenshaw (1989), and Walker (2003) was invoked to underscore the importance of incorporating intersectionality into organizational and leadership studies, as it offers a holistic and nuanced perspective on the challenges faced by African American women, articulating a politics of survival for them.

In conclusion, the studies by West et al. (2021) and Davis and Maldonado (2015) offer valuable insights into the coping strategies and resilience employed by African American women in PWIs. By delving into their experiences through collaborative autoethnography, the research sheds light on the nuanced ways in which these women navigate challenges and contribute to the transformation of the higher education landscape. Despite some limitations, the studies are a significant contribution, underscoring the need for continued research that captures the richness and diversity of African American women's experiences across various educational contexts. My research focuses on African American women across various academic positions, from student workers and professors to high-level administrators. This inclusive approach highlights the diverse experiences and challenges faced by these women within the academic sphere, emphasizing the importance of targeted mental health interventions and support systems tailored to their unique roles and responsibilities.

Resilience is Key

Resilience is critical when navigating higher education as an African American woman. Davis and Maldonado's (2015) study stated that their participants, despite the barriers they encountered, these women performed skillfully in an environment where inequities, negative assumptions, and doubts were prevalent. Despite adversity, they carry out their responsibilities but often in an atmosphere where they must constantly prove themselves. Barnes found that through all the barriers and challenges faced as an African American woman leader, being true to oneself, knowing strengths and capitalizing on them, and never compromising personal values will allow positive strides to be made (Barnes, 2017, p.49).

Strength in Solidarity

Unity

African American women's experiences at PWIs envelop many intersectional inferences, such as microaggressions, gaslighting, racism, sexism, and ageism (Chance, N, 2022; Hughes and Howard, 2003). Unfortunately, they may find it uncomfortable to discuss challenges in academia because thinking through where they fit within the systems of advantage and structural disadvantage in the academy is daunting (Chancellor, 2019, p. 183). Cultivating a strong and supportive community for African American women at PWIs relies on the collective dedication of individuals committed to encouraging one another (West, 2019a). An increasing number of African American women actively seek mutual support to navigate workplace challenges, fostering a strong sense of community. Whether occupying administrative positions, working in academic departments, serving as faculty members, or fulfilling other staff roles, the importance of seeking guidance from individuals who have encountered similar situations is invaluable for overcoming specific challenges. Collectively, they join forces to provide mutual support,

navigating the inherent pressures of their professional environments while finding solace in the shared experiences within the realm of higher education. These supportive networks offer a vital space where African American women can find understanding and community as they encounter workplace obstacles. These brave spaces afford opportunities to junior and senior faculty alike to educate and be educated, to support and be supported, and to be vulnerable and yet safe (Merriweather, 2019).

A study by West (2019a) explored the experiences of seven African American women student affairs administrators actively engaged in the African American Women Student (AAWS) program between 2006 and 2011. Participants perceive the AAWS as a culturally homogeneous encounter, enriched with various culturally responsive resources and delivered through a culturally intentional curriculum. The qualitative study employed the frameworks of professional counterspaces situated in Black feminist thought and a Counterspace conceptual model. It emphasized the need for additional data to comprehensively understand the composition of ecological sites of resistance for African American women in student affairs roles, a group still significantly underrepresented in the U.S. Exploring professional development strategies employed by Black women in higher education facing challenges due to their underrepresented status is a focal point. The concept of professional counterspaces, informed by Black feminist thought, is clarified as a distinct form of professional development. Participants highlighted the positive impact of the AAWS on their well-being as African American women student affairs administrators. The study's findings hold significance in guiding the creation of professional counterspaces tailored for African American women, not only in higher education but also in other professional settings. It advocates for counterspaces designed with the specific needs and interests of African American women at the forefront, aiming to disrupt prevailing

cultural narratives. Overall, the study underscores the importance of intentionally diversifying counterspace demographics, integrating culturally responsive resources, and designing a curriculum that is personally, professionally, and culturally relevant for participants.

Institutional Accountability

Institutions should bear the burden of dismantling oppressive university structures and ensure that Black women are heard and valued in a climate that does not marginalize their concerns (Apugo, 2019). Such efforts are crucial for fostering an academic climate that supports the persistence and well-being of Black women. The responsibility of institutions encompasses implementing systemic changes that challenge the status quo, promoting policies that ensure equity, and providing resources that cater to the unique needs of African American women in academia. Recognizing and acting on this responsibility is imperative for the creation of an inclusive and supportive academic environment that empowers Black women to thrive in their various roles.

In their exploration of the challenges faced by Black women leaders in academia, mainly focusing on time capital and title power, Tevis et al. (2020) present a compelling ethnographic exploration that underscores the nuanced struggles within this demographic. The authors contend that, despite holding prestigious titles and assuming significant responsibilities, Black women in academic leadership often grapple with a lack of control over fundamental aspects of their professional lives, such as time management and the cultivation of their professional image. This phenomenon is encapsulated by the term "time capital," suggesting that, despite their formal roles, these leaders face constraints in optimizing their time and managing workloads effectively.

Furthermore, the authors shed light on the distinct disparity between the assumed authority of administrative titles and the actual influence wielded by Black women leaders. This

divergence, termed "lack of title power," signifies a systemic challenge wherein the bestowed titles do not necessarily translate into commensurate control or influence within academic institutions. Consequently, these leaders are expending additional resources to navigate and fulfill their roles effectively.

The article poses a crucial argument for institutional introspection, urging academic entities to address the systemic conditions, institutional inequities, and structural biases that underpin the challenges faced by Black women leaders. Recognizing these issues is pivotal for fostering a more inclusive and equitable academic environment. My research will further investigate these issues in greater depth.

Moreover, Tevis et al. stress the imperative of future research to delve into the impact of social depictions, collegial perceptions, and institutional culture on the professional identity and productivity of Black women administrators. By advocating for a comprehensive understanding of how these factors shape the contributions of Black women in academia, the authors suggest a transformative potential to reshape the prevailing narrative surrounding their role in academic leadership.

The article adeptly weaves personal narratives and existing literature to underscore the systemic nature of challenges stemming from gendered racism and cultural inequities. However, the article's strength could be bolstered by a robust incorporation of a mixed methods approach to add quantitative data to substantiate its claims, thereby enhancing the scholarly rigor of the analysis. While the article admirably suggests future research directions and practical strategies, it falls short of providing an in-depth discussion on the implementation of these strategies. A more thorough exploration of the feasibility and potential hurdles in translating research insights into actionable institutional changes would fortify the article's practical implications.

In conclusion, Tevis et al.'s work is a valuable contribution to the ongoing discourse on diversity in academic leadership. Through its insightful analysis and poignant narratives, the article succeeds in bringing attention to the intricate challenges faced by Black women leaders while providing a compelling call for institutional reform and continued research initiatives in this critical area.

Theoretical Framework

Collins (1986) places the responsibility for interpreting the theoretical framework of Black women's reality in their own hands, acknowledging the sociopolitical context shaping their lives (as cited in West, 2019b, p.162), resulting in the Black Feminist Standpoint Theory. As a Black feminist theorist, she underscores the marginality of Black women in academic settings, contributing to developing a shared worldview termed "standpoint" (West, 2019b). While common themes arise from historical and contemporary experiences shared by Black women, their manifestation varies due to diversity in socioeconomic status, geographic locale, age, and sexual orientation (West, 2019b). West states that the concept of standpoint, which describes the bonding among Black women due to their common struggle against racism and sexism, suggests that connective strategies may work to strengthen and empower these women (2019b).

Furthermore, sharing personal experiences (known as "counterstories") and creating supportive and welcoming environments ("counter spaces") help Black women overcome the challenges related to systemic racism compounded by the lack of critical mass (West et al., 2021). Researchers contend that although gains have been made in the number of Black women working in higher education, they remain severely underrepresented.

The theoretical framework underpinning this dissertation draws from two interrelated perspectives: *intersectionality theory* and *critical race theory*. These frameworks provide lenses

through which to examine the complex dynamics surrounding the experiences of African American women in higher education, specifically within PWIs.

Intersectionality theory, pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw, offers a nuanced understanding of how intersecting social identities, such as race and gender, shape individual experiences and influence broader structures of power and privilege. Coined by Crenshaw in 1989, the term 'intersectionality' emerged from the need to address the unique experiences of Black women that were overlooked by both feminist and antiracist discourses. Sojourner Truth's 1851 'Ain't I a Woman?' speech serves as an early articulation of the intersectionality perspective. Truth challenged the notion that race, and gender are mutually exclusive for Black women, highlighting how being Black impacted her visibility and access to societal privileges afforded to white women.

In the speech, Truth challenged the notion that being a woman (i.e., gender) and Black (i.e., race) are mutually exclusive (Bowleg, 2012). Truth's speech invoked how being Black makes her invisible as a woman:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! Moreover, ain't I a woman? Look at me!... I have borne thirteen children and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! Moreover, ain't I a woman? (Wyatt et al., 2022, p. 866).

According to Crenshaw, race and gender are intertwined and inseparable for Black women (1989). The work of intersectionality, as noted by Wyatt et al. (2022), challenges the centering of normative experiences and identities, fostering a critical examination of intersecting identities in Western society. Wyatt et al. states, as a foundation, the work of intersectionality is

to challenge the centering of what is considered normative—White, Western, cisgender male, middle-class, and heterosexual individuals and their experiences—by raising questions about what it means to have intersecting identities in Western society (2022). In the context of this study, intersectionality theory offers a framework to explore the complex dynamics at play in the experiences of African American women in higher education (Wyatt et al., 2022). It recognizes that their encounters with microaggressions and discrimination are influenced by the intersection of their race and gender, among other identities (Davis and Maldonado, 2015). This study aims to deepen our understanding of the unique challenges faced by African American women in PWIs by examining the interplay of these identities.

Critical race theory (CRT) provides a critical framework for analyzing how racism is embedded within societal systems and structures (Bowleg, 2012). Originating from the work of legal scholars, CRT interrogates the dominant ideology shaping the social and historical construction of race and its profound effects on the lived experiences of people of color. Most people in the United States first learned of CRT when Lani Guinier, a University of Pennsylvania law professor, became a political casualty of the Clinton administration (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 10). This served as a pivotal moment marking the intersection of academia, politics, and race relations within the American socio-political landscape. Guinier's association with CRT and subsequent political repercussions underscore the contentious nature of CRT and its implications for broader discussions on equality, justice, and diversity. CRT is an interrogation of the dominant ideology informing the social and historical construction of race and the profound effects of this construction on the lived experiences of people of color, including students and faculty of color (Thomas, 2019, p. 54).

This theoretical lens, as articulated by Bowleg (2012), recognizes the historical and ongoing marginalization and oppression experienced by racial minority groups. CRT acknowledges the historical and ongoing marginalization and oppression experienced by racial minority groups. It recognizes the intersection of race and racism with other social identities and systems of oppression, such as gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. In the context of this study, CRT facilitates an exploration of systemic factors, power dynamics, and institutional practices perpetuating microaggressions and discrimination against African American women at PWIs.

Utilizing CRT, this study explores systemic factors, power dynamics, and institutional practices perpetuating microaggressions and discrimination against African American women at PWIs. It facilitates an analysis of the structural and institutional barriers that must be addressed to foster a more inclusive and equitable academic environment. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of narratives or “storytelling” from people of color to counter White supremacy and privilege the voices of people of color (Bowleg, 2012, p. 1271).

Integration of Frameworks

The integration of intersectionality and critical race theories provides a robust theoretical foundation for this dissertation. By leveraging these frameworks, the study aims to delve into unmasking challenges of African American women at PWIs by unveiling phenomenological realities and prioritizing well-being. This theoretical foundation facilitates a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of African American women within PWIs, informing strategies for fostering inclusive and equitable practices within higher education institutions (Chance, 2022).

Summary

Further research is imperative to fully comprehend the significance of support for African American women at PWIs as they confront the complex challenges of microaggressions, racism, and sexism, amongst other “isms.” The pivotal role of mentoring and supportive networks in their professional success cannot be overstated. Nevertheless, their experiences remain affected by persistent systemic barriers, tokenism, stereotypes, and implicit bias, all of which hinder their advancement.

Taking proactive measures to address these issues and promoting equitable practices in academia are indispensable for establishing an inclusive environment that fosters the growth and well-being of African American women in higher education at any institution. By acknowledging and rectifying these challenges, we can ensure they are afforded the opportunities they deserve to thrive academically.

Moreover, recognizing and addressing these interconnected elements is not only crucial for the well-being of African American women in higher education but also for fostering a truly inclusive academic environment.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The research method of phenomenology proves particularly valuable in exploring the experiences of African American women in higher education. It provides a robust framework that facilitates a profound understanding of their lived experiences, perceptions, and the meanings they attribute to these experiences within the context of PWI. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study aims to delve into unmasking challenges of African American women at PWIs by unveiling phenomenological realities and prioritizing well-being.

This chapter will discuss the role of the researcher, the research design, and the methodology necessary to analyze the research questions best. This research is designed to provide insight into the areas of inquiry and the specific aspects of African American women's experiences at PWIs that the researcher seeks to explore. The research question guiding this inquiry is:

How are African American women's professional experiences and well-being in higher education impacted by the hidden labor they perform?

