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The impact of race, gender, and class on career development: perceptions of African American women

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**THE IMPACT OF RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS ON
CAREER DEVELOPMENT: PERCEPTIONS OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN**

by
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family.

Mom, Dad, Damon, Chelsea, Chloe, and Nicholas, I love you more than you know and

appreciate the sacrifices you made so that I could pursue my aspirations.

Acknowledgments

For four and a half years I have been on a meaningful journey of learning. Now that I have concluded this journey with the completion of my dissertation, I can write a note of appreciation in honor of the individuals who have been my biggest supporters.

I would like to thank the faculty of Rowan University's Department of Educational Services and Leadership for their confidence in my abilities. I am particularly grateful for Dr. MaryBeth Walpole, my dissertation chair. Thank you for your time, care, and guidance as I completed my dissertation. Your influence will never be forgotten. I also appreciate the time and commitment of Dr. Zalphia Wilson-Hill and Dr. Crystal Chambers. Thank you for serving on my dissertation committee. Finally to Dr. James Coaxum III, thank you for your support over the years. I am so appreciative.

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To the five women whose narratives I shared in this study, thank you for trusting me with your stories. Never allow anyone to define who you are or render you invisible, and above all, continue to share your narrative. It is a story that must be told.
-- Nicole

Abstract

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Socio-political issues of race, gender, and class have had a lasting impact on African American women. This impact has historically shaped the reality and lived experiences of African American women including their employment and economic opportunities. At the heart of this impact are the career goals and aspirations of African American women, which are also influenced by race, gender, and class. The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the perceptions of five African American undergraduate women regarding their career aspirations, and the impact that race, gender, and class have on those aspirations. The study was conducted at a predominantly White institution located in the Northeastern United States. Four themes emerged from the qualitative data collected. Those themes related to college preparation, helping others, campus experiences, and support systems. The implications from key findings suggest that African American women are in need of career development that transcends conventional strategies; recognizes the dynamics of race, gender, and class as a three-way intersection; and incorporates culturally relevant approaches appropriate to this group of students.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The employment market of the 21st century has been characterized as highly competitive, with employees required to perform at high levels (Schulz, 2008). A skilled workforce must demonstrate the ability to be technical, innovative, and human relations oriented (Dixon, Belnap, Albrecht, & Lee, 2010; Overtoom, 2000). As undergraduate students plan to enter this competitive market, career development is a significant component in their preparedness. President Obama from the onset of his presidency acknowledged the importance of academic and career readiness skills among college students of both two and four-year institutions. In 2009 he declared a national goal that by the year 2020 the United States would have the highest number of graduates attaining associates and baccalaureates degrees in the world (United States Department of Education, 2011).

The Obama Administration looked to the system of higher education to accomplish this goal through increasing college access, improving college readiness, ensuring excellence, and accelerating college completion (United States Department of Education, 2011). With a focus on added work-study positions, student loan debt reform, and additional needs-based grants, President Obama worked to increase educational attainment and career advancement as well as to provide healthier economic prospects (Dervarics, 2012; Holland, 2015).

In an ideal educational environment, equal opportunities exist for all undergraduate students to become career ready with the goal of gainful employment. Success from a college education equates to economic security and the opportunity for

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future socioeconomic growth that translates into upward mobility (Brown & Jones, 2004; Hotchkiss & Borow, 1990; Johnson, 2015; Okech & Chambers, 2012). The Obama Administration supported student success through its objective to increase educational attainment, career advancement, and economic prospects for college graduates (Dervarics, 2012; Holland, 2015). However, it is unrealistic to believe that all college students have the same opportunities to cultivate the knowledge, skill sets, and work history necessary to enter the workforce and attain occupational advancement.

Today's African American undergraduate women, specifically, still face the challenges of their predecessors regarding career opportunities due to societal racism and sexism (Williams & Nichols, 2012). Thus, this group is unique in that they need career development that transcends conventional academic and career readiness skills, and that incorporates the dynamics of race, gender, and class as a three-way intersection of factors traditionally not acknowledged by researchers (Schiller, 2000). Assisting African American undergraduate women with career development can be accomplished by having a firm understanding of this group's interests, abilities, and aspirations. Equally important is the ability to understand the worldview of African American women, including African American undergraduate women, which has been crafted by experiences drawn from their race, gender, and class (Collins, 1989, 1990; Schiller, 2000; Williams & Nichols, 2012). It is particularly arduous to unravel the tie connecting racism and sexism, which shapes the lives of all African American women (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Subsequently, the career development of African American undergraduate women is largely dependent on strategies that reflect an understanding of the history and

experiences of this group with the hopes of increasing their preparedness as future job candidates.

Disparities in Employment, Economic, and Educational Attainment

Since the early 1970s, the economic status of African Americans compared to Whites has not improved (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). The economic growth of African Americans is linked to the unemployment rate, which has consistently remained higher among African Americans compared to other major racial and ethnic groups (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Pinkney, 1989; United States Department of Labor, 2012). While this study focuses on African American undergraduate women, individuals and governmental entities do not collect demographic data specific to African Americans, who are a subset of the Black race. As a result, the government statistics presented in this study reflect the Black race as a group, and not African American as a subset of that group.

Unemployment rate for Blacks. In 1978, the unemployment rate for Blacks was 12.3% compared to 5.4% for Whites (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Pinkney, 1989). Approximately 33 years later, the United States Department of Labor (2012) reported the average unemployment rate for Blacks in 2011 was 15.8% compared to 7.9% for Whites and 11.5% for Hispanics/Latinos. The unemployment rate for Blacks has been of particular concern as the United States struggles to recover from a national recession, which began in 2007. During this economic downturn, Blacks experienced higher unemployment rates because their workers had less education compared to the dominant group. As reported by the Department of Labor (2012), the unemployment rate among Blacks was slower to recover due, not only due to low levels of education, but to the fact that Blacks comprised a significant portion of the government workforce, a sector that

experienced substantial layoffs during the recession. As the United States began to recover from the recession, Blacks were and continue to be underrepresented in sectors of work that have experienced the greatest growth. Not including the health and educational fields, Blacks have had minimal success in gaining workforce experience in fast growing fields such as the manufacturing, professional, and business sectors (United States Department of Labor, 2012).

The Department of Labor (2012) also reported that Blacks who became unemployed were less likely to be hired and remained unemployed for longer periods. For example, compared to Whites and Hispanics/Latinos, Blacks in 2011 remained unemployed longer, with a median period of 27 weeks, whereas Whites had a median period of 19.7 weeks, and Hispanics/Latinos a period of 18.5 weeks. Moreover, 49.5% of all Blacks who were unemployed remained jobless for a minimum of 27 weeks compared to Whites at 41.7 % and Hispanics/Latinos at 39.9%. Prolonged unemployment makes securing a new job more difficult. This is particularly true of individuals who do not have a network of family members, friends, and acquaintances who can be utilized for job leads or recommendations (United States Department of Labor, 2012).

The outlook for Black teens has been equally discouraging. In 1978, Black teens experienced a 38% unemployment rate compared to White teens who experienced a 14% rate (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Pinkney, 1989). In 2009, the unemployment rate for Black teens climbed to 49.1%, although it declined to 38.5% in 2012 (United States Department of Labor, 2012). The Department of Labor (2012) attributed this decline to the large number of Black teens who were no longer active participants in the workforce as

opposed to an increase in employment. In reality, Black teens were not working, nor were they seeking employment (United States Department of Labor, 2012).

More recently, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) reported that in 2014 the unemployment rate for Blacks trailed behind the rates of both Whites and Hispanics/Latinos. At 11.3%, Blacks were among those groups with the highest unemployment rates compared to Whites who were at 5.3%, followed by Hispanics/Latinos who were at 7.4%. As reflected in past statistics, Black teens held the highest rate with 33% unemployed compared to Hispanic/Latino teens, who experienced an unemployment rate of 22.5% and White teens whose rate was at 17.3%.

Unemployment rate for Black women. Prior to 1978, the employment landscape for Black women between the late 1960s and early 1970s appeared cautiously optimistic. Similar to White women, Black women took advantage of the shift from unskilled to skilled work in the area of secretarial and office positions (Giddings, 1984; Patillo, 2013; Pinkney, 1989). Unfortunately, these opportunities afforded little to no movement for Black women. They remained the most underpaid and underemployed group of adults compared to other adult groups that entered the job market (Beal, 2008).

In 2011, the unemployment rate for Black women was 46.9%, compared to 43% for White women and 41.9% for Hispanic/Latina women (United States Department of Labor, 2012). Interestingly, Black women were the only group of women to represent a larger percentage of the employed when compared to their male counterparts. Among employed Blacks in 2011, 53.8% were Black women, compared to 46% for White women and 40.6% for Hispanic/Latina women. However, similar to 1978, Black women

in 2011 remained the most underpaid compared to White men and women, as well as to Black men (United States Department of Labor, 2012).

For 2014, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) reported the unemployment rate for Black women, ages 20 and older, was 9.8% compared to 11.3% for Black men in the same group. While more Black women were employed compared to Black men, they still lagged behind both White and Hispanic/Latina women whose unemployment rates were 4.8% and 7.5%, respectively. Moreover, in 2014, the median weekly earnings of Black women employed with full-time wages and salaries, were the lowest compared to White men and women and Black men (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

Educational attainment. A strong indicator of employability among individuals has been educational attainment. The employment rate is higher for people who possess higher levels of education compared to people with lower levels of education. The Department of Labor (2012) reported that among the employed, ages 25 and over in 2011, 36.8% of Whites were college graduates, compared to 26.5% of Blacks and 16.7% of Hispanics/Latinos who possessed college degrees.

In 2015, the employment rate for 20 to 24 year olds who earned a bachelor's degree was higher than for those individuals of the same age who did not have a bachelor's degree and only some college education. Notably, the employment rate of individuals with some college was higher than individuals whose highest level of education was a high school diploma. This pattern was also reflected among older adults, ages 25 to 64 years old (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

When looking at the unemployment rate of Blacks, their lower educational attainment may be a reason why they lag behind Whites. In 2011, the unemployment rates of Blacks, ages 25 and older, were higher than the rates of Whites at every educational level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). However, the unemployment gap narrowed as educational attainment increased. For example, for those who had less than a high school diploma, 24.6 % of Blacks were unemployed compared to 12.7 % of Whites; for those who possessed a high school diploma 15.5% of Blacks were unemployed compared to 8.4% of Whites. The unemployment gap continued to narrow for those who either had some college or attained an Associate's degree. For this group, the numbers reflect that 13.1% of Blacks were unemployed compared to 7% of Whites. Finally, for those who possessed a bachelor's degree or higher, 7.1% of Blacks were unemployed compared to 3.9% of Whites.