By addressing this research question, the study aims to unmask the challenges of African American women at PWIs and unveil the phenomenological realities in experiences and the importance of well-being. The resulting findings will significantly contribute to the existing knowledge base, offering valuable insights that can inform institutional practices. Moreover, the study seeks to advocate for implementing better support systems to address the unique needs and circumstances of African American women in academia.

To capture the essence of participants' experiences, this study employed a purposive sampling technique to select participants who possess diverse perspectives and experiences within higher education (Patton, 2014). The selection criteria included race, gender, role within the institution, and length of service, encompassing various perspectives and experiences. To protect participants' rights and well-being, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their confidentiality and privacy. This process adhered strictly to ethical guidelines and involved obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before the start of the study.

The data collection phase consists of the execution of 13 semi-structured interviews with vetted participants. Following the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded to capture comprehensive information. Subsequently, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to facilitate analysis and ensure accuracy.

The data analysis approach of thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was actively employed. TA approaches typically acknowledge the potential for inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) orientations to coding, capturing semantic (explicit or overt) and latent (implicit, underlying, not necessarily unconscious) meanings, processes of coding, and theme development, and the potential for some flexibility around the theory that frames the research (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

This study presents the findings through vivid descriptions, compelling quotations, and engaging narratives that authentically portray the lived experiences of African American women who work or have worked at a PWI. The primary objective is to offer rich and nuanced insights into their unique experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and aspirations. By employing this approach, the research aims to bring forth a vivid and immersive understanding of the

participants' perspectives and contribute to a more profound appreciation of their journey in the academic realm.

Recognizing the inherent limitations in this study, encompassing the specific context of the participants and potential subjectivity in data interpretation and analysis, the researcher committed to maintaining transparency and practicing reflexivity throughout the research process. These measures were to minimize bias and enhance the credibility of the findings, ensuring a robust and reliable study that contributes meaningfully to the field of research. In conclusion, this study employed a phenomenological research approach to explore the experiences of African American women in higher education. After employing a purposive sampling technique, conducting in-depth interviews, and utilizing thematic analysis, the research aims to unveil many experiences, challenges, perspectives, and narratives of African American women in PWIs.

Research Design

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges encountered by African American women on PWI campuses, a phenomenological research design was employed to investigate the lived experiences, challenges, and aspirations of African American women on PWI campuses. In this qualitative research methodology, a phenomenological approach was utilized to investigate the lived experiences, challenges, and aspirations of African American women at PWIs. This approach facilitates a thorough exploration of individual perspectives and subjective experiences. The study's research setting focused on the professional lives of African American women at degree-granting PWI's. The sample population consisted of African American women in various roles, such as staff, administrators, and faculty. The study investigated the personal accounts of these women to uncover how they navigate or navigated

their careers, with a particular emphasis on their perceptions of their experiences and challenges. This aspect is crucial to the study, as it sheds light on their experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and unfair treatment. The study used the terms African American and Black interchangeably, as no distinction is made for ethnicity.

This research is driven by the researcher's previous experience working at a PWI, which provides valuable insights and familiarity with the context and participants. By leveraging this firsthand knowledge, the study aims to delve into unmasking challenges of African American women at PWIs by unveiling phenomenological realities and prioritizing well-being.

Participation Recruitment

The participant pool for this study consists of 13 African American women who are either currently employed or have previously been employed at PWIs within the last ten years, as specified in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonyms	Age Range	Years currently worked or previously worked	Current/Previous position	Current/Previous Department/Program	In Higher Ed?
Maxine	51-65 years	6-7 years	Adm Clerk II	Enrollment Services/Operations Division	No
Regine	31-40 years	3 years or less	Ops Manager	Radio Station	No
Synclaire	65 +	10- 15 years or more	VP, Corp Community Relations	Community Relations	No
Khadijah	41- 50 years	3 years or less	Asst. prof	Adjunct prof.	Yes

(Table 1 Continued)

Lynn	31-40 years	3 years or less	Coordinator	Disability	No
Maya	31-40 years	10- 15 years or more	Director of Recruitment	Enrollment Management	Yes
Joan	41- 50 years	16 years or more	Director of Administration	Facilities and Economic Development	Yes
Toni	31-40 years	8-9 years	Director of DEIB; former: DEI Coordinator, AD of Community Involvement	HR, DEI, Student Affairs/Service Learning	Yes
Andi	31-40 years	10- 15 years or more	Current: Asst Director of Academic Success; former: Asso. Director, Multicultural Center	Current: Academic Affairs; previous: Student Affairs	Yes
Sabrina	51-65 years	8-9 years	Director of State Authorization	Distance Education	No
Danni	51-65 years	16 years or more	Asso. Prof. & Adj. prof.	Communications & Behavioral and Social Sciences	Yes
Fatima	51-65 years	16 years or more	Asst. Director	English Department Work Study Student	Yes
Karen	31-40 years	3 years or less	Therapist	Counseling Department	Yes

Among the participants, eight are presently employed at such institutions. The study included two participants serving as adjunct or assistant professors, while the others occupy or have occupied various positions across different departments and programs. Table 1, provides a detailed breakdown of these roles, including both current and past positions, along with the departments and programs to which the participants are or were affiliated. Eligibility for participation was determined based on the fulfillment of the research criteria qualifications.

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling employing electronic communication channels such as emails and social media tools to request their engagement in the study. The researcher posted a flier (Appendix B) outlining the study's purpose along with the required qualification criteria. Subsequently, the promotional material was further distributed by others, to peers in their social networks.

Individuals demonstrated their interest by completing an online questionnaire (Appendix C). Upon submission, the researcher confirmed their eligibility for participation. Subsequently, participants were invited to take part in the study and advised of the need for consent for the study.

Participation Selection

Individuals who responded to the online survey and met the specified criteria for the study were invited to participate in detailed follow-up interviews. Before the first interview, each participant received an electronic version of the informed consent form via Adobe Sign (see Appendix D). The informed consent form outlined a description of the research, the time involved, risks and benefits, compensation (voluntary), participants' rights, confidentiality, collection of information, Zoom's encryption policy, and the researcher, the dissertation chair, and IRB's contact information. Upon obtaining the participant's signature through the DocuSign platform, indicating their consent to abide by the terms delineated in the consent form, both the researcher and the participant receive a copy of the signed document through DocuSign's interface. After the reception of the consent form, participants are formally enrolled in the study. They were then contacted via email to confirm their interview date. Following the confirmation of the interview date, participants received an additional email reiterating pertinent details including the date, time, time zone, Zoom link, and their respective pseudonyms. Pseudonyms

were allocated to participants, ensuring their anonymity and effective data management.

Renaming the participants was crucial for the ethical management and efficient organization of the data by the research team. Participant pseudonyms were; Maxine, Regine, Synclaire, Khadijah, Lynn, Maya, Joan, Toni, Andi, Sabrina, Danni, Fatima, and Karen.

Interview sessions took place on the Zoom web-based conferencing platform, with agreed-upon dates and times that were mutually convenient. Before these interviews, participants were advised to secure a private and interruption-free personal space. This precaution aimed to facilitate the provision of candid and comprehensive responses to the interview questions, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of their experiences. Moreover, before initiating the recording, the researcher explained Zoom's encryption policy and sought verbal consent from participants. This involved explicitly informing participants about the impending recording and requesting their agreement by asking them to verbally confirm with a "yes" if they agreed to be recorded.

Data Collection

This study's data were collected through responses to open-ended questions during semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, conducted via the Zoom web-based conferencing platform. The transcriptions of the audio recordings were created using Zoom AI technology, with participants' names omitted to ensure confidentiality. Following transcription generation, a thorough examination occurred to identify typos, errors, and potential corrections, while also assessing for signs of data saturation. Data saturation was achieved in this study when further data collection ceased to yield new insights or themes, indicating that the dataset was sufficiently comprehensive to encapsulate the depth and breadth of the participants' lived experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, the researcher is the key instrument. The role of the researcher is to collect data by examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This study employed the six steps of analyzing and interpreting qualitative data outlined by Creswell & Guetterman which are preparing and organizing data for analysis, exploring and coding the data, creating themes by using the codes, interpreting and representing the findings, interpreting the meaning of the results, and conducting strategies to validate the accuracy of the findings (2019).

After each interview, the transcriptions were downloaded by the researcher for data organization and preparation. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms replaced the participants' Zoom IDs which also reflected the pre-assigned names on their transcripts. The researcher conducted a thorough review of the transcripts, focusing on the contextual details and performing a line-by-line analysis to maintain the accuracy of the data. This included comparing the transcripts with the audio recordings to verify the accuracy of the participant's responses. Following this, the transcripts were also sent to the participants for them to check their accuracy. All participants confirmed that the transcripts accurately reflected their responses during this review process, in some cases there were corrections made.

In the process of identifying patterns within the data, the researcher began to develop themes through a holistic interpretation, ensuring that these themes reflected the natural language of the participants. Quotes and phrases that accurately captured each participant's viewpoint were carefully selected to enhance the analysis. The researchers' continuous engagement with the data was supported by the reflective documentation of thoughts and insights in memos. Redundant information and overlapping concepts were meticulously removed to isolate the primary phrases

that formed the basis of thematic categories. These categories were enriched with direct quotes from participants, allowing their stories to unfold naturally and authentically.

The use of Dedoose, a software specifically designed for analyzing extensive textual data, facilitated the systematic organization, categorization, and interpretation of the data into themes. Since the software did not provide initial categories, the process involved developing a classification scheme from the ground up. This began with identifying essential data points and coding categories, which laid the foundation for theme development and pattern recognition. By analyzing the data to discern distinct themes and topics, insights were placed into specific categories, and themes were created. These categories were refined for clarity and relevance to the study's objectives, with overlapping categories merged and irrelevant data excluded. New categories were created as needed to ensure a comprehensive coverage of all significant themes. Through specific coding techniques, the data was systematically categorized, defining emerging themes. The categorization process was iterative, involving multiple reviews to adjust and validate the categorization, aiming for accuracy and specificity in the organization of the data. Quality control checks ensured the reliability of these adjustments, facilitating a nuanced analysis. The software primarily served as a tool for the research team to store data and easily access coded segments, as highlighted by Creswell (2019, p.242).

Assumptions and Limitations

This phenomenological study aimed to unveil the lived experiences of Black women who have been employed at or were previously employed by a PWI within the last decade. It is important to note potential limitations within this study. Firstly, the sample size was restricted to 13 participants; therefore, caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings. Secondly, acknowledgment of the potential influence of the researcher's own biases, including values,

experiences, and beliefs, on the interpretation of the interview data. The study specifically captured the perspectives of a subset of African American participants who held or had held diverse roles at PWIs, which could potentially limit its broader applicability. Nevertheless, in qualitative research, this approach aligns with the emphasis on exploring the universal essence of shared individual experiences.

In conclusion, the research design chosen for this dissertation involved in-depth interviews and a reflexive approach. Findings from the qualitative analyses are triangulated to provide wide-ranging nuances of the experiences of African American women at PWIs. The integrated findings contribute to a richer and deliberated understanding of the research topic. Through this approach, the aim is to unmask the challenges of African American women at PWIs by unveiling phenomenological realities in experiences and the importance of well-being.

Role of the Researcher

In the pursuit of unveiling the experiences of African American women in higher education, particularly within PWIs, it is imperative to acknowledge the nuanced role of the researcher in this exploration. As the primary investigator, my unique positionality is shaped by nearly seven years of personal and professional engagement within a PWI setting. This research allowed time and space for reflection, enabling me to review extensive notes regarding actions that were permitted to occur without scrutiny from those in charge, as well as my attempts to seek assistance in unresolved situations. The “test” I faced during this time formed the basis of my testimony, which was used to guide other African American women navigating similar difficulties. Through overcoming these challenges, I not only learned to navigate them but also discovered and affirmed my sense of self-worth in the process.

During my time at the institution, I traversed a path marked by both triumphs and tribulations. In the vibrant tapestry of the academic environment, I encountered microaggressions that, at times, threatened to overshadow the accomplishments achieved. These microaggressions, reflective of broader systemic challenges, underscore the persistence of subtle biases that can permeate the professional landscape. Amid these challenges, I have not merely withstood but also thrived, finding strength in resilience and determination. My journey was marked by instances of gaslighting and erasure, where the uniqueness of my experiences and contributions was overlooked. Yet, paradoxically, there were instances where visibility was thrust upon me, not by choice but by necessity, to represent the underrepresented.

Witnessing the revolving door of employment for African American women in the academic sphere has been a poignant aspect of my experience. The cycle of women entering and exiting, driven by the impact of microaggressions, has fueled my commitment to creating a supportive community. Recognizing the need for a space where African American women can find solace, encouragement, and shared understanding, I, along with a colleague took the initiative to establish a support group for African American women within the institution. This support group served as a refuge for those who, like me, have faced the complexities of navigating the psychological warfare many experienced at this PWI as African American women. The collective strength that emanated from shared experiences fostered resilience and fortitude, creating a space where challenges were acknowledged, and triumphs were celebrated.