Achievement gap. While employment and economic gaps have existed between African Americans and Whites, an educational gap has also developed. "The term 'achievement gap' has been used to capture the academic underachievement of African American and Hispanic/Latino students when compared to their White American counterparts" (Caldwell & Obasi, 2010, p. 349). As it pertains to African Americans, the start of the educational gap is marked by a history of laws that prohibited any slave from learning how to read or write. Later, segregation laws forced freed African American children, who were believed to be intellectually inferior, to attend poor schools (Takaki, 2008). A lifetime of laws and preconceived notions has worked to the detriment of African Americans and their education.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have played an integral part in the education of African Americans. HBCUs were recognized by the Higher Education Act of 1965, which defined an HBCU as: (a) established before 1964; (b) focused on the education of African Americans as its mission; and (c) accredited by an official agency (United States Department of Education, 2016). In the 1940s, African American women attended colleges at higher rates compared to White women and African American men (Blalock & Sharpe, 2012; Giddings, 1984; McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann & Shwed, 2011). Researchers offer multiple reasons for this accomplishment. Compared to White women, more African American women participated in the workforce and perhaps believed that a higher education led to occupational advancement (McDaniel et al., 2011). Compared to African American men, more African American women completed their high school education (McDaniel et al., 2011) and more received their bachelor degrees from HBCUs (Giddings, 1984). Subsequently in the 1940s and 1950s, African American women made up the larger fraction of first-generation graduates (Giddings, 1984). College enrollments and educational attainments of African American women continued to increase well into the current era, with more African American students enrolled in predominantly White institutions today than in HBCUs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However the educational achievements of African American women have not alleviated them of the struggles produced from race, gender, and class (Chambers, Bush, & Walpole, 2009). In fact, these women have persisted and attained college degrees in spite of racism, sexism, and classism (Chambers et al., 2009).

Nonetheless, educational inequities continue to exist at all educational levels and have been viewed as an established issue that must be addressed with a sense of urgency.

Educational leaders have grappled with how to eradicate or narrow the educational gap by assessing and responding to its root causes (Snell, 2003). Leaders are called to accept responsibility for inequities in educational outcomes, including student underachievement (Bensimon, 2005; Snell, 2003). Children from historically underserved populations, such as African Americans, are the students who have primarily suffered from the educational gap. Since the mid-1980s, the achievement gap has been analyzed and believed to play a part in the career development of African American students (Brown & Jones, 2004). This inequity holds true for students in higher education as well (Bensimon, 2005). How educators teach, think, and connect with students can produce unequal outcomes.

Moreover, the assumptions and preconceived notions educators possess about the race and ethnicity of their students can also produce negative outcomes. This mindset of educators harkens back to the belief that African American students are intellectually inferior compared to those students of the dominant culture, who have been viewed as intellectually superior (Takaki, 2008). As a result, the expectations of these educators regarding their students of color are low compared to their expectations regarding students of the dominant culture.

Statement of the Problem

African Americans have continued to endure employment, economic, and educational disparities. These disparities are the residual effects from centuries of oppression, subjugation, and segregation that have gravely impacted the advancement of African Americans as a group. At the center of this group are African American women, whose position has been crafted by unique circumstances and experiences based on the intersectionality of race, gender, and class.

Purpose of the Study

Thus, the purpose of my dissertation was to explore the perceptions of African American women regarding their career aspirations, and the impact that race, gender, and class have on those aspirations. This purpose was accomplished by studying five African American undergraduate women at a predominately White institution. While academic achievement, skill sets, and early work experiences are important to future job seekers, I believe that higher education needs an understanding of those socio-political issues that have impacted the lives of African American women, including their work history and subsequent career aspirations, goals, and ensuing employment.

Research Questions

The following research questions were proposed as part of my dissertation study:

RQ1: How do African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White liberal arts institution develop career aspirations?

RQ2: How do African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White liberal arts institution understand issues of race, gender, and class as pertaining to career goals?

Significance of the Study

This dissertation study is significant in addressing the employment and economic opportunities of African American undergraduate women. As the researcher, my intention was to (a) expand on existing information as it relates to the career development and readiness of African American undergraduate women; (b) assist educational leaders and practitioners as they attempt to better serve African American undergraduate women

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as a subset of their student population; and (c) empower African American undergraduate women on their journey from students to professionals.

Existing information. The intersectionality of race, gender, and class have forced African American women to be among those groups marginalized throughout history. As it pertains to employment, historically, the work experiences of African American women have been dictated by oppression based on race, gender, and class. Limited to positions that were labor-intensive, domestic, and other service-oriented work, African American women have had minimal experience in other areas of employment compared to the dominant group (Collins, 1990).

Surviving within a system of oppression has left African American women confronted by matters of invisibility, sexual harassment, racial slurs, discriminatory practices, and stereotypes (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Traditional strategies among African Americans have included garnering support from family members, friends, peers, and faith-based activities (Chambers et al., 2009; Collins, 1989; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Additionally, African Americans customarily have adopted coping strategies such as withdrawing, avoiding, accepting, detaching, and suppressing when confronted with racial oppression (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Similarly, young African American college students have coped with impending racial tensions on the job by altering their career ambitions, which result in lower expectations (Evans & Herr, 1991).

Educational leaders and practitioners. There are professionals within higher education who are acutely aware of the socio-political issues that plague American society (Johnson, 2015). These issues, which include matters of discrimination, stigmatization, and marginalization, impact African American women and other

individuals with various identities (Johnson, 2015). Educational leaders and practitioners, particularly those at predominantly White institutions, must be better prepared to assist subsets of their student populations for employment after college (Falconer & Hays, 2006). A part of this preparation is incorporating career development strategies that are culturally relevant. For strategies to be culturally relevant, leaders and practitioners must be considerate of the distinctiveness of different student groups, and must be deliberate in their practice when implementing strategies that reflect socio-political issues, which impact these groups (Kimbrough & Salomone, 1993; McCollum, 1998; Perrone, Sedlacek, & Alexander, 2001). This approach is of particular importance in assisting African American undergraduate women with entry into an already competitive workforce.

Empowerment. Open conversations and collaborative projects serve as opportunities to foster a supportive educational environment for marginalized groups. In the case of African American undergraduate women, a supportive environment around the issues of race, gender, and class, contributes to their growth and development (Johnson, 2015). Moreover, developing a political consciousness of the exploitation of African American women contributes to empowerment and liberation (Beal, 2008). This is of particular importance for African American undergraduate women whose next step is to transition from college to a capitalist workforce recognized for its history of racial exploitation and male dominance (Beal, 2008; hooks, 2000).

Research Design and Strategy of Inquiry

To garner the descriptive information needed to answer the research questions, a qualitative approach was used to collect data from the study's participants (Creswell,

2014). This approach was utilized for the fundamental purpose of learning, with me as the primary learner (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). My qualitative research consisted of the following features: (a) occurred in the natural world to collect data based on experiences; (b) used numerous methods to understand the experiences of participants; (c) focused on the setting, environment, and perspective to describe experiences and interpret findings; (d) evolved rather than predicted; and (e) based on the interpretations of the researcher (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

The qualitative design of inquiry was narrative research. This design of inquiry provided the needed opportunity to collect and examine personal accounts and stories relayed through participants' words and perceptions used to describe their lived experiences (Clandinin, 2013; Creswell, 2014; Livholts & Tamboukov, 2015). Those experiences were treated "as a source of important knowledge and understanding" to answer the research questions (Clandinin, 2013, p. 17).

Sample Population

The study was conducted at a predominantly White liberal arts institution. The sample of African American undergraduate women was "purposefully" chosen to participate (Patton, 1990, p. 169). This sample is referred to as homogenous, as it was purposefully selected for in-depth information specific to their lives and experiences as African American women (Patton, 1990). The study included women having either one or two parents who are African American. In addition, those African American women classified as rising seniors and recent graduates were identified and recruited as participants. I believed that rising seniors and recent graduates would provide more in-

depth information, whereas information from rising freshmen, sophomores, and juniors would be limited.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews comprised of open-ended questions, which allowed participants to respond in their own voices, with the prospect of elaborating on or raising new ideas (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This strategy was conducted with the goal of garnering information pertinent to addressing the research questions. The data collection also included field notes, which allowed me to capture the setting and environment of each interview. Field notes afforded another perspective in understanding and describing the complete experience of each participant and her interview (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Both interview responses and field notes were transcribed and analyzed for emerging themes (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Saldana, 2013). Finally, I kept a journal to record and reflect on my own thoughts throughout the research process (Maxwell, 2013).

Conceptual Framework and Ideological Lens

After researching multiple theories related to career development, I discovered that theories were limited in their scope when considering the intersection of multiple factors, such as race, gender, and class. For example, traditional career development theories were based on White middle class men, whose experiences, compared to the experiences of African American women, were at the opposite end of the spectrum (Kerka, 1998; Kimbrough & Salomone, 1993; McCollum, 1998). Other theories discussed the importance of developmental stages, experiential learning, or categorical factors that impact career development (Kolb, 1984; Super, 1980). However, those

theories did not offer a comprehensive approach when considering the interconnection of multiple factors or sociopolitical issues. Also, theories related to developmental stages and experiential learning assumed that all students have equal opportunities to participate in activities that assist with career development and readiness at particular periods in their lives.

Thus, my study used career theories that examine multiple factors as the conceptual framework, and was complemented by Black feminist thought as the ideological lens to assist in contextualizing how race, gender, and class mediate career choices and goals. With a conceptual framework and ideological lens, I explored the perceptions of African American undergraduate women and their understanding of socio-political issues regarding race, gender, and class as well as their understanding of these issues as factors in career development, readiness, and goals.

Social learning theory and social cognitive career theory. The conceptual framework appropriate for my study was comprised of two career theories, social learning theory of career decision-making and social cognitive career theory. Both theories support the concept that multiple factors are the basis of individual career choices. For example, social learning theory of career decision-making explored the reasons why individuals enter particular occupations (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990), whereas social cognitive career theory explored the influences that impact the career goals and self-efficacy of individuals (Lent & Brown, 1996).

Black feminist thought. To capture the socio-political issues of race, gender, and class as factors in career choices and goals among African American women, Black feminist thought served as the ideological lens for my study. Black feminist thought

understands that race, gender, and class are "simultaneous forces" (Brewer, 1999, p. 32), which have created a history of oppression and invisibility for African American women (Collins, 1990). It also recognizes that as a three-way intersection, race, gender, and class impact groups of individuals differently. Those dynamics can either promote advancement or thwart progress for certain individuals. The practice of Black feminism is essential in rethinking, re-interpreting, and re-understanding the experiences of African American women (Collins, 1990). As a lens for my study, the use of Black feminist thought in relaying the reality of African American women was significant, as traditional scholarships have relied on White women for the feminist perspective, and men for both the Black political and social perspectives (Collins, 1990). Understanding the lived experiences of African American women, as Black feminist thought does, may assist in promoting progress among African American undergraduate women seeking to transition from students to professionals.

Definition of Terms

The individual terms of race, gender, and class were an integral part of my study. They are defined as individual strands, but are acknowledged as social constructs fused and tightly woven to form an intersectionality unique to African American women. Also described are the terms White privilege and segregation, both of which have preserved the marginalization of groups of people, such as African American women.

Race. Omi and Winant (1994) proposed that although race historically speaks to biological characteristics, "race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (p. 55). It is more a social and historical development (Omi & Winant, 1994). As described by Oliver and

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Shapiro (1995), race has been assigned "a unique cultural meaning in American society wherein blacks have been oppressed in such a way as to perpetuate their inferiority and second-class citizenship" (p. 34). This meaning, which is socially constructed, is the foundation of racism.

For African Americans, racial labels have been of particular importance as the label for this group has frequently changed. Over the course of 100 years, African Americans have been referred to as "Colored," "Negro," and "Black" and most recently "African American" (Smith, 1992). Changes to this label reflected the desire of African Americans to embrace self-esteem and pride as a group that continuously was held in positions of inferiority (Smith, 1992). The evolving label symbolized strength and the search for equality. Most recently, the change from Black to African American was done to signify the connection to African heritage and to extend the American societal perspective to include a more global viewpoint regarding African Americans. Equally important, the shift from Black to African American was a shift from a racial identity to an ethnic identity. African Americans hoped that this shift would draw attention away from the negative, bring a focus to the positive and thereby increase the level of tolerance among the dominant culture (Smith, 1992).

Gender. Similar to race, it is suggested that gender, today, is also socially constructed (Brewer, 1999; Omi & Winant, 1994). The social construction of gender is but one piece to the "larger pattern of unequal social relations" (Zinn & Dill, 1994, p. 3). Under Black feminism, gender must not be separated from race and class as its meaning is socially constructed and systematically entrenched (Brewer, 1999). How an individual

perceives her gender is based on how it overlaps with other social relations that may be tied to inequalities (Zinn & Dill, 1994).

Class. As important social relations, race and gender are closely linked with class (Collins, 2009). However, race and gender have also been used as diversions from necessary discussions about the cruel realism surrounding class (hooks, 2000). Class takes on the meaning of "relational positioning" of groups of individuals (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995, p. 34). It is based on access to power and resources, as well as ownership and control of capital; all of which determine social status. Social capital is connected to the social position and mobility of families (Bourdieu, 1977). Researchers have theorized a relationship between the academic success of children and social capital of their parents (Bourdieu, 1977).

Intersectionality. In the 1980s, the term intersectionality was coined by Crenshaw (2015), who wanted to create a title for a concept that represented the realities and experiences of African American women. Intersectionality described how different types of forces intermingled and how they connected to power (Crenshaw, 2015). As forces pertain to race, gender, and class, intersectionality was Crenshaw's effort to bring awareness to the invisibilities that occurred within feminism, anti-racism, anti-discrimination, and class politics (Adewunmi, 2014; Crenshaw, 2015).

Since Crenshaw coined the term, other scholars have researched its meaning and rendered their own interpretations. For example, Brah and Phoenix (2004) explain intersectionality as the following:

> We regard the concept of "intersectionality" as signifying the complex,
> irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of

differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands. (p. 76)

While scholars may expand upon the original term and meaning, it is agreed that the individual strands that comprise intersectionality cannot be separated as these strands work concurrently (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Jones & Guy-Sheftall, 2015). The experiences of African American women are shaped by the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. These experiences have been remarkably different than the experiences of the dominant group (Collins, 1989).

White privilege. Class, status, and occupational mobility are among the key concerns regarding inequality (Blackburn & Prandy, 1997). When considering the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, White men are viewed as living at the highest strata or levels of these multiple social groups; whereas African Americans as a group are viewed as living at the lowest strata, as they traditionally have experienced low income and menial work, as well as limited education (Jeffries & Ransford, 1980). Consequently, White men have the greatest opportunity for resources and rewards, which translate into power, prestige, and privilege. Power is the ability to control others, and prestige is a ranking in society. Privilege is connected to entitlements, advantages, and liberties (Jeffries & Ransford, 1980). It is based on positioning within the social hierarchy, and is withheld from those individuals whose position is not high within the hierarchy. A position that is high within the hierarchy is accompanied with social, economic, and cultural capital that preserve the classifications, stability, and struggles between groups of

individuals (Bourdieu, 1977, 2013).

Serving to the advantage of the dominant group, White privilege produces outcomes to the distinct disadvantage of minority groups (Cheng, 1997; McIntosh, 1998). McIntosh (1998) describes White privilege as "an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks" (p. 95). Moreover, the dominant group does not recognize, nor are they cognizant of, their own privilege and power, which makes the process of self-assessment and learning difficult (Calvert & Ramsey, 1996; Rothenberg, 2000).

There are privileged individuals, considered radicals, who advocated for social justice and against the oppressive nature of capitalism (hooks, 2000). When a distinct line was drawn by society between individuals who have and those individuals who do not, those same individuals who advocated for social justice and against oppression opted to remain among the privileged (hooks, 2000). The interests of White liberals and radicals aligned with the agendas of their conservative counterparts, as personal advancement outweighed the common good (hooks, 2000). Protecting, perpetuating, and reproducing their social status and class standing for generations that followed was a priority (Blackburn & Prandy, 1997; hooks, 2000; Rothenberg, 2000). However, they would not acknowledge doing so (Rothenberg, 2000).

Segregation. There have been two forms of segregation practiced within American history. One is a more formal approach, which is de jure segregation, and the other is a less formal approach, but nonetheless harmful, which is de facto segregation (Oldfield, 2004). De jure segregation is defined as intentional actions legally carried out

by individuals and systems under the protection of governmental laws (Green, 1999). De facto segregation, on the other hand, is defined as private actions that are neither legal nor within the parameters of the law (Green, 1999).

Most notable among de jure segregation were laws of the South that separated races. Jim Crow legislation, for example, was passed in the late 1800s. It was intended to create a system that legally excluded African Americans and limited interaction between both races (Bennett, 1984; Franklin, 1980). For the exception of relationships between master and slave and later employer and employee (White, 1994), both private and public services and facilities, legally separated African Americans from Whites (Bennett, 1984; Franklin, 1980). Moreover, African Americans were prohibited from entering White owned businesses.

De facto segregation was most prevalent as desegregation laws began to take affect in the South, and in parts of America, such as the North, where de jure segregation did not exist. "Separate but equal" was the new term adopted by the dominant culture, and it gave rise to de facto segregation. For example, as desegregation of schools took place, school districts based student enrollment procedures on place of residency, which limited the integration of schools as neighborhoods were established along color lines (Higginbotham, 1994; White, 1994).

As de facto segregation relates to employment, discrimination was perpetuated through hiring practices and earnings (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). For example, "job ceilings" were created to thwart the occupational mobility of African Americans (Higginbotham, 1994, p. 115). Job ceilings prohibited African Americans from either being considered, hired, or promoted to certain positions. This discriminatory practice

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was implemented whether or not African Americans were qualified job candidates. Employers who implemented such practices limited African Americans to low-wage and manual positions (Higginbotham, 1994).

Limitations

With sufficient rigor, quality, and detail, this study serves other researchers who may want to expand on the findings by conducting another qualitative study or a quantitative study. The findings expand on existing information, assist educational leaders and practitioners, and inform African American undergraduate women. It must be noted the study was not without its limitations. This research focused on African American undergraduate women at one predominantly White institution only. It was not a comparative study. It did not compare African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White institution with African American undergraduate women at a historically Black college or university.

In addition, general limitations inherent within a narrative design related to the analysis, which was dependent on criteria not connected to validity, reliability, and generalization (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). However, since there are no standardized criteria within narrative design, as the researcher I defined and supported the criteria most applicable for this study. In other words, I identified accounts and details garnered from each participant's narrative. I then retold and analyzed each narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Conclusion

Based on employment, economic, and educational rates reported, Blacks, as a group, have lagged behind other major racial and ethnic groups. Historically, African

Americans have struggled for reasons that include a lack of educational opportunities, discriminatory practices implemented by employers, and minimal experience in multiple professions. Moreover, African American women have been consistently under-employed, underpaid, and underrepresented within the workforce compared to other groups. As African American undergraduate women transition from students to professionals, these issues are not eliminated because they have attained a college degree (Higginbotham, 1994). These issues may be more prevalent as African American women graduate and enter non-traditional fields of employment where their numbers are low. Subsequently, part of their career development is understanding socio-political issues of race, gender, and class, and how these issues intersect to impact their career aspirations, goals, and readiness. As the researcher, my hope was that the findings from this study would reveal the need for career development that is uniquely designed for African American women. Such career development may strengthen career readiness, increase employment opportunities, and help avoid the pitfall of unemployment among African American undergraduate women.

The following chapter of my dissertation study presents literature that speaks to the importance of career development for undergraduate students as future job seekers. Also discussed are race, gender, and class as a three-way intersection, and its impact on the lives of African American women, particularly on career development, choices, and goals. I provided a snapshot of traditional theories that have been used as frameworks for researchers who examine career development. These theories did not always consider the lived experiences of African American women. However, I identified two career theories as the conceptual framework as well as Black feminist thought as the ideological lens for

this study on African American undergraduate women. Chapter 3 discusses the

methodological approach and the strategy of inquiry, which were qualitative study and

narrative inquiry. My findings are discussed in Chapter 4. My conclusion, which consists

of the discussion and implications, is presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The success of an undergraduate student in higher education includes not only academic achievement and graduation, but also the development of career readiness skills that incorporate specific qualities and behaviors essential to a future job candidate (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Schulz, 2008). In the following sections, I discuss how the literature defines career, career development, and the career readiness skills deemed essential to employers and for job seekers. Also discussed are career problems that potentially threaten the career development and advancement of individuals. The literature recognizes these problems as related to personal and situational determinants, many of which are connected to history and life circumstances (Brown, Brooks, & Associates, 1990; Cochran, 1994; Super, 1980). At the center of this study are African American women whose circumstances and experiences have shaped past centuries of work and their future career development and choices.

Next, I discuss the application of traditional, developmental, and career based theories to the career development of African American women. Through this examination, career theories that focus on multiple factors emerged as my study's conceptual framework, while Black feminist thought emerged as the ideological lens by which I examine the intersectionality of race, gender, and class as factors on the lived experiences of African American women. It is important that the lens used in this study views the socio-political issues of race, gender, and class as an intersection, rather than as individual strands. Furthermore, my discussion on Black feminist thought includes its history, purpose, and the community of African American women that support Black

feminism as a means to articulate the position of African American women in this nation. Finally, I conclude this chapter with the connection of career theories and Black feminist thought to the career development of African American undergraduate women. In an effort to prepare African American undergraduate women for a competitive 21st century employment market, the intersectionality of race, gender, and class needs to be not only recognized within career development, but its impact on the career choices of American undergraduate women needs to be better understood.

Defining Career, Career Development, and Career Readiness Skills

Career, as a concept, embodies work as an action, and considers goals, plans, and choices as a means to achieve that desired action (Cochran, 1994). It is defined not by a single moment or position, but rather it is defined by a sequence of positions over an extended period (Cochran, 1994; Super, 1980). For postsecondary students, that time period often begins during college. Career development during college affords undergraduate students the opportunity to cultivate the necessary knowledge, skill sets, and experiences for gainful employment following graduation (Schulz, 2008). As undergraduate students initiate careers, possessing specific qualities and exhibiting certain behaviors are critical. Employers seek these qualities and behaviors among candidates as they identify and hire prospective employees (Robinson, 2000).

Thus career development in college is important for our students and their future employers. This development involves making multiple decisions that lead an individual to achieving her goals (Brown et al., 1990). Career development in college assists with the identification of strengths and interests, as well as the examination of career choices and goals (Cochran, 1994; Super 1980, 1983). In other words, it supports a period of

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career exploration when students are able to learn more about themselves, career prospects that exist, and the elements that comprise a thorough job search (Stumpf, Collareli, & Hartman, 1983; Werbel, 2000). Over time, career development reflects "the lifelong psychological and behavioral processes as well as contextual influences shaping one's career" (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2013, p. 15).