When I embarked on this research journey, my dual roles as both insider and researcher helped shape the lens through which I perceive and interpret the narratives of African American women. The lived experiences within this PWI setting not only informed my academic inquiry but also underscored the urgency and significance of amplifying these voices to bring about

institutional change. In the spirit of advocacy for empowerment and resilience, this study is not merely an academic endeavor but a call to action. It is an opportunity to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on inclusivity, equity, and the transformative power of narrative within the landscape of higher education.

Summary

In summary, Chapter Three serves as a comprehensive guide to the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis approach utilized in this study. These methods aim to provide a profound lens unveiling the experiences of African American women in higher education at a PWI, generating valuable insights that contribute to the existing body of knowledge and advocating for the implementation of improved support systems within the academic environment.

The qualitative research design employed in this study is geared toward exploring the life experiences and beliefs of African American women in higher education at a PWI.

Through semi-structured interviews, in-depth conversations were conducted with participants, utilizing a semi-structured format that encouraged open-ended discussions. This approach garnered a profound unmasking of these women's perceptions regarding their experiences in the academic setting. With participants' consent, these interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The collected data underwent coding and review to ensure the credibility and validity of the findings.

Thematic analysis was the selected approach for data analysis, involving a meticulous journey of coding, categorizing, and interpreting the collected data. The goal is to uncover recurring themes, patterns, and cultural dynamics in the transcribed interviews. Qualitative data

analysis software and manual coding techniques were employed to guarantee the rigor and dependability of the findings.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to address African American women's intricate challenges at PWIs, exploring the outcomes of navigating a sense of belonging within this professional context. This investigation into various experiences significantly contributes to an enhanced comprehension of the subject matter. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the study delves into the experiences of individuals actively working or previously worked at a PWI. Through the thorough collection of personal narratives from African American women occupying diverse roles within PWIs, the research seeks to expound the nuanced interplay between race and gender dynamics, thereby discerning their significant impact on the professional lives of these individuals. The following research question aligned with the problem and purpose of this study: How are African American women's professional experiences and well-being in higher education impacted by the hidden labor they perform?

Chapter four encompasses the findings derived from the conducted study. Within this section, a comprehensive interpretation of the participants' experiences is provided. The data collection phase involved conducting interviews with 13 women who fit the criteria of the demographic survey. The African American women who participated in the interviews recounted personal stories with distinct similarities to others in the study. Feelings about themselves as women in higher education at a PWI were expressed during the interviews often accompanied by tears. For many participants, they had to dig up tragedies they experienced in their previous roles to be transparent and in congruence with their answers. Their interview responses included real or perceived barriers that they or other African American women have had to overcome or

sidestep to achieve positions of leadership in educational administration. It should be noted that not all respondents reported that they had been successful in these environments.

After the participant interviews, a thematic analysis was undertaken, leading to the identification and explication of emergent themes detailed in this chapter. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study results, measures were taken, including the recruitment of a purposeful sample, member checking, and a meticulous focus on the quality and depth of the gathered data. These methodological steps were strategically employed to fortify the reliability and validity of the study's findings.

Findings

Themes were systematically categorized based on the research question to elucidate the multifaceted challenges faced by African American women at PWIs. Seven prevalent themes emerged from the narratives provided by these women, illustrating their experiences and obstacles encountered while navigating higher education.

Theme 1: The Multifaceted Nature of Hidden Labor

In examining the professional experiences and well-being of African American women in higher education, we uncover critical challenges that highlight the hidden labor they undertake. Alongside this, we examine how racial and gender stereotypes introduce additional, nuanced challenges. This theme aims to offer a thorough understanding of the wide-ranging adversities African American women encounter in PWIs, from emotional exertion to intellectual efforts and cultural work.

Layers of Hidden Labor

Hidden Labor of Cultural Contributions

The hidden labor of cultural contributions embodies another complex layer for African American women at PWI which is an often-unrecognized facet of their work.

Maxine shares a compelling account of her journey within the academic landscape, focusing on the nuanced challenges and systemic barriers she encountered as an African American woman striving for professional growth and recognition. Her narrative sheds light on the intricate dynamics of navigating institutional policies and personal ambition, revealing the critical intersection of race, gender, and professional identity in the pursuit of equity and inclusion within higher education settings. Maxine recounted her experience taking on the role of advisor for the Black Student Union, which, under the lax oversight of their previous advisor, had become disorganized and lacked focus, as students were left to their own devices. She observed that the group's meetings lacked formal structure and professionalism, often characterized by indifference and a casual atmosphere. Upon stepping into the advisory position, Maxine introduced rigorous guidelines aimed at instilling a sense of order and professionalism. These included a requirement to learn and apply Robert's Rules of Order, the maintenance of a structured agenda for meetings, the implementation of formal elections, adherence to established organizational practices, and the incorporation of the Black American Anthem into each meeting. The shift toward a more structured and disciplined approach initially faced resistance from the students, who showed a preference for socializing and sought to gain resources with minimal effort. Maxine stressed the value of earning achievements through hard work and instilled principles of accountability and organizational discipline

among the students. Despite her efforts, an administrator's decision to personally finance the students' requests without requiring them to work for it undermined her authority.

This act of generosity set up a contrast between Maxine's approach and the administrator's more lenient stance, ultimately compromising her efforts to foster a work ethic and discipline, with the administrator appearing more lenient by providing instant gratification.

These contributions encompass the enrichment of the academic environment through the infusion of diverse perspectives, the integration of culturally relevant knowledge and practices into student experiences, and the provision of role models for minority students.

Hidden Labor of Emotional Support

The invisible labor of emotional support embodies another complex layer for African American women at PWI's. These women often find themselves providing an unwavering pillar of support, mentorship, and guidance to students and colleagues alike, addressing not only academic challenges but also the nuanced racial and gender-based adversities that pervade the academic landscape.

Andi shared, "I go above and beyond, particularly with my students, and especially when they are Black students who lack support outside of my domain. In such cases, I definitely extend myself further in offering them support, even if it has been to my detriment in the past." She elaborated that she often undertook additional responsibilities without compensation, explaining, "I was just like, well, I advise most of these students in my program, anyway. So, I'm just going to do it because they need advising. They shouldn't be left to their own devices."

This emotional labor, though pivotal in creating an inclusive and supportive academic environment, usually occurs with the pretense that the hidden labor rarely receives the recognition or compensation it merits.

Hidden Labor in Efforts to Enhance Diversity

In an insightful reflection, Regine discusses her involvement in creating a misleading image of diversity in the PWI she was employed.

Regine's experience sheds light on the superficial nature of diversity initiatives at her campus, highlighting a stark contrast between the institution's public image and its actual diversity. She recounts how she was unwittingly complicit in curating a facade of diversity through photography, aimed at portraying the campus as more inclusive than it truly was. This realization dawned upon her as she observed the strategic use of photographs of diverse individuals, including a new Black female employee named Mouse Mini, whose image was disproportionately publicized. These efforts were directed by predominantly white leadership, crafting an illusion of diversity that did not match the campus's reality. Regine grapples with her role in perpetuating this misleading narrative, feeling manipulated into contributing to a deceptive portrayal that used her identity to lend authenticity to the facade. This dissonance between the advertised diversity and the actual demographics of the campus leads Regine to a moment of awakening, recognizing the manipulation and questioning her involvement in a system that exploits representations of diversity for its own benefit.

Hidden labor involves a diverse array of activities that, despite their crucial role in shaping institutional culture and function, are often overlooked and unrewarded. Creating an

illusion that there is a vast representation of African American women at PWIs equates to “This is what I ordered and this is what I got”.

Theme 2: Intersectionality: Race or Gender

Some patterns inevitably shape the treatment of African American women within PWIs, affecting their day-to-day experiences and professional trajectories. When participants were asked whether they had experienced or faced microaggressions due to their race or gender, the majority could not definitively attribute their treatment exclusively to their gender; rather, they felt the treatment was primarily because they were Black. Like Ferguson et al., qualitative study, to explore the experiences of Black women faculty members teaching in graduate education programs at a PWI, seeking to comprehend how they navigate their identities within the academic structure with the overarching question how to navigate their identities within organizational structures (2021).

Karen said: “I feel like I have experienced them ‘microaggressions’ It’s unclear about whether or not it was specifically because of my race, for sure. But I will say that there have been a few different changes that were made, or a few different encounters that I had, and it was always consistently someone who was not of the same race.”

Moreover, Maya asserts “At my previous institution, majority of those in leadership were women. And they were either Hispanic, black, or white. And I would experience microaggressions from both Hispanic women as well as white women. It was definitely race, not gender.”

Toni stated “I think black women in the workplace have been.. I don't want to say brutalized. But right like we're seen as it was, just like brutes, right? And we're not. We're brilliant, and we make the world go around. But I think the blackness is what always has come

first for me, so I don't know. I think they're too intertwined for me to separate them if that makes sense.”

By delving into these intertwined dimensions, there is a need for greater recognition and valuation of African American women's contributions and calls for a concerted effort to dismantle the institutional barriers and biases that perpetuate their marginalization.

Shattered Diamonds

Many African American women encounter what I would coin, The Shattered Diamond phenomenon. The "Shattered Diamonds Phenomenon" reflects African American women in academia as diamonds that, despite their inherent strength and brilliance, are subjected to systemic pressures that result in fractures within the societal structure. These fractures such as tokenism, stereotypes, and marginalization, much like how imperfections in a diamond can distort its brilliance and value. One may ask, “Why shattered instead of broken? Many challenges and experiences that cause hidden labor... as everyday manifestations, chip away at mental resilience, symbolized by the state of being "broken," where these burdens can disrupt emotional well-being and imply the potential for recovery. In contrast, "shattered" encapsulates the devastating effect of chronic, intersectional discrimination(s), microaggressions and psychological warfare, leading to severe mental health crises like depression and anxiety, and a fragmentation of self-identity and worth. This phenomenon elucidates the complex interplay between the inherent value and resilience of African American women and the societal biases that attempt to diminish their shine.

Tokenism as an Illusion

Increased challenges arise simply from existing and embodying the identity of an African American woman at a PWI, who is often utilized as a symbolic figure or token, particularly in

roles or situations designated based on racial identity. Harkening back to Chance's 2022 study, tokenism can happen in many ways and many different times which our study is consistent with. Tokenism, sometimes implicit, sometimes deliberate, can be very detrimental to one's well-being.

Maya observed that students were offered opportunities in a specific program primarily because of their African American heritage. "I was asked to work closely with that program of study because I was a black woman" When it came to opportunities to mentor, to, you know, to be around the students, to home in on focus groups. I was chosen because I was a black woman. However, once the term "black" was removed from that cohort of students. I was then removed from being a mentor.

The challenges African American women face at PWIs are compounded by their significantly low representation among staff and faculty, not only underscores issues of diversity and inclusion but leads to instances of tokenism as well. Thus, further burdening African American women in these academic environments.

Stereotypes Unveiled

The complex mixture of underrepresentation and tokenism sets the stage for the proliferation of stereotypes, further complicating the experiences of African American women at PWIs. Many of the participants in this study indicated there was a tendency for the PWI where they worked to exhibit an overall personality or culture that was uninviting and at times hostile to African American women employed there.

Toni began her tenure filled with optimism and a well-defined strategy for her new role, only to face unexpected challenges in the student affairs department. As the sole African American woman in her area, she quickly becomes aware of the biases shaping her colleagues'

perceptions. “I actually came into the role super excited. With a really clear plan of like what I was going to execute in the role.” Unfortunately, being labeled as intimidating, unapproachable and later as aggressive, Toni's experiences underline the racial and gender stereotypes impacting her professional interactions. The situation escalated following a last-minute request from faculty members for her to organize a program addressing the 2020 Racial reckoning following the murder of George Floyd, with less than two days' notice. She made the decision to decline, citing the need to process because of her own personal stake in the matter as a member of the community that's affected, which led to a misunderstanding with her supervisor. Toni thoughtfully navigated the request by involving her supervisor in her response, which unfortunately, resulted in her being reported to HR for alleged aggressiveness and a lack of willingness to collaborate. “I had a hard time.” Toni’s story highlights the complex dynamics of race, gender, and professional expectations within the workplace, especially during a period of heightened awareness of racial injustices.

Ignorance often paves the way for stereotyping, as a lack of knowledge and understanding about others fosters the reliance on oversimplified and prejudiced views that diminish the complexity of individual identities.

Danni, a current professor at a PWI, described her way to handle these experiences this way: When you are black and firmly rooted in who you are, once you assert yourself, they establish it as being difficult. so there'll be whispers and buzzes. Danni asserts “The reality is...I'm difficult because I'm black and I don't stand for your bullshit, and I don't let you walk over me, trample me, accept anything that you're giving, and grin and bear it. I will establish my position. It may be oppositional to yours. But it is my position, and

I'm making it known. Once you get that labeling... it is hard, almost impossible, to ameliorate that perception.”

According to Mayweather (2019), the challenges and stereotypes African American women face in academia, emphasizing their detrimental impact on professional growth, performance, and overall well-being. Ultimately, the entrenchment of stereotypes within these academic settings not only diminishes the sense of belonging among African American women but also undermines their contributions and potential, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and marginalization.