Building and strengthening career readiness skills are an integral part of career development. Researchers have defined career readiness skills as a blend of hard and soft skills (Overtoom, 2000; Robles, 2012). Hard skills are described as technical or administrative (Dixon et al., 2010; Robles, 2012; Sophia, 2014). They are learned through education, training, and work experience (Dixon et al., 2010; Sophia, 2014). Additionally, hard skills involve areas of expertise representing specific proficiencies that are tangible and measurable (Dixon et al., 2010; Robinson, 2000; Sophia, 2014). Those proficiencies are related to academic skills or a particular trade or craft (Robinson, 2000; Robles, 20120).

Comparatively, soft skills are described as interpersonal, social, or people skills (Dixon et al., 2010; Robles, 2012, Sophia, 2014). They are connected to personal traits, values, and habits of individuals (Robles, 2012; Sophia, 2014). Whereas hard skills are tangible, soft skills are defined by intangibles driven by an individual's ability to interact, listen, organize, negotiate, resolve conflicts, and problem solve (Sophia, 2014). These personal qualities are intrinsic and are thought to serve as predictors for future professional behavior (Brown, 1990). Furthermore, these qualities help develop an individual's leadership and teamwork skills (Dixon et al., 2010; Sophia, 2014).

At the core of soft skills are communication skills (Schulz, 2008; Sophia, 2014). Communication skills are described not only as a language proficiency but professional behavior, conversation, and presentation, including body language (Schulz, 2008). Strong communication skills can enhance an individual's career opportunities. They can also enhance an individual's level of social competency, which links to a candidate's ability to network with employers and other professionals (Schulz, 2008; Vilorio, 2011). Developing a professional network of personal contacts is important to any job seeker. A network is comprised of family and friends, past and present employers and colleagues, as well as professors and fellow alumni. Attending both casual and formal activities help to build these connections. Moreover, employers are inclined to hire individuals who are recommended by people they know and trust (Vilorio, 2011).

As employers identify prospective employees, it is recommended that soft skills can enable candidates to stand apart from others who possess common knowledge, education, and work experience (Dixon et al., 2010; Sophia, 2014). A candidate can demonstrate the skill of effective communication throughout the interview process, which includes pre and post interview conversations as well as the interview itself (Vilorio, 2011). Therefore, it is important that candidates develop soft skills in addition to hard skills (Schulz, 2008).

Recognizing Potential Career Problems

Nonetheless, career problems can ensue when events take place that threaten an individual's course of action. There are a multitude of issues, barriers, and circumstances that might create career problems (Cochran, 1994). The process of career development is influenced by factors connected to family, values, capabilities, and societal contexts

(Brown & Brooks, 1990). The backdrop of culture, ethnicity, and gender also influence career development as well as an individual's commitment to work (Arbono, 1995; Luzzo, 1994).

Personal and situational determinants. Super (1980) refers to these influences as personal and situational determinants. Personal determinants reflect an individual's "genetic constitution" (Super, 1980, p. 294), which are mediated by environmental experiences from birth, home life, and the community. Situational determinants are geographic and historic settings as well as social and economic circumstances, all of which comprise an individual's life. Similar to issues, barriers, and circumstances that can lead to career problems (Cochran, 1994), determinants can uplift or tear down an individual in her quest to advance in life (Super, 1980).

History and life circumstances. The distinctiveness of different student groups needs to be considered as career development strategies are planned by educational leaders and practitioners (Kimbrough & Salomone, 1993). History and life circumstances have made aspects of the employment market inaccessible for specific groups of individuals (Kimbrough & Salomone, 1993). For example, career choices and patterns of African Americans have been largely influenced by racial and class discrimination. As a result, African Americans have been confronted with distinctive socio-political issues in career development (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996; Parham & Austin, 1994). Among this group are African American women, whose overall progress has been historically thwarted based on biases and limitations (Collins, 1989; Schiller, 2000). Yet career development has rarely considered racial discrimination, financial hardship, and social

adaptation as influences on the career behaviors of individuals from different racial and cultural backgrounds (Brown et al., 1990).

Understanding the History and Life Experiences of African Americans

Beginning with slavery, African Americans have occupied the lowest work positions in the nation (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). Taken by force and enslaved for hard labor, Blacks from Africa worked on the plantations of other continents, including islands in the Caribbean, prior to the plantations of the New World (Dubois & Garrigus, 2017; Franklin, 1980). As slavery entered the New World, it became an institution and was later recognized as America's earliest form of capitalism (hooks, 2000). There was no distinction in the treatment between Black African men and Black African women, as both were sold as property within the slave trade, worked long hours on plantations, and suffered cruelty at the hands of plantation overseers (Franklin, 1980). Women worked as house slaves and caregivers to the children of slave owners. They worked alongside men in the fields, where they cleared trees, dug ditches, and plowed and planted the land. Moreover, girls and women were used as breeders. This was extremely important to slave owners, who sold those girls and women unable to have children. For those who did have children, their work responsibilities continued even while pregnant (Bennett, 1984).

The treatment of African Americans post slavery was just as cruel as it was during slavery. African Americans experienced a cumulative effect due to Jim Crow laws or de jure segregation that existed in southern states (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). In the mid 1800s, Jim Crow was synonymous with the word Negro (Bennett, 1984). By the late 1800s, it was passed as a racial segregation law to disenfranchise African Americans (Bennett, 1984; Franklin, 1980). Jim Crow laws were characterized as "a wall, a system,

a way of separating people from people" (Bennett, 1984, p. 256). That wall separated

African Americans from Whites, and helped coin the phrase separate but equal (Bennett,

1984; Franklin, 1980). As a system, Jim Crow was created to avoid interaction between

the two races, and to avoid the assimilation of African Americans into American society

(Bennett, 1984). Neighborhoods, schools, employment, and hospitals legally separated

African Americans from Whites. Areas such as public water fountains and bathrooms

were labeled White and Colored, as were sections in movie theaters and public libraries

and on public transportation (Bennett, 1984). In other instances, African Americans were

prohibited from entering restaurants, hotels, banks, food and clothing stores, and other

businesses that were White owned (Franklin, 1980). These practices perpetuated the

isolation, subordination, punishment, and humiliation experienced by African Americans

(Bennett, 1984).

By the late 1800s, 80% of African Americans lived in the rural south (Massey &

Denton, 1993). However, African Americans eventually migrated from the southern

states to the northern states. Referred to as the Great Migration (Pattillo, 2013; Takaki,

2008), their relocation occurred for the following reasons. First, African Americans had

become tenant farmers or sharecroppers of White landlords (Massey & Denton, 1993;

Takaki, 2008). This system of farming was noted as a means by which Whites replaced

slavery (Massey & Denton, 1993). As tenant farmers and sharecroppers, African

Americans suffered from extensive debt and were forced to depend on their landlords for

financial support. Many southern farmlands gradually perished due to floods and insects.

This further increased the debt of African American farmers and their dependency on

landlords, which resulted in African Americans relocating to the North. Second, due to

World War I, the influx of immigrants declined in the northern states. This decline in immigration caused an increase in the number of factory positions, which were made available to African Americans from the South (Pattillo, 2013; Takaki, 2008). Both young African American men and women believed in the possibilities of new work and decent wages provided by industrial employment (Pattillo, 2013). Finally, new opportunities were viewed as an escape from southern Jim Crow laws, segregation, violence, and exploitation. In other words, northern opportunities were thought to be a chance for increasing the self-worth of southern African Americans (Bennett, 1984; Giddings, 1984; Takaki, 2008).

As southern African Americans migrated, northern cities experienced a significant influx in their African American populations between the years 1910 and 1920 (Takaki, 2008). Among the urban areas most impacted by the influx were Detroit, where the African American population increased from 5,700 to 40,800; Cleveland increased from 8,400 to 34,400; Chicago from 44,000 to 109,400; and New York City from 91,700 to 152,400 (Takaki, 2008). Whites met this influx with discrimination and resistance (Bennett, 1984; Takaki, 2008). Similar to Jim Crow laws of the south, Whites adopted discriminatory tactics of violence and intimidation that included destroying the homes and churches in African American communities (Takaki, 2008). African Americans were prohibited from moving into White neighborhoods, attending better schools, and banned from employment opportunities. Resistance from Whites created a culture that translated into unequal rights, treatment, and conditions of African Americans (Takaki, 2008).

For African Americans, the migration from south to north was intended to be an opportunity for integration, advancement, and liberty. However, it became a vehicle for

continued segregation and oppression (Massey & Denton, 1993). African Americans as a group were confined to living in crowded and inadequate housing. African American children, believed to be intellectually inferior, attended poor schools (Takaki, 2008). African American men and women were reduced to low-wage menial employment (Takaki, 2008). As a result, the majority of African Americans worked in positions of service and maintenance, which continued well into the future (Pinkney, 1989). "Generation after generation of blacks remained anchored to the lowest economic status in American society" (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995, p. 5). In these instances, we see that slavery paved the way for not only the development of capitalism, but also its progression, which was dependent on inexpensive labor (Beal, 2008; hooks, 2000).

African American women, specifically, made up an overflow in labor supply, a necessity for capitalism to be profitable. Post-slavery, African American women continued to be relegated to domestic and menial work (Beal, 2008; Giddings, 1984). They occupied positions such as domestic, hospital, and factory workers as well as janitors, washerwomen, and laundry workers (Beal, 2008; Giddings, 1984; Higginbotham, 1994). Their work conditions often consisted of poor and segregated environments, and their jobs required long hours and were the dirtiest and most physically difficult tasks (Giddings, 1984; Walker, 2008). Consequently, African American women have been controlled by an oppressive system that has abused them economically and physically (Beal, 2008).

The reverberating effect of this abuse has had a lasting impression on the employment rate, educational attainment, and achievement outcomes for African Americans, including African American women. The picture portrayed of the

employment and economic status of African Americans, a residual effect of slavery and segregation, has been anything but encouraging (Evans & Herr, 1991; Pinkney, 1989). Moreover, African Americans as students have struggled with educational attainment and have not experienced the same outcomes as their White student counterparts.

Considering the Unique Experiences of African American Women

Racial and cultural differences may act as impediments in career development as groups present with "differences in language, habits, personality characteristics, and values" (McCollum, 1998, p. 44). This is particularly true of groups who have not fully integrated into the dominant culture, but whose lives have been shaped by their own experiences (Parham & Austin, 1994).

To understand the career development and aspirations of African American undergraduate women, it is important to first discuss the work history of African American women in the larger society. It is believed by Black feminists that African American women have "experienced the triple whammy of discrimination based on sex, race, and class" (Schiller, 2000, p. 119). Black feminist scholars believe that as race, gender, and class connect, there have been minimal discussions regarding this intersection, though the intersection fuels oppression and shapes the lives of this particular subset of women (Schiller, 2000). This intersection has also enhanced the concern of African Americans, especially African American women, as many find themselves in the position of strategists who have used a bicultural approach (Alfred, 2001). In this position, African American women fight and survive the forces of race and gender, which include the legacy of slavery and imagery of stereotypes; all while they develop as professionals and prove their competency (Bell, 1990).

Work history. Traditionally, the work experiences of African American women have been dictated by oppression and perpetuated by discriminatory practices (Browne & Misra, 2003). Limited to positions that were labor-intensive, domestic, and service-oriented, African American women have had minimal experience in other areas of employment compared to the dominant group (Collins, 1990; Evans & Herr, 1991). The constraints and economics of slavery, for example, governed the early work of African American women, who were restricted to manual labor both in the fields and in the houses of slave owners (Evans & Herr, 1991). Later, prejudices grounded in racism and sexism defined their work post-slavery, which again largely limited African American women to labor-intensive and domestic employment (Beal, 2008; Evans & Herr, 1991; Giddings, 1984).

Racism and sexism have greatly impacted the career development and choices of African American women. Labor-intensive and domestic work defined and symbolized the relationship between privileged and disadvantaged groups (Browne & Misra, 2003). Future career paths, beyond labor-intensive and domestic work, were not easily defined for African American women. Yet in the past some African American women escaped the normal career path, through opportunities in the African American community as educators and entrepreneurs (Giddings, 1984; Gill; 2004; Walker, 2008). Within education, African American women have served as school founders, administrators, and teachers for their communities. Teachings were a blend of academics, industrial arts, and morality (Giddings, 1984). Classes in industrial arts or domesticity were specifically designed for girls, whereas lessons in morality were for both girls and boys in an effort to move beyond their present circumstances of poverty (Giddings, 1984). As entrepreneurs,

African American women worked as beauticians in shops that were often owned by them. Beauty salons were a refuge from workplaces that practiced racial discrimination and sexual mistreatment. Unlike domestic work, it had promises of financial security, as well as professional independence, satisfaction, and creativity (Gill, 2004; Walker, 2008). For some African American beauticians, life as entrepreneurs propelled them into roles of prominence or activism (Gill, 2004; Walker, 2008).

While opportunities to become educators and entrepreneurs were possible, on-going perceptions of racism and sexism influenced the career choices of many African American women and may have placed them at a "developmental plateau" (Evans & Herr, 1991, p. 131). In other words, opportunities for growth and advancement were stalled as African American women found themselves predestined by notions created by the dominant culture to career paths and choices that were domestic and service-oriented.

Double consciousness. Additionally, career problems and conflicts have existed more for African Americans because they are challenged with adopting a bicultural approach, which is the balance between two value systems that include European American and African American (Alfred, 2001; Parham & Austin, 1994). African Americans as a group have had to create a balance between two worlds, one that represents their inner qualities (African American) and the other that represents the mainstream's outer demands (European American) (Alfred, 2001).

DuBois (1903) identifies the term double consciousness, which is often used to understand the bicultural experience of African American individuals. Of double consciousness, DuBois (1903) states:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking

at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a

world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, --

an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two

warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being

torn asunder. (p. 5)

It is believed that double consciousness is a means by which African Americans shed the

inner self in an attempt to develop another self that would be more accepted by

mainstream America. This is done with hopes of eradicating prejudices and gaining

resources (Cook, 2013).

Regarding African American professional women, Bell (1990) notes that double

consciousness requires an awareness of both worlds that have been created on socio-

political issues of race, gender, and class. However, African American women are

challenged by the orderliness and balance of developing careers in one world and

maintaining a connection to their personal lives in the other world (Bell, 1990). Their

cultural link to the African American community is a representation of their identity. A

part of that identity is "the harsh legacy of slavery: its bondage, sexual exploitation, and

compulsory labor" (Bell, 1990, p. 464). Challenges arise as African American

professional women aim to remain committed to the African American community, while

their professional development and mobility rest with being employed at places of work

that are often White and male-dominated (Bell, 1990). These places insist that employees

adopt an identity, as well as adhere to rules and ideals, that may be contrary to those of

the employees, such as African American women. Making this transition especially

daunting is the reality that many African American women are first generation

professionals in non-traditional careers with limited role models, mentors, or advocates to

help with this navigation (Bell, 1990).

Mirroring the professional world are institutions of higher education, which

descend from a European and American colonial backdrop. These institutions were

established on European American standards (Chambers et al., 2009), and produce

mainstream's outer demands on African American students (Alfred, 2001). This history

has helped define the principles and culture of many colleges and universities, which

intended to educate White middle and upper class males (Tierney, 1992). African

American women enrolled in predominantly White institutions are challenged where

campus climates may not be welcoming because of their race, gender, and class

(Chambers et al., 2009).

Whether in a professional or academic setting, African American women are

linked to the dominant culture by way of work, education, and related activities that

include professional and collegiate affiliations (Bell, 1990). However, as stated, their

family ties and other personal interactions are based within the African American

community. Those relationships, which are recognized as traditional coping strategies,

help empower and provide support to these women (Bell, 1990; Chambers et al., 2009;

Collins, 1989; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). This is of particular importance when surviving in

a system where African American women are not accepted as part by the dominant

culture, but oppressed by it (Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

Specific to African American undergraduate women are individuals who can

advise them on a collegiate level. These individuals include family members who have

college experience, high school staff, community leaders, as well as college peers, faculty and staff, and other mentors who assist students with college navigation, persistence and engagement (Chambers, 2009; Chambers et al., 2009). Peers who are like-minded in interests are of particular importance as peer group members influence one another (Winkle-Wagner, 2009).

However, peers can also contribute to a campus climate where misconstructions, fallacies, or conflicts occur to the detriment of African American undergraduate women (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). These subtleties can come from not only White peers, but African American peers as well. This disruption within the intragroup dynamics of African American women can leave them feeling isolated and insecure (Walpole, 2009). In response, African American women have practiced compartmentalization to keep their personal lives completely separate from their professional or educational lives (Bell, 1990). Their management of both worlds is often a balancing act, enabling them to benefit from the resources afforded from both worlds. However, problems and conflicts arise if one world insists on the containment of the other identity. This can be particularly challenging when the African American identity is secondary to the identity shaped by the dominant culture. Many African American women express frustration at having to maintain a bicultural approach (Bell, 1990), and often encounter racism and sexism. This frustration is in addition to battling to prove their worth and competency, and to negate stereotypes and preconceived notions.

Critiquing Career Development Theories

As career development theories emerged, early research failed to consider race, gender, and class as factors in career choices (Jackson & Neville, 1998). Rather,

traditional theories were grounded in research based on the personality, behavior, and habits of White middle class males (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996). These traditional theories were to the exclusion of the personality, behavior, and habits of women, people of color, and individuals of low socioeconomic status (Kerka, 1998; Kimbrough & Salomone, 1993; McCollum, 1998).

While traditional theories were thought to be all-inclusive, in actuality they were specific to one group and unsuitably applied to other groups (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996). Consequently, problems and conflicts emerged from career counseling and development strategies that were based on traditional theories (Kimbrough & Salomone, 1993; Osipow & Fitzerald, 1996). Traditional theories failed to recognize "the severely restricted life opportunities of most minority workers" (Kimbrough & Salomone, 1993, p. 266). Similarly, intelligence and trait tests were administered to gauge and predict professional performance. Such tests were particularly unsuitable for minority groups, whose cultures were not parallel to those cultures of White middle-class Americans (Brown, 1990). These groups included Blacks, who have not "universally assimilated into European American culture" (Parham & Austin, 1994, p. 140). African Americans, as a subset of Blacks, have their own "varying individual and psychosocial experiences" unique to them (Parham & Austin, 1994, p. 140). The practice of assimilation would be reserved for those African Americans who found themselves balancing between two worlds as reflected in the concepts of double consciousness and biculturalism (Bell, 1990; DuBois, 1903).

Recognizing a link between racial identity attitudes and career development, Jackson and Neville (1998) believe that understanding the role of race could effectively

facilitate career development strategies that are culturally relevant. Similar to Jackson and Neville (1998), Bowan (1995) also recognizes the role of racial identity within career development among African Americans. However, both Kerka (1998) and Bowan (1995) went one step further by acknowledging that career development strategies existed for women as well as for African Americans, but strategies were limited in considering individuals who were of both demographics. Additionally, researchers began to recognize the three strands of race, gender, and class as variables that impacted career development and choices (Kerka, 1998; Perrone et al., 2001), yet explored the career development of women, people of color, and people of low socioeconomic status as individual groups (Kerka, 1998). Furthermore, because of stereotypes created by the dominant group, when research was conducted on African American women, it concentrated on issues such as low-income status, teen pregnancy, broken homes, and unwed motherhood (Collins, 2015). In addition, African American women of low-income status were repeatedly examined as welfare recipients as they transitioned from public assistance to employment (Collins, 2015). Rarely did studies focus on college-educated or career-oriented African American women (Bell, 1990). However, this dissertation study focuses on African American undergraduate women transitioning from students to professionals.

Developmental theories related to age-connected stages. At institutions of higher education, career development typically begins as students are presented with opportunities through educational and service activities, as well as work experiences. Life span and experiential learning theories are both linked to career development. Life span is based on an individual's development throughout the course of her life (Super, 1980). Experiential learning is the process of learning with knowledge as the outcome (Kolb,

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1984). Both concepts are among those theories associated with understanding the importance of age-connected stages, including the age range of traditional undergraduate students (Evans, 2011).

Life span theory. Super (1980) identified a psychosocial theory with age-connected stages that represent an individual's life span. The exploration stage of Super's Life Span Theory begins in high school through college, and then includes three years post-college when individuals are employed (Super, 1980). This stage captures individuals formulating questions, identifying their strengths and interests, and discovering possible career choices and outcomes (Super, 1980, 1983).

Experiential learning theory. Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), as defined by Kolb (1984), is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 14). The specialization stage of experiential learning is the time between post-secondary schooling through early work, and it represents both occupational and personal experiences as a young adult (Kolb, 1981; Kolb & Kolb, 2005b), and is a key component to student learning and the overall personal development of undergraduate students (Kolb, 1981; Kolb & Kolb, 2005b).

Additionally, Kolb (1981) identified four types of learning abilities that individuals must possess to become successful learners in the experiential learning process. Those abilities are Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation. There are four learning styles frequently found among these types of learners. Those styles are the Converger, Assimilator, Accommodator, and Diverger (Kolb, 1981; Kolb & Kolb, 2005a). Each style speaks not

only to the learner's ability, but also to the learner's main strength and potential career path.

Of the four learning styles, Diverger appeared as the style closest linked to African American college students and their choice of professions. Their abilities lie with Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation, while their main strength rests with creativity (Kolb, 1981). Divergers examine situations from multiple points of view, express their emotions, and are people-oriented. Their interests are broad and culturally based, which cause them to gravitate to professional careers in social service such as counselors, consultants, and managers (Kolb, 1981; Kolb & Kolb, 2005a).

As college students, African Americans have tended to pursue social service careers (Evans & Herr, 1991). These decisions may be based on concrete experience with reflective observation of their environment, experiences, and demands. African American college students are believed to identify career choices based on the need for safety and racial tolerance (Littig, 1968). Even if other careers better complement their professional strengths and interests, African American college students often eliminate those choices if they believe racial discrimination is prevalent in those careers (Evans & Herr, 1991; Littig, 1968). Furthermore, it is believed that the motivation of African American undergraduate women has been fueled by their socialization (Hamilton, 1996). They have been socialized to believe their education is to assist with the uplift of the African American community. The importance of giving back to the community may supersede any personal interests and aspirations (Hamilton, 1996).

This socialization is similar to that of the African American middle class, which has also believed in the uplift of African Americans who are poor (Pattillo, 2013).