Unseen, Unheard, Unwanted

Amidst this backdrop of underrepresentation, tokenism, and stereotypes, African American women frequently navigate a pervasive sense of un-belonging, heightening their sense of isolation within PWIs.

Danni shared her experience of feeling marginalized for not conforming to the existing norms of her workplace, described metaphorically as a "well-oiled machine." She felt out of place and was implicitly blamed for any discord. Danni recounted an interaction with a black male provost at her campus. She highlighted the significance of her decision to use a lowercase 'b' for 'black,' regarding this individual. He criticized her for her non-conformity, likening her actions to swimming against the current, suggesting that she was the source of the problem rather than the environment itself. This provost went as far as to use the adage, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do," implying that Danni's refusal to assimilate was at fault.

Unfortunately, the prevailing sense of being undervalued, unseen, unheard, and unwanted experienced by African American women in PWIs not only highlights the urgent need for

systemic change but also calls for a reevaluation of inclusivity practices to foster a truly welcoming academic environment.

Hostile Maneuvers

The environment of exclusion and marginalization often escalates into a more overt sense of hostility, further challenging African American women's ability to thrive within PWIs.

Fatima recounted a period of transition in her workplace, starting with her supervisor's retirement and the interim period where one of the counselors, with whom she had philosophical differences akin to mixing oil and water, temporarily took charge. Upon the arrival of a new director, tensions escalated; Fatima felt targeted by her, unsure if the director's discontent was directed personally at her or stemmed from internal frustrations. Despite the adversarial approach from the director, Fatima refrained from reacting aggressively. A notable incident unfolded in front of students, where Fatima firmly refused to engage in a confrontational discussion with the director, emphasizing the inappropriateness of such a dispute in view of their students. This incident led them to seek resolution through the ombudsman, turning into a situation of Fatima's word against the Director's. Despite this, students and coworkers were willing to support Fatima, indicating a pattern of behavior from the director who would criticize Fatima's ideas during staff meetings as illogical or trivial in attempts to provoke her.” I would bring up an idea. and she would say- Well, why would you think about something like that? That's dumb” Fatima reflects “Any little thing to kind of get me wound up so she could point and say, Aha! You're angry! You're being angry, you're yelling”. Fatima maintained her professionalism throughout these challenges, never succumbing to anger or raising her voice, despite the director's provocations.

Many challenges and/or experiences delve into the nuanced realities of being perceived through a distorted lens of racial and gender stereotypes—often labeled as "angry," "insubordinate," or "aggressive" due to intersectional biases. Consistent with Apugo's 2019 research, these characterizations not only undermine African American women's professionalism but also place an undue burden on African American women to constantly navigate and mitigate these perceptions in their daily professional interactions leading to damaging labeling and potential professional aftermaths.

Joan said, "And so, when I had my initial challenges with my supervisors, the ones that were telling me... well, you just look mean because you don't smile enough and those types of things. I wasn't gonna play the game of shucking and jiving, but I would try to smile and and whatnot, but then, when they tried to relate to me by saying 'hey, girl', and all that... I was like... We're not doing that"

This theme illuminates the complex interplay between the often-unrecognized contributions made and the pervasive intersectional biases that further complicate their professional experiences at a PWI.

Theme 3: Navigating Identity and Appearance

The professional landscape of higher education is navigated not solely through achievements but is significantly influenced by the nuances of personal identity and appearance. For some African American women, this navigation involves the dual challenge of maintaining authenticity while conforming to the norms of PWIs. Additionally, most Black women do not fit the Barbie image, and may deal with a lifetime of negativity on account of their skin color, hair, nose, size, and so on (Niemann, Y. F et al, 2020). This critical examination delves into how hair, attire, and overall appearance intersect with their professional experiences, emphasizing that

expressions of cultural identity are deeply meaningful and impact African American women profoundly.

Crown Act

Digging deeper into the complexities of identity and appearance, the conversation naturally progresses to the specific topic of hair, a significant aspect of cultural expression that intersects profoundly with professional experiences for African American women. Andi shares her perspective on hair, emphasizing the non-correlation between African American women's hairstyles and their professional capabilities, thereby challenging prevailing biases.

Andi noted, "How we wear our hair doesn't have anything to do with our capability to do our work...If you're worried about black women's hairstyles, you're worried about the wrong thing". This underscores the need to separate personal appearance from professional capabilities.

The CROWN Act was created in 2019 by Dove and the CROWN Coalition, in partnership with then State Senator Holly J. Mitchell of California, to ensure protection against discrimination based on race-based hairstyles by extending statutory protection to hair texture and protective styles such as braids, locs, twists, and knots in the workplace and public schools (The CROWN Act, n.d.).

With the growing recognition of racial discrimination related to hairstyles in educational settings, examining how Black women perceive the influence of sporting natural hairstyles on their occupational advancement is crucial (Summer et al., 2020). The ability to wear natural hair styles contributes to the cultural competency of the institution. Furthermore, it could assist African American women in managing biases related to appearance and natural hair in the workplace.

Navigating Physicality and Professionalism

Building on the theme of appearance and its implications, the following narrative recounts an experience shared by Sabrina, detailing a troubling interaction with a male colleague regarding her body.

Sabrina reflected on a time when she was physically smaller, which she believed caused issues with some male colleagues who found her attractive. She recounted an incident involving a male colleague who failed to respond to a meeting set up, despite technology indicating he had not accepted, he showed up. He later admitted to deliberately not notifying her of his attendance. When he finally arrived, Sabrina was engaged in conversation elsewhere. Upon hearing her voice, he approached her, admitting he was about to leave thinking she wasn't present. Sabrina, surprised by his intentional lack of communication, retreated to her office alone requesting a moment, frustrated and inwardly screaming at the situation. The colleague's visit to her office was marked by his inappropriate focus, not on her face but on her chest.

Through the lens of phenomenological inquiry, this theme explores the lived experiences of African American women as they articulate their struggles, strategies, and the impacts of these dynamics on their sense of self. It uncovered some of the layered realities of appearance-based judgments and biases, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of professionalism that embraces diversity in all its manifestations.

Maya recounted “I can't help it that I look a certain way, you know, and I'm not going to try to hide who I am. As a person that's a part of me as well like, you know, we were arguing, you know, like our anatomy is different. I look at different ways. So it is what it is and not gonna hide it.

The tension between maintaining one's cultural and personal identity and adapting to professional standards shaped by white norms—which frequently overlook the depth of diverse identities—is palpable.

Navigating Dress and Identity

Moving beyond the discussion of hair and body, we now turn our focus to the role of dress and attire, examining how African American women's choices in fashion and professional wear further influence their navigation of identity and perception within the academic environment. However, highlighting the impact of cultural attire on perceptions within the workplace, Sabrina's experience provides a compelling insight into the challenges faced when expressing one's cultural identity through appearance.

Sabrina shared, "I discontinued wearing some of my more African-centered garb because it was scaring folks...a black male told me to discontinue doing that because the dominant culture was very afraid" (Sabrina). This highlights how cultural expressions through appearance can be misconstrued and negatively impact professional experiences.

Khadija: "Umm, I have received comments, but they've been positive. I am a person that I will call myself a fashionista. I like. I like fashion so I'm always complimented on dressing professionally.

Following Khadija's positive experiences with fashion in the workplace, Danni provides a contrasting viewpoint, emphasizing the fundamental principle that professionalism cannot be solely determined by outward appearance, challenging the emphasis on attire over substantive contributions.

Danni asserted, "My professionalism is not determined by my attire...If you focus on the exterior, you will lose out on a lot" (Danni).

This statement challenges superficial judgments based on appearance and emphasizes the value of substance over style.

Fear of the Black Body

Transitioning to a deeper exploration of racial perceptions, we now address the "Fear of the Black Body." This section seeks to unveil the complex dynamics of how the physical presence of African American women is navigated and perceived, shedding light on the entrenched fears and biases that profoundly affect their interactions in professional environments.

Sabrina shared an experience with a colleague at her former workplace who would visibly tremble in her presence. She expressed her concern by asking if they were alright. Sabrina learned from another African American woman, who had also interacted with the same colleague, that this nervous reaction had been ongoing for approximately 5 to 7 years. With a touch of humor, Sabrina noted that she might only have to endure this for another 2 to 3 years until the shaking ceased. The confirmation was somewhat reassuring, as it confirmed that the issue wasn't just a figment of her imagination—they did tremble in her presence, indicating it was her arrival that triggered this response. This realization was comforting to Sabrina. However, it also served as a lesson not to take such reactions personally, as they were reacting to their own preconceived notions. It became clear that she was reacting solely to Sabrina's skin color, not to who she was as an individual. She was unable to see beyond racial identity, never truly understanding her or my essence, influenced by her own biases linked to Sabrina's skin pigmentation.

Sabrina's experience with a colleague who trembled in her presence reveals the deep-seated fears and prejudices that can manifest in PWI settings. As we shift focus

from external expressions of identity, such as attire, to deeper aspects, we delve into the significant role of colorism. This exploration reveals how skin tone-based prejudices by people who are also African American introduce additional challenges to the experiences of many African American women in PWI environments.

Unveiling the Impact of Colorism

The intersection of appearance and colorism significantly influences individuals' experiences and perceptions, underscoring the impact of societal biases related to skin color on both personal and professional evaluations of beauty. Interestingly, the phenomenon of colorism often manifests within the African American community itself, pointing to the complexity of these biases among African Americans.

Synclaire: I did experience colorism. Unfortunately, my own people, they seemed to resent me first of all my color, and secondly that I was placed in a position of power. I thought I was opening doors, and they seemed to resent me being put in that position. In fact, because I was a corporate communications person, I even received it from the outside where some of the staff ... accused me of being an Uncle Tom. They didn't say it directly. They just sort of euphemistically indicated that I was an Uncle Tom.

According to Miriam Webster dictionary, an Uncle Tom is a Black person who is overly eager to win the approval of whites (as by obsequious behavior or uncritical acceptance of white values and goals).

Building upon the discussion of colorism's impact, Lynn offers a personal perspective that illuminates the nuanced ways in which these biases manifest, further complicating the dialogue around identity and acceptance of the color of one's within the African American community.

Lynn states she feels like she has witnessed colorism: “I think, like in the same as in the vein of like. “Oh, it's different because, you know, like, oh, you're mixed. You don't understand”, you know, like, regarding maybe my opinion on something.

By highlighting the voices of African American women, this theme seeks to contribute to the discourse on equity and inclusion, challenging institutions to reconsider what constitutes professional appearance and to foster environments where all individuals can thrive while being true to themselves.

Theme 4: Barriers to Support and Advancement

The promised institutional support during recruitment and the reality faced post-entry at a PWI underscore profound barriers to many African American women's professional growth and highlight systemic issues within higher education's approach to diversity. Building on the research by Johnson and Delmas (2022) our participant's challenges regarding perceptions of career advancement which enforces the research in Chapter 2.

Recruitment Realities

The recruitment strategies employed by many institutions often showcase a commitment to diversity and inclusion, yet the experiences of some African American women reveal a concerning pattern of "bait and switch," where initial promises of support and opportunity are not consistently fulfilled.

Sabrina acknowledges, “The previous institution that I was at was good at recruitment. There's brilliant people on that campus. There's brilliant black women that are on that campus, or at least there were and watching how all of those promises... I felt lied to. I'm sure some of them felt that too and it's really sad to see all of that brilliance in one place, but it's not being used properly and watching those women's lights... If they keep staying

they're just dim. You can see it. You can see it. They just, you know and then you feel like, "I gotta save my life. I gotta save myself because this institution is not gonna do right by me and if I don't leave, I'm gonna start internalizing this thing and think that there's something wrong with me when there's absolutely nothing wrong with me." And then some people...they feel that they stay too long and so then they can't leave, and that again makes me very sad. because I'm like you can.

The trajectory of African American women at PWIs is fraught with barriers that impede their support and advancement. Unfortunately, what Sabrina experienced and witnessed is not an uncommon practice.

Systemic Obstacles

Some African American women at PWIs face systemic and structural obstacles that create a unique set of challenges that impede their progress and success. Systemically, these obstacles are rooted in widespread, long-standing societal prejudices and discriminatory practices that influence perceptions, behaviors, and opportunities across multiple levels of academia. African American women often encounter skepticism regarding their intellectual capabilities, face higher scrutiny compared to their peers, and are underrepresented in leadership positions and tenured faculty roles.

Andi shares her experience on a Diversity Council, an institution-wide committee focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion, led by a white woman chair.

She observes how the chair often grouped the Black women members together, either addressing them collectively or calling on them sequentially during meetings, which were held on Zoom. Despite the chair's role in promoting diversity, Andi feels that the contributions of the Black women on the committee were not fully appreciated or valued.

This perception was shared among the Black women members, who would communicate their disbelief and frustration through texts during the meetings, questioning the chair's awareness of her own actions. Andi points out that while the chair's behavior wasn't overtly offensive, it was noticeable enough to question her genuine commitment to the principles of diversity and inclusion she was supposed to champion.