Whereas African American undergraduate women are known to use their educational endeavors to assist and uplift (Hamilton, 1996), the African American middle class has used their involvement in church and community groups to accomplish the same (Pattillo, 2013). As divergers, this relates to the consciousness of both groups regarding their identity and experiences as African Americans, their responsibility to community, and their position to make a difference (Sampson & Milam, 1975). Moreover, for African American undergraduate women this may later tie into the struggle with maintaining a bicultural approach as African American professional women (Bell, 1990).

Career Theories that Examine Multiple Factors as the Conceptual Framework

The reasons behind individual career choices are the basis of career theories that examine multiple factors. Reasons may be associated with such factors as identity, environment, experiences, and demands. Social learning theory of career decision-making (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990), and social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent & Brown, 1996) are two theories that have discussed those various factors and influences shaping career decisions. Appropriately, these two theories serve as the conceptual framework for my study.

Social learning theory of career decision-making. Social learning theory of career decision-making, identified by Krumboltz, explores the factors that impact career choices (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990). This theory emphasizes the combination and relationship of multiple factors. The following four categories of factors are identified as influencing career decisions: genetic characteristics, environmental conditions and events, learning experiences, and task approach skills (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990).

Genetic characteristics are inherited qualities that may act as constraints against educational and professional preferences and abilities. Race and gender are among these genetic characteristics. While Mitchell and Krumboltz (1990) consider race and gender genetic characteristics, race and gender, as defined in Chapter 1, are social constructions (Brewer, 1999; Omi & Winant, 1994). As social constructions, they are uniquely intertwined and systematically entrenched (Brewer, 1999).

Environmental conditions are linked to social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances that shape the lives of individuals (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990). Learning experiences help to formulate an individual's knowledge base and personal perceptions. Past experiences are part of learning experiences that often influence career preferences, skills, and paths. Lastly, task approach skills are the relationship between the prior three categories. Task approach skills are connected to values and habits as well as mental frames and emotional intelligence (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990).

Generalizations are developed from these four categories (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990). In the case of people of color, generalizations are created about both self and worldly perspectives based on lived experiences (Kimbrough & Salomone, 1993). The genetic characteristics of minorities are believed to have shaped their environmental conditions, which in turn shape their learning experiences (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990). The past and present learning experiences of minorities have greatly influenced their career decisions (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990). This concept may be additional credence as to why African American college students pursue certain career paths and eliminate others (Evans & Herr, 1991; Littig, 1968).

Social cognitive career theory. Similar to social learning theory of career decision-making, social cognitive career theory (SCCT) considers multiple influences that impact the understanding of career goals and self-efficacy. SCCT is a derivative of Bandura's social cognitive theory, which defines self-efficacy as a perception that an individual possesses regarding the capability to establish and implement specific actions to achieve desired goals (Bandura, 1994). SCCT believes the environment of a young individual is shaped by activities guided by key persons such as family members, friends, school peers, and educators (Lent & Brown, 1996). Those activities are significant, as they help to develop and hone skills, standards, goals, and potential career interests. Continual interest and positive outcomes from early developmental activities produce self-efficacy, and a sense of competency and value within an individual (Lent & Brown, 1996).

Self-efficacy, along with ability, expectations, and goals, impacts performance, which in turn reinforces self-efficacy (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2013). Researchers have held career counselors in higher education accountable, and believe career development strategies should take into consideration socio-political issues of racism, sexism, and classism that hinder the success of diverse groups of students (McCollum, 1998; Perrone et al., 2001). Due to the affects of these issues on diverse groups, including African American undergraduate women, career choices are limited, career exploration is restricted, and career expectations are lowered (Jackson & Neville, 1998; Lent & Brown, 1996; McCollum, 1998). Career development activities that include choices, exploration, and expectations are based on self-efficacy and lived experiences that have shaped the perspectives of African American women (Lent & Brown, 1996).

Incorporating Black Feminist Thought as the Ideological Lens

In view of the standpoint offered by Black feminist thinkers, Black feminist thought is the appropriate ideological lens for this study on African American undergraduate women. Black feminist thought understands the history and lived experiences of African American women. Its thoughtful insights represent African American women and their many facets of life, including career development and aspirations. Black feminist thought postulates the perpetual invisibility of African American women and discusses the history, experiences, and ideas that have shaped an inequality permeating the larger social structure (Collins, 1990).

Noted as an "impressive political paradigm," Black feminism has served as a platform for Black feminists, who spoke to issues unique to African American women during the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries (Taylor, 1998, p. 251). Black feminist thought contends that African American women experience a reality different than the dominant group, and the interpretation of that reality also differs between these two groups (Collins, 1989, 1990), a concept supported by other researchers that groups do not recognize reality in the same manner (Tierney, 1992). African American women and the dominant group have been described as possessing unequal power congruent with unequal access to resources (Collins, 1989). African American women are bound together based on a "legacy of struggle against racism and sexism" despite era, age, class, orientation, or ethnicity (Collins, 1990, p. 22).

A legacy of unwavering efforts beginning in the 19th century. The interpretation of women has been intimately connected with the historical landscape of America (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Historical eras, such as anti-slavery, women's suffrage,

and civil rights, have helped redefine and transform the roles of African American women throughout history (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). These key movements combined to create a legacy of unwavering efforts undertaken by African American women toward change (Barnett, Brewer, & Kuumba, 1999; Collins, 1990).

      Sojourner Truth. Early discussions on the intersection of race, gender, and class were limited to conversations initiated by Black feminist thinkers, whose traditions date back to the 19th century (Collins, 1986; Taylor, 1998). African American women, who were mothers, teachers, activists, preachers, and musicians, vocally shared their position as women of color (Collins, 1986). Sojourner Truth, an African American woman enslaved at birth, championed the abolishment of slavery as well as equal rights for all women (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). She is best noted for posing the question Ar'nt I a Woman? during a women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851 (Beal, 2008; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1981; Mullings, 1994). Truth's speech called into question the dichotomy of what constitutes a woman (Crenshaw, 1989). Truth drew the distinction between the humane treatment of White women versus the inhumane treatment of African American women (Crenshaw, 1989; Mullings, 1994). This treatment included the living conditions of White women versus the living and working conditions of African American women as slaves. Moreover, she explored the meaning of motherhood for both African American and White women, with African American women bearing offspring for the primary purpose of their owners' economic gains. African American mothers grieved at the loss of their children to the slave market (Mullings, 1994).

      Later used as the inspiration of a book authored by bell hooks, Truth's Ar'nt I a Woman? raised the notion of intersectionality of race and gender, though the term,

intersectionality, had not yet been coined (Crenshaw, 2015). The public discussions offered by Truth were an alarming analysis of socio-political, economic, and cultural practices; those practices resulted in the historic marginalization of African American women (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). She particularly challenged the individual mindset and mental frames that categorized and stereotyped women.

For example, over the course of history there has been a vast difference in the images of African American and White women. The dominant group has traditionally aligned African American women with images of objectification and subjugation (Browne & Misra, 2003). Asexuality and promiscuity are stereotypes associated with African American women (Collins, 1990, 2015; Mullings, 1994). Whereas, femininity and passiveness are images associated with White women, who as the female ideal, were believed to be in need of protection (Browne & Misra, 2003; Mullings, 1994). The "defeminization" of African American women perpetuated the differences between both groups of women (Mullings, 1994, p. 267). African American women were seen as not being of a specific gender or having traits identifiable with being a woman. These traits were reserved for White women only (Mullings, 1994). The stereotypical images of African American women included the protective mammy and Aunt Jemima, the happy and obedient slave, as well as the sexual Jezebel, and evil Sapphire (Collins, 1990, 2015; hooks, 1981; Morrison, 1971; Mullings, 1994). These ideologies were created by the dominant group as justification and rationalization for the abusive power and treatment of African American women (Mullings, 1994).

The continuance of Black feminism in the 20th and 21st centuries. While Black feminism began to take root in the 19th century, it was not until the 1960s that

scholarly discussions included African American women, as a sample, due to their involvement in the civil rights movement and other efforts for social change and justice (Belkhir & Barnett, 2001; Taylor, 1998). In fact, the civil rights movement is marked by the second surge of feminism, also noted as the women's liberation movement, with the first surge connected to the abolitionist movement. The purpose of Black feminism continued to develop among Black feminists and lesbians of the 20th century. Written projects emerged to advance the awareness and commitment of Black feminism (Barnett et al., 1999). Collaborative efforts and individual scholarship contributed to the evolution of Black feminist thought in both the 20th and 21st centuries.

The Combahee River Collective. Among the most notable collaborative projects was the Combahee River Collective. Released in 1977, the Combahee River Collective was revered by researchers as a statement that combined both feminist and political perspectives to analyze the realities of African American women (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Collins, 2015; Jones & Guy-Sheftall, 2015; Taylor, 1998). The Combahee River Collective was a group of women comprised largely of Black lesbian feminists (Jones & Buy-Sheftall, 2015). Black lesbian feminists, in particular, were regarded as "the most pronounced group of African American women that continued to struggle in a collective fashion around feminist issues" (Taylor, 1998, p. 249). As part of the Combahee River Collective (1977), the members proclaimed:

> We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.

As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face. (p. 1)

The Combahee River Collective (1977) discussed four main areas: the origin of Black feminism, the perspective of Black feminism, the challenges in unifying Black feminists, and the issues and practices of Black feminists. In their statement, they recognize earlier feminists, who included women such as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, and Mary Terrell. They also discuss the evolution of Black feminists as based on the socio-political movements that included the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, civil rights of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as Black Nationalism and the Black Panther movement. However, the Combahee River Collective (1977) characterized the truth of African American women within these movements as "disillusionment" (p. 2) because these movements failed to focus on issues unique to African American women. As African American women battled racism and sexism, the civil rights and women's liberation movements were marked by the evolution of Black feminist thought in part because neither movement exclusively met the needs of African American women.

Similar to the sentiments expressed by the Combahee River Collective, scholars such as Morrison (1971) and Crenshaw (1989) discuss that African American women found the women's liberation movement to be insignificant to the progress of African American women. African American women did not trust and were suspicious of White women (Morrison, 1971). They believed racism was not limited to White men, but believed White women harbored the same sentiments. Similar to Black feminist thought, Morrison (1971) believed that to understand this perspective, one must first understand

African American women and their unique experiences from their imposed categorization. Moreover, White women used the African American movement and the history of African American women as a springboard for their own interests (Crenshaw, 1989; Morrison, 1971). African American women did not "want to be used again to help somebody gain power – a power that is carefully kept out of their hands" (Morrison, 1971, p. 15). Morrison (1971) presented the view that White women were concerned about their own advancements, which included educational development and occupational growth. African American women, on the other hand, were concerned about basic adult education and workforce entry. The lives and experiences of African American and White women were simply different.

Scholars believed that the Black lesbian feminists, under the Combahee River Collective, used their lived experiences to discuss oppression as well as the interconnection of race, gender, sexuality, and economics (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Collins, 2015; Jones & Guy-Sheftall, 2015; Taylor, 1998). They argued that it was difficult to separate the strands of race, gender, and class when all three strands work concurrently in the oppression of African American women (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Jones & Guy-Sheftall, 2015). As it was intended, researchers viewed the Combahee River Collective Statement as an invitation for all African American women to unite under one sisterhood regardless of sexual orientation. Unification was imperative as members depicted the relationship between African American women and the American system as detrimental based on historical ideologies and practices. The Combahee River Collective (1977) echoed the stereotypical images, painful treatment, and imposed degradation of African American women described by Truth over 120 years earlier.