Structurally, the obstacles manifest in the policies, practices, and cultures of academic institutions that have historically been shaped by and for the dominant group, often excluding or marginalizing the contributions and experiences of African American women. This includes a lack of mentorship opportunities, and limited access to networks that are crucial for career development. Furthermore, as previously indicated, institutional climates can perpetuate feelings of isolation and tokenism, making it challenging for African American women to find supportive and inclusive academic communities.

Fatima asserted “I feel like sometimes especially at PWIs. They already have their eyes and ears on certain people or they stay in that position until they have to be basically pushed out or they die out...then they bring someone in that probably didn't have all the training, all the background, all the knowledge.”

These systemic and structural obstacles are not only barriers to individual achievement and well-being but also contribute to the broader underrepresentation of African American women in academia, limiting the diversity of perspectives and knowledge within the field.

Andi recounted a situation where, despite serving as the Assistant Director and fulfilling nearly all responsibilities of the Director's role, she was not appropriately compensated. During her personnel review period in March, she received the job description for the Director position, prompting confusion given her current role and the extent of her

responsibilities. In response, Andi conducted a self-reflection in alignment with the job description, concluding that she was either performing tasks without proper compensation or should reduce her workload accordingly. Upon discussing her contributions and seeking appropriate recognition with the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, Andi proposed assuming the Director's position with corresponding compensation. However, the Vice Chancellor suggested appointing her as Associate Director at a lower salary, framing it as an opportunity for future advancement.

Reflecting on the encounter two years later, Andi felt that her lack of assertiveness in pursuing the Director role and her belief at that time that her race and gender influenced the Vice Chancellor's decision left a lasting impact. She speculated that the Vice Chancellor leveraged her dedication to the job and willingness to work under any circumstances, a strategy she doubted would have been employed with someone not sharing her demographic characteristics. Andi concluded that, given her extensive fulfillment of the director's duties, she should have been promoted and compensated as such.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including institutional policy changes, increased support and resources for African American women in academia, and a concerted effort to dismantle the biases and structures that perpetuate inequality.

Marginalization and Limited Access

Through their narratives, we explore the dynamics of exclusion and the resilience required to pursue excellence in environments that often fail to acknowledge their contributions or address their unique needs.

Sabrina's narrative offers an insightful perspective on the nuanced challenges of racial and gender dynamics within the professional setting, particularly focusing on her experiences of exclusion and accountability in a leadership role. She expressed her belief that her exclusion from certain professional settings was racially motivated, although she acknowledged that others might see it differently. As the only female and person of color among the Dean's direct reports, she uniquely faced exclusion from the Director's meetings, a crucial forum for decision-making and information sharing. Despite being held accountable for the outcomes and decisions of these meetings, she was never invited to participate, with the justification given that she did not oversee any staff. This rationale led to confusion among her colleagues about her lack of awareness regarding ongoing discussions and decisions, a situation Sabrina attributed to her racial identity rather than her gender, despite her noticeable difference in appearance from her fellow directors.

Thus, the exclusion faced by many African American women in these settings not only underscores the critical need for institutional reforms but also highlights the importance of dismantling barriers to create a more equitable and inclusive environment.

Theme 5: Well-being and Professional Identity

At the intersection of hidden labor and systemic barriers lies a profound impact on the well-being and professional identity of African American women at PWIs. This theme focuses on the mental, emotional, and psychological repercussions of undervaluation and marginalization, exploring how continuous identity negotiation and the struggle for recognition erode personal well-being and complicate the professional journey of these women. Including physical health within the concept of well-being underscores the holistic effect of these challenges, recognizing that systemic strains extend beyond mental and emotional health to

impact the physical body as well. Reflecting on this topic earlier in Chapter 2, participants in this study and West's 2015 study, articulated both the physical and psychological dimensions of their experiences of being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized within the academic setting they were employed in on their respective campuses. Additionally, many of the phenomenological experiences reported in this study support findings that are consistent with the research conducted by Hall et al., (2011).

Mental Health Challenges and Interventions

Recognizing and addressing mental health is essential for African American women, highlighting the intersection of their resilience and the substantial psychological strain they face.

Maxine shared, "I quit my job, cause I was stressed out and I quit my job, not even having a plan. I just couldn't take it no more at all. I couldn't. I saw that I wasn't getting anywhere, and it made me sad I got totally depressed I was physically sick, getting sick every time I each time I had to go to work."

Protecting one's mental health demands a concerted effort to mitigate the effects of systemic injustices and microaggressions, ensuring that well-being is prioritized within the framework of equitable and supportive environments.

Emotional Toll and Recovery

Delving into the profound emotional impact and subsequent healing processes, illustrate how many African American women at PWIs navigate the complexities of emotional distress and find pathways to resilience and recovery.

Danni recalled, "I was pissed off, angry all the time it impacted my health. It really did. It impacted my health. One of the things that I wasn't surprised when I found that I had high blood pressure over a decade ago. That was not surprising to me. This shit makes your blood boil. I

was also not surprised when I became pre-diabetic. I was not surprised that you, carrying all this inside the body, have always released it. So it is taking its toll physically but thankfully. I'm in the process of moving myself out of this space and moving myself out of the state and all those good things that I'm focusing on. Yeah. But while you're in the middle of it. You don't see an out. If you don't see a light at the end of the tunnel.”

The journey through emotional toll and recovery underscores the critical importance of acknowledging and addressing the deep-seated emotional challenges faced by African American women in academia, while also highlighting their remarkable capacity for resilience and healing in the face of adversity.

Physical Manifestations of Stress

Exploring the tangible impact that prolonged stress and emotional strain have on the body, showcasing the direct link between the psychological pressures experienced by African American women in academia and their physical health outcomes.

Danni highlights the emotional and physical toll of suppressing one's natural expression, emphasizing that frustration manifests in various forms. She personally experiences a tangible, physical response to disrespect, describing how it can lead to a sensation of her stomach tying in knots, showcasing a direct link between emotional distress and physical symptoms.

Through a detailed exploration of their lived experiences, this study highlights the critical importance of recognizing and addressing the holistic needs of many African American women at PWIs underscoring the inextricable link between well-being and professional success.

Sabrina reflected, “I had to undo the work of blaming myself for calling myself negative names, because I believe now and it took me a while to learn that I wasn't wrong. They were just wrong. It was them. It's not me...”

Strategies for Resilience and Self-Care

Navigating a toxic work environment demands the development of effective coping strategies, enabling individuals to maintain their well-being and resilience in the face of challenging and detrimental conditions.

Sabrina stated, “I got into crystals. and I started using crystals to help negate some of that negative energy that I found useful. I found helpful, spiritual work, whether that is the Bible. Christianity, other forms of spirituality, just any and everything. You find all kind of coping mechanisms.”

Her coping mechanisms aligned with many of the study participants.

Karen inserts, “I just cope in a lot of different ways spiritually. Writing, dancing, Music, breathing, and meditation. I'm into all different types of forms of self-care and coping as and just using my support systems even outside of the institution. leaning into my family and friends. and just being open about different challenges and stuff that I deal with.”

For many African Americans in general, the power of prayer serves as a profound source of strength and solace, offering spiritual fortitude and a sense of community in facing life's challenges and systemic adversities.

Mya states, “I pray a lot. I pray before I walk into every room that I'm unfamiliar with. I pray in my office. I pray in my classroom while I'm teaching, I pray that God removes all barriers out of my way, and if it's not for me, remove it out of my path”.

Sometimes coping mechanisms prove insufficient to mitigate the pervasive stress of systemic challenges, the decision to leave one's job emerges as a drastic yet necessary measure to safeguard personal health and well-being.

Maxine confessed, "I didn't have any strategies. All I knew was to quit. I didn't have any coping mechanism, I went into the bathroom and started crying. You know I went in the bathroom; I overate, you know I never coped. I went through counseling, spiritual counseling, and cleansing. I even took advantage of the Wellness Center, hearings, and counseling...but yet still nothing changed. So all I did was quit because I couldn't. I couldn't deal with it.

This realization highlights the critical need for institutions to undergo systemic changes, emphasizing the creation of environments that actively support individuals' mental and emotional health.

Seeking Solace: The Role of Therapy

When considering therapy, we see it as a haven for healing, providing a way for individuals to address and surmount the systemic obstacles affecting their well-being and professional paths. Until recently, going to therapy was "taboo" in African American culture (Wallace, et. Al, 2023).

Synclaire states, "I don't mind saying that I went to therapy to cope with a lot of the nonsense that was going on because you know constant microaggressions can affect your self-esteem. And it's very tiring, too, because you're always fighting. You need relief, and therapy was a relief."

As we acknowledge the healing power of therapy, the narrative naturally extends to the value of mentorship, illuminating another crucial dimension of support that fosters growth, guidance, and resilience in navigating professional landscapes.

Theme 6: The Critical Role of Networks and Mentorship

The journey of African American women through the landscapes at PWIs is significantly influenced by the presence or absence of robust support networks and mentorship. This theme investigates the pivotal role these elements play in mitigating the challenges and barriers faced by these women. It illuminates the ways in which networks and mentorship serve as essential resources for navigating institutional complexities, offering guidance, advocacy, and a sense of community.

By exploring the transformative potential of these relationships, this theme underscores the necessity of intentional policies and practices that foster meaningful connections and support systems within higher education institutions.

Support on campus: Internal Networks

Within the academic environment, the presence of supportive figures and networks on campus plays a crucial role in the professional and personal development for African American women at PWIs. Joan shares a transformative experience, highlighting the impact of leadership that acknowledges and nurtures potential.

Joan stated, "I got a new boss that really changed the trajectory of my career. She believed in me, saw what I had to offer, and she was black, I might add. She really helped me to see myself in a new light, and I always was confident in myself, which helped to develop that even more".

Furthermore, Lynn emphasizes the significance of community and solidarity among African American women within these settings. Reflecting on her experiences, Lynn notes,

"Yes, so I have had the opportunity and privilege to be around other black women. I've been able to seek counsel and receive advice."

As a result, the importance of mentorship and support networks in facilitating professional growth and emotional support and the sheer ability to utilize the networks is a privilege for some who can obtain the support.

Expanding on the theme of mutual support, Sabrina articulates the nuanced dynamics of giving and receiving aid among peers. She observes,

"Fellow black women would try to help me. We tried to support each other as much as we could, just to listen and give advice. When I would recount something, they would try to show me a different angle. But it was also them, having time and space, they're dealing with a lot of BS as well. They need recovery time. We all need that, so I tried to be very cognizant of that and to not be a burden. I didn't want to be a burden, because I felt like the things that they were dealing with, that I knew about, was heavy" (Sabrina).

These narratives collectively underscore the multifaceted nature of support within academic institutions, from transformative leadership to the intricate web of peer support among African American women at PWIs. The testimonies reveal a shared understanding of the challenges faced by being a part of the support networks on campus, fostering a culture of empathy, resilience, and mutual aid that is essential for navigating the complexities of getting support and supporting those in need.

Off-Campus Support: External Networks

The significance of external support networks becomes particularly evident when PWI resources are lacking or absent. Karen provides insight into the challenges faced by African American women seeking support within academic environments and the necessity of looking beyond these confines for empowerment and aid. She remarks,

"There used to be support for African American women at my institution (Oyana), but it's no longer available at this time. Outside of my institution, I'm actively involved in support networks and organizations that cater to African American women."

Karen's observation underscores the importance of external communities and organizations in providing the much-needed support and resources for African American women. These networks serve as vital platforms for connection, advocacy, and empowerment, compensating for the gaps left by institutional support systems. Her active involvement in such groups highlights the proactive steps taken by individuals to find solidarity and assistance in spaces specifically designed to address their unique needs and challenges.

Moreover, Karen, Khadija, Fatima, Andi and Danni are all proud members of Delta Sigma Theta Incorporated. Delta Sigma Theta is an organization of the Divine nine Black Greek-letter sororities and fraternities. Danni states:

"Now I'm around professional women, we have this common goal in mind, and we're working toward the same thing. And so, it gave me a sense of purpose and something to do and people to connect with outside of work."

Theme 7: Pathways to Equity and Inclusion

In the dynamic landscape at a PWI, the pursuit of equity, inclusion, and empowerment stands as a cornerstone for transformative change, especially for African American women.

Through a nuanced exploration of recommendations from the research participants, it lays out suggestions for institutions committed to making substantive progress toward true inclusivity and equity.

Andi emphasizes, “Honestly, the biggest recommendation is to compensate Black women for what they do.” Those in the decision-making positions, you see what black women do, that goes above and beyond, compensate them for that, find a way to do it. My favorite phrase is, ‘People find ways to do exactly what they want to do’. And in education, the favorite thing to say is, there's no money, yet here you go with the promotion... Here you go with the promotion... Here you go. You just happened to find money for some program that's your little pet project but you tell me there's no money to compensate me. I don't believe it because you could find it if you wanted to. So pay Black women. Y'all see the work that they're doing, that we're doing. You see us doing it at a level that is usually leagues higher than everybody else around~Pay us”.

This call for equitable compensation highlights the need for institutions to acknowledge and reward the extra efforts of Black women.

Fatima advocates for broader and more inclusive communication: Talk to us. Don't just send one person. It's almost like one Black person represents all the blacks. No... talk to everybody, because once again there are generational things. Open up the conversation to everybody. We might not all agree, but it would be good to just get everybody in the room, so we could see each other first of all, and then, you know. Start the dialogue and the conversation and find a happy medium”.

Her statement underscores the importance of dialogue and inclusivity in fostering advancement opportunities for African American women. Maya reflects on the importance of representation and ongoing struggle,

“I would say that. I'm thankful to have the opportunity to be in a setting where I can contribute to the wealth of black people. I would much rather have a seat at a table than no seat at all. Even if the table is not made for me, because if not, it's gonna be someone else making decisions on behalf of us. That's how I see it. I would say, for those that are coming after us. The fight will continue. It can be 20 years from now. We're still gonna be fighting. That's just the honest truth”.

Her perspective highlights the long-term nature of the pursuit of equity and the critical role of having a seat at the table. By centering the voices and experiences of African American women at PWIs inviting institutional leaders, policymakers, and stakeholders to engage in a concerted effort to reshape the academic landscape into one where diversity, equity, and empowerment are not just ideals, but lived realities. Achieving equity and inclusion within higher education requires deliberate and sustained effort. This theme explores the strategic pathways through which institutions can cultivate environments that are truly inclusive and equitable for African American women. Drawing on the insights and recommendations of research participants, it outlines actionable steps for leadership and institutional policy-making to address systemic inequalities, microaggressions, and discrimination.

Human Resources

Within the realm of academia, the Human Resources (HR) department initially acts as a crucial link between new hires and the university, facilitating the onboarding process and introducing them to institutional practices. This foundational role positions HR as a go-to

resource for employees seeking resolution to workplace challenges. However, it has become increasingly clear that HR's obligations might lean more towards protecting the institution's interests rather than advocating for the employee's well-being. This dichotomy highlights the urgent need for HR departments to be held accountable and for the development of mechanisms that genuinely bolster employee support and empowerment.

Joan articulates the need for policy reform, emphasizing that, “I think, HR and other entities have to make sure that there is wording and policies where supervisors have to give their staff time to be able to get involved in those things (Professional Development) because it doesn't make any sense to say what we offer this. But then, when you say you know, they say you have to use your lunch break. If you're gonna go to this meeting now, they have to choose. If they're gonna eat, or if they're gonna be involved, you know. I think that you have to create opportunities, but also don't make people feel guilty when they wanna take advantage of it”.

By focusing on the creation of supportive policies, practices, and interventions, this theme advocates for a comprehensive approach to fostering professional well-being, advancement, and a sense of belonging among African American women in academic settings.

Transitioning from Joan's insights on policy, Maya addresses the importance of understanding and inclusion, stating,

Maya said, “do not assume you know what a black woman is going through just because, you ‘see’ it. You have no idea what she's going through emotionally. You have no idea what she's going through physically, and you have no idea what she went through to get where she is.” She adds “And if we find some type of way to make black people feel as though they belong in every sense of the way. I think we'll be better as institutions

because we won't feel like we're faced... We're pushed against the wall all the time.

That's the problem, like we're so tired of trying to fight our way through doors and opportunities that once we get there you had to fight to get there, and then when you get there, you still have to fight...and fight to prove that you're worthy”.

Maya's reflections emphasize the need for empathy and a more inclusive institutional culture that acknowledges and addresses the unique challenges faced by African American women.

Further building on the conversation, Khadija highlights the importance of community and retention,

“I feel that the main thing that universities can do is they can try to recruit more people. You can't just have one and say, well, we've met our quota, we have our one like, make sure that there's a community for that faculty because you want to keep and retain them. The important word is retained. You want to make sure that they stay. They're not going to stay in a place... they meaning, the African American woman, they're not going to want to stay if they don't feel that they're supported and they're not understood and how you do that is create spaces and environments in which they feel that way, which also include adding people to the conversation that look like them. That's what must be done”.

Sabrina echoes the sentiment for meaningful engagement,

“We wanna have enriching experiences we want...we want to contribute. We want our contributions to be meaningful. And when they're not treated that way, just. you know. Just you're just like, Wow! I wanted something different this time”.

Concluding with a note of gratitude and rarity, Khadija shares her positive experience,

I'm probably the minority like and I'm grateful. I thank God every day for him, allowing me to be at my university because they are very supportive. This is rare. They showed me the path like, hey, we want you tenure track and that's rare. Sometimes that's hard to get a full remote tenure track position is very hard. So when people know that I have that they're like, wait a minute, what they're like, do you know how hard it is? It's like a needle in a haystack”.

By weaving together these diverse perspectives, the discourse around HR's role in fostering equity and inclusion is enriched, calling for a concerted effort from institutional leaders, policymakers, and stakeholders to ensure that diversity, equity, and empowerment transcend rhetoric to become lived realities within academic settings.

Transition out of the Sunken Place

Deciding to leave a toxic work environment stands as a crucial moment that demands both courage and self-awareness. This step is fundamental in prioritizing one's mental health and professional well-being. Toni encapsulates this sentiment, sharing her realization:

“Don't get comfortable. Basically, there's no room for growth here. There's no opportunity for change... and so that really stifled me. And I mean it contributed to my burnout for sure.”

The internal debate to stay or leave is a prevalent concern among African American women at PWIs. Regine reflects on her experience with regret, stating,

"I wish the circumstances had improved. If so, I would have stayed longer to achieve a better outcome. However, there's another part of me that wishes I had recognized things

as they were, rather than as I hoped or imagined they could be. I wish I had decided to leave sooner. Yet, that's not the choice I made.”

This highlights the complex interplay of hope and reality in making such a critical life decision.

Maxine vividly describes the breaking point that led her to resign without a subsequent plan: “I quit my job, cause I was stressed out and I quit my job, not even having a plan. I just couldn't take it no more at all. I couldn't. I saw that I wasn't getting anywhere, and it made me sad I got totally depressed I was physically sick, getting sick every time I each time I had to go to work” (Maxine).

Danni shares an experience that symbolizes the cumulative frustrations with systemic challenges and individual interactions that can exacerbate the decision to leave:

Danni, a professor, discussed a complaint from a white student about a condensed class session that lasted over 2 and a half hours. Danni offered the students a choice at the beginning of the class: to go straight through the session with the option for students to take breaks at will and end the class 10-15 minutes early, or to have an official break and stay for the full scheduled time. The consensus from the students was to end early while managing their breaks. A specific student complained about this arrangement. Danni emphasized that students were not forced to remain seated and could take restroom breaks freely, indicating there were "no locks and chains" restricting them. When Danni responded to the student's complaint, which the student perceived as arrogant, Danni acknowledged the student but refused to engage further. In the interview, Danni expressed disgust and frustration over years of having to adapt to the complaints of white students who undermined her knowledge and experience as their professor. The situation escalated to the point where Danni contacted the Vice President of Academic Affairs, who did not take any action. She began to receive backlash from leadership. Danni

stated,” It could have been anything as simple as my door should be left open, and I remember one time I said, let me just go see if my other colleagues said their doors open, none of them, while they were in their office, had the door open. Why do I have to keep my door open? It was ridiculous. And so, when this happened, this is well, after 10 years, like I said, the Straw broke the camel's back.

Additionally, Maxine confronts a demeaning encounter with a VP, relating it to past trauma:

While following up with a VP regarding a job that she wrote the job description for, “Well, he told me how dare I even question him. You should know your position and you don't come in... I felt like this man...cause I was sexually assaulted, and I felt that energy again, that dominance...I felt like he was, you know, bullying me like he's gonna take me and he's gonna you know you... I mean he just, like he had his hand on my neck and pushed me down and put his foot like I was a little puppy dog to him, and he's gonna do whatever he wants to do. And nobody could say anything, and I felt that.” (Maxine). This confrontation underscores the deep-seated issues of power dynamics and disrespect that can influence the decision to leave.

Fatima believes that with more mentorship and guidance, her path might have been different:

“I think if I were to have had more mentorship, a little bit more guidance, I wouldn't have stayed as long as I've stayed...”.

This sentiment reflects the critical role of support in navigating professional environments.

Toni discovers solace in understanding her experiences as part of a broader phenomenon known as emotional battle fatigue:

“I learned a lot about emotional battle fatigue which...brought me some solace, right like, oh, I'm not alone...And that kind of put me on a path of like, I need to separate myself from work. My life... I'm not here to work”.

This realization about work-life balance was pivotal in her journey toward self-care and well-being.

These narratives collectively illuminate the complex considerations and emotional processes involved in deciding to leave a toxic work environment, emphasizing the importance of mentorship, support, and self-care in the face of systemic adversities.

Summary

This chapter introduced the 13 participants of this research with their pseudonyms: Maxine, Regine, Synclaire, Khadijah, Lynn, Maya, Joan, Toni, Andi, Sabrina, Danni, Fatima, and Karen. Descriptors including years in the field, current title or previous title, current or previous department, age ranges were provided in aggregate to protect the confidentiality of the participants. The findings of the research were based on how the participants in this study described their experiences at their PWIs. In many instances, the participants' own words were used verbatim to present a more accurate representation of the stories they told during the interviews. In addition, the research question of this study was connected to areas related to intercultural competence including daily life, support and resources, challenges and survival strategies for the change process of intercultural competence, and off-campus community.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study endeavors to unmask the challenges faced by African American women at PWIs, unveiling the phenomenological realities that shape their experiences and emphasizing the critical importance of their well-being. Employing qualitative semi-structured interviews, this research engaged 13 participants who self-identify as African American women who are working or previously worked (within the last 10 years) at a PWI. These participants were asked a series of questions (see Appendix F) centered around the research question: How are African American women's professional experiences and well-being in higher education impacted by the hidden labor they perform? This chapter discusses the findings of the study, the boundaries (limitations), implications and recommendations on this critical topic. In doing so, we endeavor to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges and the hidden labor encountered by African American women at PWIs. This examination not only underscores the significance of our findings but also highlights the imperative for continued research in this critical area by further contributing to the discourse on diversity, equity, and inclusion within PWI settings.

Discussion

This study has journeyed through the complex challenges and lived experiences of African American women at PWIs, uncovering numerous intersecting realities. The research is predicated on the theoretical frameworks of Intersectionality Theory and CRT (Bowleg, 2012; Crenshaw, 1989). The integration of Intersectionality and CRT in this dissertation provides a robust theoretical foundation for exploring the challenges faced by African American women at PWIs. By employing these frameworks, the study illuminates the intersecting forms of

discrimination and marginalization experienced by these women, advocating for a more inclusive and equitable academic environment (Chance, 2022).

Revelations

The study's results are best understood by comparing them to related research that has sought to understand the experiences and challenges faced by African American women in the PWI climate. Through this lens, the research underscores the importance of acknowledging and addressing the complexities of identity and systemic oppression, offering critical insights into fostering environments that support the well-being and success of African American women in higher education. Consistent with previous research by Zambrana et al. (2017), many participants in the present study reported experiencing microaggressions and discrimination, underscoring the persistence of systemic barriers in academia. It is also noted that many of the participants were unable to acknowledge their experiences as being detrimental until they were in their role for at least three years; some acknowledged them after their probationary period of employment ended. This study also broadens the conversation by shedding light on how race and gender identities intricately combine to influence experiences of unseen work across various staff roles, an aspect not deeply examined in Chance's 2022 research which focuses predominantly on leadership dynamics.

During the interviews, clear differences emerged between faculty and staff roles, with staff showing a stronger tendency towards commitment or loyalty to the universities where they are or were employed. In contrast, the participants who were faculty members recognized their worth and independence but appeared to struggle within isolated academic “silos”, as though a systemic divide of “us versus them” separated different groups. Due to a strong sense of commitment to their positions, their programs, and their students, many participants chose to stay

in their roles and navigate the challenges they experienced. Those who decided to leave realized they had undertaken considerable hidden labor and faced numerous challenges that affected their well-being before their departure.

Intersectionality played an immense role in the identity formation of many of the participants as well, in determining the challenges that they were experiencing. Many could not discern if they were experiencing these challenges because of their race, gender, or a combination of both. Moreover, while interviewing the participants, the consensus was that there was a problem on their campuses regarding the invisibility of African American women equating to lack of representation especially with faculty affirming that at their university, they were the “only” one in their discipline or the only one at the University as referenced in the Henry and Glenn (2009) research. Utilizing the lumping of women into a “People of Color” category disallows the ability to actually see the true representation of African American women at PWIs that braggingly claim the honor of being “The Most Diverse.” However, the number of African American women on campus falls below 6% on many of these campuses and faculty below 2% (Patitu and Hinton, 2003). According to Tevis et. al (2020), “grouping Women of Color’s experience in administration, rather than having a disaggregated understanding discounts how racial treatment differentially manifests for different racial/ethnic groups; furthermore, grouping universalizes experiences and enables institutional communities to over-generalize about their leadership” (p.282). In layman's terms, the oversimplification of the actual number of African American women on PWI campuses, allows institutional communities to make broad, inaccurate generalizations.

Additionally, in each interview, participants expressed gratitude for their employment at PWIs, along with aspirations to advance their careers in higher education and serve as role

models for African American students on campus. However, they also conveyed that the challenges they encountered significantly impacted their well-being. Unsurprisingly, only one participant mentioned therapy as a coping strategy, while many others relied on prayer, breathing exercises, and various holistic methods to manage their challenges.