Moreover, the unification of African American women was vital as the multi-faceted advancement of White women was limited to the needs of White women only (Collective, 1977). Activists, such as Wells and Terrell, delivered these same sentiments before the Combahee River Collective. The reaction of African American men to the prospect of African American women advancing was unfavorable. This reaction was based on the idea that they were losing their primary advocates with whom they carried the African American struggle through the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and they needed their female counterparts to continue with these efforts (Collective, 1977; Morrison, 1971). The underlying matter for African American men was that race, not gender, defined the lives of men and women in their community. The patriarchal influence set the tone and decided which struggle dominated the other (Crenshaw, 1989).

The Combahee River Collective (1977) believed that African American women did not have the privileges, power, and resources that the dominant group possessed. In the following years, Collins (1989) discussed the same issues of unequal power and access to resources. While the intersection of race and gender may be acknowledged, the intersection of class must be better understood as the marginalization of African American women on the fringe of the labor market, a reality discussed by the Combahee River Collective (1977).

bell hooks. bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins were among the next set of Black scholars who used the framework of Black feminist thought to interpret the roles and experiences of African American women. In doing so, these scholars challenged the mindset of mainstream America. hooks has been described as an "unflinching critic and contributor" to contemporary scholarship (Valdivia, 2002, p. 430). As a scholar, her

voice epitomized "intellectual integrity and emotional honesty" (Cheng, 1997, p. 558).

However, her work has been criticized for a lack of scholarly references (Cheng, 1997).

To the discontent of her critics, hooks believed scholarly writing was exclusive and came

from an elite perspective that was typically from White male points of view. Her writings

made academics uncomfortable as these academics traditionally relied on scholarly work

to define authority. Rather, hooks based her authority on experiences drawn from the

lives of African American women (Cheng, 1997; Valdivia, 2002).

In hooks' writings, she incorporated her personal experiences as an African

American woman growing up in Kentucky during the 1950s (Valdivia, 2002). While

class was not discussed during hooks' childhood, problems with money were discussed

and attributed to race (hooks, 2000). hooks' father, who earned an honest salary, never

made the same salary as his White male counterparts for doing same work, due to race.

However, in the home, hooks' father was the dominant figure because he was male and

the primary financial provider for the family (hooks, 2000). She discusses her father's

disrespect for women, as he would override her mother's authority, believed women

should not be too educated, and treated women like objects that could be bought (hooks,

2000).

hooks' awareness of injustice and dominance sharpened as she attended Stanford

University, a predominantly White educational setting (Valdivia, 2002). At Stanford,

hooks discovered how important class was for both students and faculty. For example,

privileged students loathed people from the working class. Many faculty members of

class privilege felt the same and desired to teach students of the same class privilege.

hooks (2000) discusses her own conflict between her commitment to the working class

and desire to attain more in life. Other students of the working class experienced this same conflict, but many cracked under these pressures.

The objective of hooks' compilation of work was to dismantle the dominant group's mentality, which rested on values of superiority, capitalism, and patriarchy (Cheng, 1997). Race, culture, gender, sexual identity, and class are among the determinants of superiority and inferiority. Much of hooks' work introduced and critiqued issues of ethics generated by racial discrimination and gender oppression (Valdivia, 2002). hooks viewed the intersectionality of gender and race as elevating both White men and women, with the highest level occupied by White men. Among hooks' most notable work, was her first book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (hooks, 1981). hooks (1981) captured the history of African American women beginning with slavery through movements that included women's liberation, civil rights, and Black power.

These movements relied on the participation of African American women to form a united front, whether with African American men or White women, against social injustices. However, these movements were not intended to focus on the struggles of African American women, whose lives were shaped by the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. Many White women activists were viewed as racists (Morrison, 1971), while African American men activists were revealed as advocates for a patriarchal system (hooks, 1981). Unlike their male and female counterparts, African American women struggled against racial and sexual devaluation through institutional racism and a patriarchal system, a theme threaded throughout hooks' book. Both perpetuated the continued marginalization of African American women through stereotypical images

formed during their enslavement. Building on the insights of Sojourner Truth, hooks (1981) examined the stereotypes imposed on African American women by colonial America. While the African American man was de-masculinized, the African American woman was masculinized as she was viewed as less of a woman. Similar to the treatment of African American men, African American women labored in the fields and were beaten just as severely.

Moreover, the sexual abuse and mistreatment of African American women, which began during enslavement, were orchestrated by White men and has lasted for centuries. hooks (1981) discusses that White men perceived African American women as sexually permissive and the initiators of sex; hence the image of Jezebel (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981). As opposed to being acknowledged as women, they were thought of as savages, objects, and unhuman-like. These misperceptions justified the rape and sexual mistreatment of African American women and girls (hooks, 1981; Mullings, 1994).

Also imposed upon African American women was their inability to be feminine or ladylike. This fueled the creation of another negative image that labeled African American women as self-sacrificing and hard-working maternal figures. As described by hooks (1981), the image of a strong matriarch led to the theory of matriarchy, which was in direct opposition to the idea of a patriarchal system embraced by African American men. As more African American women worked outside of the home, they were perceived as the stronger figure compared to their male counterparts. This diminished the manhood of African American men and only added to the their de-masculinization, which began with slavery and continued through post slavery (Giddings, 1984; hooks, 1981). This perception had a negative impact on the relationships between African

American men and women (Beal, 2008).

Daniel Moynihan examined the theory of matriarchy in a 1965 document, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, published by the United States Department of Labor. Known as "The Moynihan Report," this document identifies unemployment and low wages as the overall problem of African Americans (Gans, 2011). It propagates the accusation that African American women are responsible for the problems that reside in African American homes and communities (Gans, 2011; Giddings, 1984; Ryan, 1972). Moynihan (1965) notes that there is a role reversal between African American men and women, with women being the dominant figure at home as well as educationally and professionally. His critique centers on low income families, which he considers unstable due to the number of households lead by women. The children within these households are also a focal point of the report, as Moynihan describes them as illegitimate, welfare dependent, uneducated, and soon to be unemployed (Gans, 2011; Ryan, 1972; Wilson, 2009).

There are earlier critiques of the African American family prior to the Moynihan report. However, the Moynihan report is flawed and controversial. A large part of this response is due to Moynihan using White norms as the criteria by which others should live (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, Moynihan touts that African American households need a nuclear family structure and any other structure is unstable and pathological (Gans, 2011). Regarding employment, African American women, unlike White women, have worked outside the home. Their independence is out of necessity, and not a deliberate tactic to reverse roles with their male counterparts (Mullings, 1994). Not only does the report lack supporting data, but also among the debate is the use of the word pathology

throughout the report. Unlike its medical meaning, it is used to symbolize the social upheaval of African American households and communities (Gans, 2011).

The expressive nature in which the report was written and then repeatedly inflated gave way to much controversy (Wilson, 2009). The 1965 report was released during a period when public opinion of African Americans was dismal, and African American leadership worked diligently to re-instill communal pride and self-affirmation (Wilson, 2009). Additionally, Moynihan's tone in the report reflected a "blaming the victim" mentality, which has been applied to nearly every social problem that has existed within American communities (Ryan, 1972; Wilson, 2009). Among those social problems are unemployment, poor education, dilapidated housing, and crime. Americans, who blame the victims, question why individuals, particularly poor individuals, do not or cannot rise above their circumstances (Ryan, 1972).

Patricia Hill Collins. hooks (1981) embraced Black feminism as a means to extend the theory and practice of traditional feminism to include African American women as well as to validate their existence and experiences. Her perspective of African American women was presented as an "outsider within," which helped frame how African American women viewed their reality including self, family, and society (Collins, 1986, p. S16).

However, it was Patricia Hill Collins who further expounded on the term Black feminist thought. She is described as a leader and educator who dared her peers and students to critically reflect on the complexities of race and gender (Schiller, 2000). Collins (1990) believes the oppression of African American women was organized along three levels: (a) the exploitation of African American women's labor, which was based

on economics; (b) the political issue of suppression that deprived African American women of the rights, privileges, and opportunities experienced by White men; and (c) the negative images of African American women created by the dominant group during slavery to perpetuate subjugation (Collins, 1990).

Collins (1986) applies the concept of outsider within to her peers who are Black feminist scholars. She believes that Black feminist scholars are in a rare position, both as outsiders within and as marginalized intellectuals, to convey and add the standpoint of African American women within academic discussions. Because of this, Collins believes that Black feminist thought held sociological significance. She identifies three significant themes: the value of self-definition and self-evaluation; the interconnection of race, gender, and class; and the redefinition of culture (Collins, 1986).

The importance of self-definition and self-evaluation among African American women challenges the external definitions and stereotypical images imposed upon them. Black feminists have encouraged African American women to self-define and evaluate who they are in an effort to question the negative imagery as well as the integrity and purpose of those who have defined and controlled these images (Collins, 1986, 1990). An understanding of self revealed African American women as human subjects rather than as objects and non-humans (Collins, 1986, 2000; hooks, 1981). In other words, this process of understanding helps move the treatment of African Americans from objects of knowledge to agents of knowledge (Collins, 2015).

While the practice of self-definition substantiates the everyday standpoint of African American women, Black feminist thought conveys that standpoint beyond the African American community (Collins, 1989, 1990). However, Collins (1989) recognizes

the challenges faced by Black women scholars who utilized Black feminist thought. Their

assertions are not always deemed credible by peers, because they did not meet or

subscribe to the traditional criteria of academia. Collins (1989) referred to this as the

knowledge-validation process, established by White male academics. hooks was among

those Black women scholars who presented new knowledge, but were challenged by

critics who believed that experiences did not constitute authority or credibility (Cheng,

1997).

As the second theme, Black feminist thought has extensively focused on race,

gender, and class as an intersection of oppression for African American women (Collins,

1986). Collins (1986) commented that Black feminists, such as Truth, presented a

perspective of subjugation that is in direct opposition to the perspective presented by the

dominant group. The reality of African American women oppressed by race, gender, and

class was unlike the reality of White women who had their whiteness to offset gender

oppression, and unlike the reality of African American men who had their manhood to

reduce the imposed humiliation of race (Collins, 1986). This is similar to other scholars

who have discussed the privileges of being White and of being male (Cheng, 1997;

McIntosh, 1992). Collins (1986) highlighted the strategic approach of "assigning a group

inferior status, then using that inferior status as proof of the group's inferiority" (p. S20).

Dating back to slavery, the stereotypical images attached to African American women

were labels used to produce inferiority.

The final theme identified by Collins (1986), was the redefinition of culture.

Collins (1986) used the term culture as defined by Mullings (1986). It is represented by

symbols, values, and beliefs used as a reference by which individuals cope with specific

conditions and situations in their lives. For the African American middle class, forms of African American art and literature as well as the prominence of African American figures serve as cultural symbols (Pattillo, 2013). These symbols represent a sense of pride and belonging among African Americans to their community, despite class or perceived social mobility (Pattillo, 2013). For African American women, the symbols, values, and beliefs that emerge from self-definition and self-evaluation are critical in understanding the concrete experiences shaped by race, gender, and class (Collins, 1986, 1989, 1990). Church, family, arts, literature, and sisterhood are parts of culture (Collins, 1986, 1989, 1990). These cultural elements have been among the traditional coping strategies used by African Americans as a group (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). According to Collins (1990), families, churches, and organizations based in African American communities are safe spaces where African American women can find and share their voices. They are ideal places where African American women can create self-definitions and build a resistance to the negative imageries imposed upon them (Collins, 1990).