The findings underscore the necessity for institutions to move beyond superficial diversity initiatives and engage in substantive systemic changes that address the root causes of inequality and exclusion. Centralizing the lived experiences of these women provides critical insights that have the power to inform and reshape institutional policies, contributing to the broader discourse of social justice. Additionally, the implementation of mentorship programs that value the rich intergenerational knowledge within this group is critical. Such initiatives affirm African American women's identities and pivotal roles, thereby enhancing the educational ecosystem.

Leadership's lack of accountability creates invisible barriers for many of the African American women who participated in this study. The study by Zambrana et al. (2017) identifies invisible barriers created by subtle and indirect actions and omissions. These barriers hinder personal and professional development, as demonstrated through the challenges faced by the participants in their research. Examples include being questioned about one's intellectual capabilities, being overloaded with committee work, being excluded from the information loop, and being deprived of mentorship opportunities. The issue with these actions being "swept under the rug" is that victims, such as Sabrina, who was a director, being excluded from Directors' meetings, can clearly see that the allowance of the malevolence she faced was detrimental to her ability to perform, and others could see that as well. The allowance of these (and additional) actions raises the question: To whom can this toxicity be reported? Navigating a toxic work

environment without the ability to seek assistance, due to the fear of retaliation, presents an uncertain dilemma for those affected, undermining their psychological well-being and professional growth. This study's findings aim to provide a voice for African American women who have experienced these challenges to encourage the development of policies and interventions that address the needs of African American women and other marginalized groups, promoting a truly inclusive campus culture. Aligning closely with Mena's ethnographical 2016 research (2016), detailing the study participants' experiences and highlighting the complex interplay of race, gender, and other identities in shaping their academic and professional lives unveils how they navigate their identities within organizational structures and the importance of intersectionality in advancing diversity and inclusion in academia. Furthermore, this research study hopes to enrich the cultural competency of all involved, encouraging them to recognize and address the intersections of race, gender, and systemic inequality.

By contributing to the scholarly understanding of diversity and inclusion efforts within the higher education setting, this study illuminates the specific challenges faced by African American women, paving the way for future research aimed at reducing disparities and creating more inclusive academic environments. Moreover, this work empowers African American women who participated in this study and read this study by validating their experiences, spotlighting systemic barriers, and advocating for change—acting as a catalyst for activism and efforts toward equity at PWIs. This research enhances the broader discourse on social justice, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging and addressing intersectional oppression in every facet of life. Furthermore, it lays the groundwork for future studies to explore the intricate dynamics of intersectionality and systemic racism within academic contexts and beyond.

Boundaries (Limitations)

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of African American women in PWIs, it is not without boundaries that highlight areas for future research. Firstly, the sample size, though sufficient for qualitative depth, limits the generalizability of the findings across all higher education contexts. The scope of this research was confined to a specific set of individuals at a particular type of institution, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences across different geographic and institutional contexts. Because this research focuses on PWIs, future studies could benefit from larger and more diverse samples that include African American women from a broader range of institutions. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data, while central to exploring personal experiences, may introduce bias and limit the exploration of external perceptions and institutional data on the experiences of African American women in academia. Moreover, this study primarily focuses on the challenges faced by African American women, with less emphasis on the strategies and support systems that facilitate their success and well-being in PWIs. Participants' responses may reflect a tendency to conform to socially desirable or acceptable norms, potentially veering away from their authentic thoughts, feelings, and experiences, especially on sensitive subjects like race, gender, and identity. This tendency poses challenges to the validity and reliability of the collected data (Zambrana, 2017, p. 213). It is important to note that the conclusions of this study are based solely on the data gathered from interviews with the research participants, without being influenced by my personal interpretations or experiences.

Despite these limitations, qualitative research on the challenges faced by African American women at PWIs can provide valuable insights into their lived experiences, perceptions, and needs. By acknowledging and addressing these limitations, researchers can enhance the

rigor, validity, and relevance of their findings, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education.

Having Our Say (Comments)

PWIs must engage in systemic reforms that tackle the specific challenges African American women encounter, embedding their well-being and success into the core institutional objectives. By highlighting the hidden labor, emotional toll, and the need for well-being for African American women, this study calls for a reevaluation of institutional policies and practices to ensure equity, support, and recognition of their contributions. The creation of safe spaces for African American women to openly discuss their experiences is crucial in addressing the isolation and marginalization they may face (Tevis et al 2020, Apugo 2019, Thomas 2019, Zambrana et al., 2017). However, these spaces must not inadvertently contribute to further detriment. For instance, requiring attendance during personal time, such as lunch hours, could place additional burdens on these women, potentially exacerbating the very issues these spaces aim to mitigate. Instead, institutions should strive to integrate these forums within the regular academic or professional schedule, ensuring they enhance rather than detract from the well-being of African American women. This approach respects their time and contributions, acknowledging the importance of their voices without imposing additional strains.

Recommendations for Future Research

Considering the qualitative data presented regarding the experiences of African American women at PWIs, several pathways for future inquiry have become evident. Foremost among them is the need to explore the longitudinal effects of discrimination, microaggressions and systemic biases on the mental health of African American women who work or have worked at a PWI. Further research should consider the impact of institutional support systems and the

efficacy of diversity and inclusion policies within PWIs. Additionally, there is a significant opportunity to examine the role of allyship and how non-minority faculty and staff can effectively contribute to an inclusive academic environment for African American women. Future studies could also delve into the potential benefits of mentorship programs at university campuses specifically tailored to the needs of African American women, particularly in the realm of leadership development. Additionally, subsequent research should delve into resilience factors, effective mentorship models, and institutional policies that positively impact African American women's experiences in academia.

It is recommended that subsequent research adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative measures to substantiate the qualitative findings of this study. In doing so, a more comprehensive understanding of the institutional dynamics at play and their implications for African American women in academia can be achieved. This future research will not only contribute to scholarly discourse but also guide actionable change toward equity and inclusion in higher education. Exploring these areas can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how to foster environments that not only mitigate challenges but actively contribute to the thriving of African American women in PWI settings.

Conclusion

In conclusion of this study into the experiences of African American women in PWIs, it is very evident that the journey to equity and inclusion within the academic sphere is both complex and ongoing. This research has shed light on the multitude of barriers these women face—barriers that are not just structural, but also deeply ingrained in the very fabric of institutional cultures. This research unveils some of the systemic issues prevalent throughout higher education, which can be aligned with the consumer-driven industry. It highlights that

many African American women in academia face similar challenges to those in corporate America, such as reduced compensation and lower hierarchical positions.

Furthermore, this framework not only maintains but exacerbates the challenges faced by African American women on PWI campuses. These issues range from their actions being closely scrutinized, to the expectation of constant accessibility, symbolized by the metaphor of keeping office doors open. The dynamics of consumerism in higher education also force faculty, particularly African American women such as Danni, to acquiesce to student demands, reflecting a broader service-oriented trend across industries.

Moreover, the study's reliance on qualitative data, while rich and in-depth, limited the ability to generalize these findings to all African American women in higher education. It is through acknowledging these limitations that we can pave the way for more nuanced and inclusive research in the future, continuing the essential work of dismantling barriers and fostering environments where African American women can thrive academically and professionally. Although the findings offer significant insights, the scope of the research context appears to be virtually limitless.

CHAPTER 6: BONUS CHAPTER

As I sit down to reflect on my journey within the realm of higher education, I am compelled to confront the myriad of challenges that have shaped my experience as a black woman researcher. This dissertation serves not only as an academic endeavor but also as a testament to the complexity of identity, power dynamics, and institutional indifference that have defined my professional trajectory. One cannot discuss the landscape of academia without acknowledging the pervasive presence of microaggressions, those subtle yet insidious acts that serve to undermine one's sense of belonging, with the attempt to enforce imposter syndrome on my being, which I did not claim. I knew I belonged.

As a black woman, I encountered these microaggressions at every turn, from being mistaken for another African American female staff member to having many of my contributions diminished in academic settings. These constant reminders of my perceived otherness and psychological warfare undoubtedly began to take a toll on my mental health, and I needed to concentrate on the unapologetic magical person I was before...not who I became. I refused to break.

Compounding these challenges was the institutional response, or rather lack thereof, to my pleas for support and pleas of support for others. Despite my attempts, to reach out to the institution for assistance in navigating the hostile terrain of academia, my concerns were summarily dismissed and swept under the rug. This betrayal of trust culminated with gaslighting from “non-black” people of color in what can only be described as a “quiet firing,” relegating me to a lateral role with diminished visibility and no opportunities for advancement. As I stated earlier, the toll on my mental health cannot be overstated. I had to “Save Thyself” from the

constant barrage of microaggressions, coupled with the institutional betrayal which left me feeling isolated and demoralized. It became increasingly difficult to muster the energy to continue fighting against a system that seemed designed to marginalize and exclude individuals like me. I am a Diamond.

The academic community is now mourning the untimely passing of Antoinette (Bonnie) Candia-Bailey, the former Vice President of Student Affairs at Lincoln University in Missouri, who tragically took her own life at the age of 49. After numerous attempts for support from her institution, she alleged bullying and racism by the school's president. Candia-Bailey detailed the problems she was having with Moseley, including saying that he harassed her and alluded to her being "an angry Black woman," which she described as a "stereotype that has demoralized Black women for decades." These allegations inflicted considerable mental anguish upon her. Dr. Bailey documented that she felt "unsupported, disregarded, and abused after countless attempts to speak out. Dr. Bailey also reportedly discussed in a letter before her passing, the "stigmatized bullying she faced from the President and other leadership officials," after disclosing her mental illness to the university.

Ironically, years before she served as Lincoln University's vice president of student affairs, Candia-Bailey wrote her dissertation on the hardships Black women face while climbing the professional ladder in academia. Her research and reflections in the thesis were eerily similar to the circumstances Candia-Bailey said she experienced in the months leading up to her death on Jan. 8. She stated that higher education institutions must do more to address the myriad of problems Black women endure in academia, including "being treated like the help; outsiders; keeping them away from the table; having a voice and discounting their experiences, skillset, and value to higher education because of their race, age, and gender."

When I read about Dr. Bailey- I am in constant thought --- that could have been me.

Furthermore, being a witness to the exodus of droves of talented black women from the PWI I was employed by only served to underscore the systemic issues at play. These were not individuals who lacked competence or dedication; rather, they were victims of a system that failed to recognize and support their talents. The pervasive presence of colorism (yes colorism), ageism, racism, and classism only served to exacerbate these disparities, further alienating those who dared to challenge the status quo. In navigating the labyrinth of academia, I have also been confronted with the sobering realization that not all black women are allies in the struggle for equity and inclusion. Despite my earnest efforts to support and uplift my fellow sisters, I encountered instances where jealousy and competition reared their ugly heads. It was disheartening to realize that, in some cases, my success was perceived as a threat rather than a cause for celebration. I am somebody.

This realization forced me to confront the uncomfortable truth that internalized oppression can manifest in unexpected ways, leading some black women to internalize the same toxic beliefs and behaviors perpetuated by the systems of oppression that seek to keep us marginalized. Rather than banding together in solidarity, some choose to tear each other down in a misguided attempt to secure their precarious foothold within the institution. I see you, Sis.

However, even in the face of such adversity, I remain steadfast in my commitment to support and advocate for other black women. I refuse to allow the actions of a few to tarnish my belief in the collective strength and resilience of our community. It is through unity and solidarity that we can begin to dismantle the systems of oppression that seek to divide and conquer us. I am here for you.

In reflecting on my experiences, I am reminded of the importance of building networks of support and mentorship within our community. By lifting each other up and amplifying each other's voices, we can create a more inclusive and equitable academic environment for future generations of black women at PWIs. Oyana.

Unfortunately, in the end, I was forced to confront a difficult truth: I could no longer sacrifice my well-being for the sake of a career that refused to acknowledge my humanity. Despite my love for the work and the relationships I had forged, I ultimately had to prioritize my own mental and emotional health. Walking away was not easy, but it was necessary for my own survival. Though the road ahead may be fraught with challenges, I am confident that I will overcome them and forge a path towards a brighter and more just future. I love me too much.

As I embark on this journey of self-reflection and academic inquiry and reflecting on the documented experiences I faced, I hope to shed light on the systemic injustices that continue to plague higher education in its entirety and inspire others to continue the fight for equity and inclusion. My mask is gone...my veil has been lifted. I can see clearly now.

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Appendix A: Email Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

Dear [Participant's Name],

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Alicia Perry, and I am a doctoral student at the University of the Pacific. I am currently conducting a research study titled "Unmasking challenges of African American women at PWIs by unveiling phenomenological realities and prioritizing well-being. I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of African American women's experiences, challenges, and perspectives in higher education, specifically at predominantly white institutions by unmasking the challenges of African American women who worked or have worked at a PWI unveiling phenomenological realities in experiences and the importance of well-being. to delve into unmasking the challenges of African American women at PWI- unveiling phenomenological realities in experiences and the importance of well-being. Your valuable insights and unique experiences can contribute significantly to this research and help shed light on essential aspects of this topic.

Your participation in this study will involve an in-depth interview, which will be conducted via a virtual platform for your convenience. The semi-structured interview will allow for open-ended discussions about your experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and aspirations within the academic setting.

Please note that participating in this study is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time without any repercussions. Additionally, all information shared during the interview will be kept strictly confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity in the research findings.

Your contribution to this study will provide valuable insights that can enhance our understanding of the experiences of African American women in higher education at a PWI, ultimately contributing to the development of better support systems within the academic environment.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions regarding the study, please contact me at a_perry1@u.pacific.edu. I have attached an infographic providing further study details.

Thank you for considering this invitation. Your involvement will be highly appreciated, and I look forward to the possibility of working with you.

Sincerely,

Alicia Perry

Appendix B: Infographic



UNMASKING CHALLENGES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS (PWIS)

UNVEILING PHENOMENOLOGICAL REALITIES AND PRIORITIZING WELL-BEING

This research aims to recognize the specific challenges encountered by African American women employed in PWIs, shedding light on their distinctive lived experiences and underscoring the significance of well-being

WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

Do you self identify as Black or African American

Do you identify as female?

Have you Worked or or you working a Predominately white institution (PWI) within the last 10 years

WHAT WILL YOU DO?

Sign a Consent Form

Participants will be asked to participate in a short survey, then follow up with a 30-60 minute Zoom recorded interview (at a time that is convenient for you). Interviews will be kept confidential and information provided is for research purposes only

Interested?

Please follow QR code to screening survey



For more information, contact:

Alicia C. Perry

a_perry1@u.pacific.edu for more information.

University of the Pacific
Bernerd College
Department of Counseling and School Psychology
IRB: 2023-240

Appendix C: Demographic questionnaire

1. Last Name _____
2. First Name _____
3. Email _____

4. Are you Black/African American?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Rather Not Say

5. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Non-Binary
☐ Other: _____

6. What is your age range?

- ☐ 20-30 years
☐ 31-40 years
☐ 41- 50 years
☐ 51-65 years
☐ 65 years or more

7. How many years have you currently worked or previously worked at a PWI?

- ☐ 3 years or less
☐ 4-5 years
☐ 6-7 years
☐ 8-9 years
☐ 10-15 years
☐ 16 years or more

8. What is your current/previous position at the institution? _____

9. What department/program was your previous role in? _____

Appendix D: Informed Consent

Informed Consent

RESEARCH TITLE: UNMASKING CHALLENGES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AT
PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS (PWIs)
UNVEILING PHENOMENOLOGICAL REALITIES AND PRIORITIZING WELL-BEING

LEAD RESEARCHER: Alicia C Perry

FACULTY ADVISORS: Dr. Amy Scott Brown, Dr. Marcia Hernandez, and Dr. Eunie Jung

RESEARCH DESCRIPTION: You are invited to voluntarily participate in this study which seeks to understand the challenges that African American women face at PWIs. This study aims to capture the essence of your lived experiences to deepen understanding of the critical issues African American women experience while working at PWIs. If you agree to participate in this individual research study, you will be asked to answer a series of questions regarding your thoughts, perspectives, and lived experiences. During your interview, we will discuss your perspective of your experiences. The interview should last for no more than (1) hour using Zoom video conference software with a link and password that will be generated and emailed to you. Your collected data will be password protected and stored on the cloud in a secure and confidential manner. The interviews will be by video (cameras off-pseudonym name) and transcribed by Zoom, with notes taken by me, the researcher. In order to ensure accuracy, you will have the right to request and review your transcribed interview once it is complete. Before the initiation of the interview, the researcher will explain what Zoom's encryption policy means to inform the participants that although other people will not be able to access the audio or video content created from an encrypted meeting (including any recordings using Zoom), it is important to understand that because we will be recording via Zoom, technically, Zoom, Inc. can have access to the audio and video recordings."

COMPENSATION: none

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS: By reading this form and deciding to participate in this research project, you acknowledge that your participation is completely voluntary, and there will be no penalties or losses that may result from your decision not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to refuse to answer any question. There is a possibility that the results of this research study may be published in scientific or professional journals. It is possible that we may decide that your participation in this research is not appropriate. If that happens, you will be dismissed from the study. In any event, we appreciate your willingness to participate in this research.

CONFIDENTIALITY: I as the researcher will take reasonable measured steps to keep all your identifying information obtained in this research study confidential. Upon selection, you will pick a pseudonym which is used during, after, and in the report of results of the research study. All data and recordings related to your participation will be stored in a password protected cloud

University of the Pacific
IRB2023-240
Approved on 2-5-2024

database. Any files related to your data will be made anonymous and the consent form stored in a separate electronic file that is unrelated to the research data. The number of persons with access to the records will be limited to only myself, the primary researcher, and my dissertation faculty advisor: Dr Amy Scott Brown. Data will be shared via Zoom cloud, Google Drive (restrict permissions of other users such as to view only) and no data will be downloaded to personal computers without password protection.

Upon conclusion of the research study, the data obtained will be maintained in a secure, password protected cloud database, and will be destroyed one year after the research is completed.

INDEPENDENT CONTACT: I would like to thank you for your participation in this study. However, the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs to speak to someone independent of the research team at 209-946-2565 or IRB@pacific.edu.

For participant:

I, _____, state that I am over 18 years of age and that I voluntarily agree to participate in a research project conducted by Alicia C. Perry, a doctoral student in Education Counseling and Psychology in the Benerd School of Education at University of the Pacific. The research is being conducted in order to meet the University of the Pacific Doctor of Education in Counseling and School Psychology degree requirements. It is designed to understand the challenges that African American women face at PWIs. This study aims to capture the essence of your experiences to deepen understanding of the critical issues Black Women experience while working at PWIs and how they affect mental health.

The interview will occur via Zoom. I understand that I will be asked about personal information; consequently possible areas of discomfort include being asked to recall unpleasant times, incidents, and situations within my professional life and/or having to "re-live" stressful experiences related to race and/or gender discrimination or other stressors experienced in my historical and present role at a predominantly White institution. I will be interviewed for a minimum of 30 minutes to an hour via Zoom. I understand that, as a participant, I may stop recording at any time.

I acknowledge that Alica Perry has explained the task to me fully; has informed me that I may withdraw from participation at any time without prejudice or penalty; has offered to answer any questions that I might have concerning the research procedure; has assured me that any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with me will remain confidential; has assured me that data obtained will be kept in a safe, locked location and will be destroyed after a period of one year after the study is completed; has assured me that any information I give will be used for research and professional development only.

I consent to the results of the study being published in a submitted dissertation and used in future publications and presentations for academic, professional conferences and professional development.

I understand that I may contact Alicia C Perry, M.Ed., the Lead Researcher, at a_perry1@u.pacific.edu. I can also email the Faculty Research Chair: Dr. Amy Scott Brown, at ascott2@u.pacific.edu if I have questions about this study. If I have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or my rights as a participant, I can contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs to speak to someone independent of the research team at 209-946-2565 or IRB@u.pacific.edu..

My signature below indicates that I have read and understand the information provided above, that I willingly agree to participate, that I may withdraw my consent at any time and discontinue participation at any time without penalty, that I will receive a copy of this form, and that I am not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

SIGNATURE _____ DATE _____
Research Study Participant (Print Name): _____

*You will be provided with an extra copy of this signed and dated consent form for you to keep to your records.

Appendix E: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND SPONSORED PROGRAMS | INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

TO: Alicia Perry

FROM: Lisa Borba-Wa, IRB Manager

DATE: Feb 5, 2024 1:17:39 PM PST

RE: IRB Approval Protocol, IRB2023-240 - UNMASKING CHALLENGES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS (PWIS) - UNVEILING PHENOMENOLOGICAL REALITIES AND PRIORITIZING WELL-BEING

Your proposal entitled "UNMASKING CHALLENGES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS (PWIS) - UNVEILING PHENOMENOLOGICAL REALITIES AND PRIORITIZING WELL-BEING," submitted to the University of the Pacific IRB has been Approved. Your project received an Exempt review.

This approval is effective through February 4, 2025.

NOTE: Your IRB approved consent document with the official stamp of IRB approval dates can be found in Cayuse IRB. You are required to only use the stamped version of this consent form by duplicating and distributing to subjects. (Online consent should replicate approved consent document). Consent forms that differ from approved consent are not permitted and use of any other consent document may result in noncompliance of research.

You can find your date-stamped consent by going into your study. At the top of the screen you will find two bars that say Study Details and Submissions. Click on the submission button where your latest date-stamped consent should be (initial submission or your latest modification. Then scroll down to the bottom of the screen and you should see, Approvals, Task History, Letters, Decisions and Attachments. Click into Attachments. Scroll to your date-stamped consent labeled "stamped" on the right hand side.

It is your responsibility according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services regulations to submit updates to the IRB. All further reporting for your study can be submitted through Cayuse IRB. Please be aware that procedural changes or amendments must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to implementing changes. Changes may NOT be made without Pacific IRB approval except to eliminate apparent immediate hazards. Revisions made without prior IRB approval may result in noncompliance of research. To initiate the review process for procedural changes, complete Protocol Revision Form.

Best wishes for continued success in your research. Feel free to contact our office if you have any questions

Human Subjects Protection
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

3601 Pacific Avenue Stockton, CA 95211
Email IRB@pacific.edu

Appendix F: Interview Questions

Interview Script:

Hello, my name is Alicia Perry, a doctoral student at the University of the Pacific and I will be interviewing you today. Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study. During the interview, you will be asked various questions and some follow-up questions about your experiences at the institution and the challenges that African American women face at PWIs. Today's interview should take about (30) minutes but no more than (1) hour. Before we begin, I would like to remind you that you are able to stop the interview at any time if any of the questions I ask make you feel uncomfortable in any way. I will use a pseudonym (fake name). Your pseudonym is _____. Please rename yourself at this time. This name will be used during the entire interview and reflected as your Zoom name. During the interview I will be recording here via zoom as well as writing a series of notes which will later be transcribed to enhance the validity of the study. As we begin, may I have your permission to record?

1. Have you ever experienced microaggressions related to your race at your current or past institution? (Yes/No)

If yes, please describe a specific incident or situation.

2. Have you encountered racial discrimination during your time at the institution? (Yes/No)

If yes, how do/did you address or cope with it?

3. Have you experienced or faced microaggressions due to your gender? (Yes/No)

If yes, please describe a specific incident or situation.

4. Have you experienced sexism at the institution?(Yes/No)

If yes, please describe a specific incident or situation.

5. Have you experienced colorism at the institution?(Yes/No)

If yes, please describe a specific incident or situation.

6. Have you experienced ageism at the institution?(Yes/No)

If yes, please describe a specific incident or situation.

7. In what ways, if any, have you personally experienced or observed instances of classism within the institution?

8. Have you experienced discrimination or bias related to your hair and/or hairstyle within the institution? (Yes/No)

If yes, please describe a specific incident or situation.

9. Have you personally navigated or witnessed comments or judgments about the way you dress at the institution? (Yes/No)

If yes, please describe a specific incident or situation.

10. Are you part of any professional or support networks or organizations specifically designed for African American women at your institution? (Yes/No)

If yes, please describe your involvement and its impact on your experience.

11. Have you faced any challenges or barriers that you felt were related to your race in career advancement opportunities at your institution? (Yes/No)

If yes, please provide details.

12. Have you faced any challenges or barriers that you felt were related to your gender in career advancement opportunities at your institution? (Yes/No)

13. What strategies or coping mechanisms have you used to navigate challenges related to race and gender at your institution?

14. Have you sought mentorship or guidance in your career from other African American/Black female employees? (Yes/No)~~ is/was it offered at your institution

If yes, what was the outcome?

15. How did/does experiences related to race and gender at your institution impact your emotional well-being and job satisfaction?

16. Have any of your experiences at your institution influenced your career decisions or goals? (Yes/No) If yes, please explain.~~Section of transition stories out of higher ed – how they coped with transition from higher ed. And/or Why I stayed in higher ed

17 . In your role, how does/did your experiences related to race, gender, and age impact your ability to effectively serve students?

18. In your role, have you observed any disparities in the educational experiences or outcomes of students from diverse backgrounds? (Yes/No) If so, please describe.

19. How do you believe fostering a more inclusive and diverse environment for employees within your institution could positively influence the experiences and success of students from underrepresented backgrounds?

20. Do/Did you have any allies at your institution? (Yes/No)

If yes, how has engaging in allyship positively influenced your experiences at your institution?

21. Do you feel that your institution provides/provided adequate support and resources for African American women? (Yes/No)~~What they knew of black women in higher ed positions

b. If no, please explain areas where improvement is needed.

22. Was there ever a time in which you experienced any of the above situations in which you felt your institution handled them correctly? (Yes/No)

b. If yes, please explain.

23. Are you still employed at the institution? (Yes/No) If No, please explain, why did you transition and how was your transition?

Recommendations:

What recommendations do you have for your institution to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for African American women?

Additional Comments:

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as an African American woman working at your institution?

This concludes the interview. Do you have any questions?

Now that we are finished, I want to let you know what happens next. I will review the video recording. I will then code the interview based on your responses. I will not use your real name in the narrative write-up of the study.

I will contact you once the transcription is complete so you can check for errors.