Conclusion

Life span and experiential learning theories speak to the importance of career development activities during various ages. However, these theories are most useful when all individuals have equal opportunities to participate in the same activities during a specific age range for continuous development. Career concepts such as social learning theory of career decision making and social cognitive career theory examine the connection of multiple factors that impact career decisions. As the conceptual framework these theories outline the dynamics that shape career aspirations and goals. Similarly Black feminist thought, as the ideological lens, offers insight on how African American

women continue to manage a litany of challenges based on the specific dynamics of race, gender, and class. Moreover, Black feminist thought understands that African American women have not historically experienced equal opportunities, which include career development and choices.

Chapter 3

Methodology

In this chapter, I reiterate the purpose of my study and the research questions, which are answered in Chapters 4 and 5. I provide the rationale for the chosen methodology, strategy of inquiry, and the method for data collection. Also discussed are the selection of participants as well as the rigor, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations of the study.

Purpose and Research Questions

As previously stated, the purpose of this dissertation was to explore the perceptions of African American women regarding their career aspirations, and the impact that race, gender, and class have on those aspirations. As the researcher, my goal was to examine the perceptions of African American undergraduate women at a predominately White institution. Based upon my topic and purpose, the following research questions were proposed as part of my dissertation study. I anticipated that the findings would reveal the need for career development that is uniquely designed for African American women in an effort to strengthen career readiness, increase employment opportunities, and help avoid the pitfall of unemployment among this group.

RQ1: How do African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White liberal arts institution develop career aspirations?

RQ2: How do African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White liberal arts institution understand issues of race, gender, and class as pertaining to career goals?

Method and Strategy of Inquiry

To answer my research questions, I adopted a research design that afforded me

the opportunity to capture rich and in-depth descriptions that represented the opinions and

experiences of the study's participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). To garner the

descriptive information needed, a qualitative approach was used to collect data from the

study's group (Creswell, 2014). More specifically, the qualitative design of inquiry was

narrative research.

Narrative inquiry. Clandinin (2013) defines narrative inquiry as "an approach to

the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experiences as a source of

important knowledge and understanding" (p. 17). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) view

narrative inquiry "as a study of the ways people experienced the world" (p. 2). What

makes this type of study unique is that it is a relational examination conducted by the

researcher (Clandidin, 2013). The relation is the interpersonal connection between the

person and her world as well as between events and her feelings. Moreover, it represents

an understanding of the past, present, and future (Clandinin, 2013). In order for my

participants to relay their experiences and feelings, it was appropriate that the information

was shared narratively through storytelling to capture the context in which each

participant has lived (Clandidin, 2013; Connelly & Clandidin, 1990). In addition,

information conveyed narratively made their experiences distinct and unique.

Additionally, narrative inquiry requires that the researcher place her life alongside

the lives of her participants to understand where she fits within the landscape (Clandinin,

2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Due to this forged relationship, narrative inquiry is

one of ethics, in which I as the researcher questioned my social accountability and the

accountability of others to my participants (Clandinin, 2013). For this reason, narrative inquiry exemplified an ethic of care, which is the ability to take into consideration the perspectives of other people (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). In turn it called for me, as the researcher, to exhibit concern, empathy, and a connection to my participants (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). This was of significant importance as participants recounted their experiences, which were retold by me (Clandinin, 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Similar to narrative inquiry and the connection to its participants, Black feminist thought, which was my ideological lens, embodies the stories and experiences of African American women regarding the world in which they live and what that means for their future (Collins, 1990). As demonstrated in the literature, these candid conversations and stories date back as early as the 19th century, when Black feminist thinkers, such as Sojourner Truth, began to interpret the world of African American women as framed by race, gender, and class (Collins, 1986; Taylor, 1998).

These conversations continued through the works of hooks (1981, 2000) and Collins (1986, 1989, 1990, 2015), and have entered into the 21st century with the understanding that race, gender, and class have impacted African American women and the various aspects of their lives, which include employment and economic opportunities. Understanding the history and lived experiences of African American women is an essential element of Black feminist thought (Brewer, 1999). This understanding is a shared element of narrative inquiry. As the researcher, I positioned my own life alongside the lives of my participants, and rediscovered where I fit into their landscape. To honor the lived experiences of my participants, I attempted to demonstrate an ethic of care as defined by narrative inquiry (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011).

Participants. Using narrative research, my study continued these conversations with African American undergraduate women, whose perceptions regarding socio-political issues of race, gender, and class were best captured narratively to examine their experiences and feelings (Clandidin, 2013; Connelly & Clandidin, 1990). As indicated in the research questions, the study was conducted at a predominantly White liberal arts institution, where African American undergraduate women served as the study's sample. African American women classified as rising seniors or recent graduates were identified and recruited for participation. I believed that rising seniors and recent graduates provided more in-depth information as they were preparing for life after college.

For the purpose of this study, five African American women were included as participants. Participants were diverse in majors and activities. More specifically, at least one participant had a typical major that is characteristic of an African American undergraduate student, while at least one other participant had an atypical major, which is uncharacteristic of an African American undergraduate student. A typical major for an African American undergraduate student is one that leads to a career that is social service related because it is believed that this field is more racially tolerant (Evans & Herr, 1991). A typical major has also been preferred by African American undergraduate women, who have been socialized to give back to their communities, and therefore have determined that the needs of their community outweigh their personal aspirations (Hamilton, 1996). In addition, at least one participant had typical involvement within school activities, while one had atypical or limited involvement.

As shared by Patton (1990), "there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry" (p. 184). A small number of participants that offer a wealth of detailed

information can prove very valuable (Patton, 1990). The sample of African American women for this study was "purposefully" chosen (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Because a particular subgroup of students is purposefully selected for in-depth information specific to their lives, the sample is referred to as a homogenous sample (Patton, 1990). The study included women having either one or two parents who are African American. However, if an undergraduate woman self-identified as African American, she would have been included in the study but not necessarily in the analysis. Nonetheless, participants associated with the category of African American as the identifiers pertained to race, skin color, or a common past characterized by oppression and discrimination (Thompson, 2011). Note, all five women participating in this study had a least one parent who was African American.

I intentionally distinguished African American women from the larger Black female population of students, as the history presented in my literature review represented that of African American women. The larger Black female population comprises not only students who are African American, but also students who are African, Caribbean, West Indian, and Afro-Latina. These other subgroups may have their own experiences separate from the experiences of African Americans though these individual subgroups may be seen by society as the same as African Americans.

Selected participants were identified with the assistance of Student Affairs, which houses such offices as Student Development, the Career Center, and Equal Opportunity Fund (EOF) program. The EOF program is a state funded initiative focused on providing financial assistance to students who are state residents and economically disadvantaged. I also collaborated with two Black faculty, one Black staff, and one White staff; all of

whom serve as mentors to African American students and/or advisors to student groups whose memberships include African American undergraduate women.

These key offices and individuals were asked to not only identify prospective participants, but to provide the initial contact with prospective participants. Key offices and individuals assisted with the introduction of the research project and listed me as the primary contact. I sent a follow-up email message to those students interested in participating for an informal meeting, where I introduced myself as a doctoral candidate and the primary researcher, the purpose of the study, and how information was to be collected from participants.

Instrumentation. Semi-structured interviews comprised of open-ended questions were administered to collect data. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allowed participants to respond in their own voices, with the prospect of elaborating on or raising new ideas (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This strategy was conducted with the goal of garnering information pertinent to addressing the research questions.

The use of field notes was incorporated to complement the primary instrumentation of interviewing. Field notes were significant in recording additional information during the interview process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Such notes served as a narrative record of each participant as well as the interview location, setting, and the atmosphere (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). The context and tone between each participant and myself as the researcher, was narratively logged. This involved noting any gaps and periods of silence, tension, rigidity, or anxiety exhibited by participants during the interview or in response to specific interview questions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

While the use of field notes supported me with my recall of the participants and their interviews, the use of a journal supported me with recording and managing my personal feelings, thoughts, and reactions regarding my participants and their responses (Maxwell, 2013). In other words, my journal served as a tool to assist with my reflective process. Narrative inquiry required that I, as the researcher, place my life alongside the lives of my participants to understand where I fit within the landscape (Clandinin, 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As an African American woman and researcher recording the experiences of my participants, the process was reminiscent of my own experiences.

Interview protocol. The interview protocol consisted of six questions (Appendix). Questions pertained to background, including family and upbringing; childhood aspirations; declared major; future occupation or career aspirations; perception of preparedness from a predominantly White institution. Probing questions were also asked when participants needed guidance through their narratives.

Data analysis. Data analysis for the interview findings consisted of an eight-step process that included: organizing, familiarizing, identifying, coding, generating themes, interpreting, searching, and writing (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). The audio recording of each interview was repeatedly listened to and then transcribed by me as the researcher. The transcripts were compared to the audio recordings for accuracy. Transcriptions were used for the purpose of organizing and familiarizing myself with the participants' responses. These two steps were followed by identifying and coding key words and phrases from participant interviews for the purpose of developing categories and generating themes that emerged from the interview findings. Emerging themes, which is

a result of coding, assisted in the substance and analysis of data (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Saldana, 2013).

Data analysis and interpretation of my field notes was also conducted. My notes, also transcribed, were repeatedly read to determine what I had collected by way of information. The exercise of repeated reading assisted me in building accounts that were chronicled and summarized (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). This information collected from field notes was coded to identify emerging topics and themes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Saldana, 2013).

Trustworthiness

There were threats of credibility and dependability that can impact the trustworthiness of the study. To ensure credibility, I employed semi-structured interviews with questions that were open-ended. Unlike close-ended questions, open-ended questions allowed me to present a comprehensive story based on the findings from the participants' lived experiences. In turn, the use of interview transcripts assisted with "member checks," which enabled me to take the interview responses back to participants for validation, elaboration, and revisions (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 65).

Conducting interviews as well as keeping field notes and a journal was assurance that I produced a comprehensive picture of what was being researched. In other words, the use of interviews, field notes, and a journal was my attempt to crystallize my findings (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). The practice of crystallization allows qualitative researchers to extend beyond the more traditional concepts of science and validity, and allows the texts collected to support themselves through interpretivism, also viewed as scholarship (Ellingson, 2011; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). The crystallization of

qualitative projects increases the chance of a more comprehensive picture of the group being studied; employs more than one form of writing or narrative, such as interviews, field notes, and journals, to create a blend; and incorporates a substantial and meaningful degree of the researcher's self throughout the research process (Ellingson, 2011).

Moreover, while I was in the field, I interacted with my participants to build research relationships (Maxwell, 2013). As discussed, narrative inquiry afforded me the opportunity to connect with participants as I collected data on their perceptions and sought to relay their beliefs, stories, and experiences of race, gender, and class (Clandinin, 2013). Finally, assistance provided by colleagues was crucial throughout the research process, as my colleagues served as debriefers and advisors, which increased both the credibility and dependability of the study (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues can exist throughout the process of any study (Maxwell, 2013). Confronting those issues can be the difference between a study that is fair and a study that is unethical (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). There are specific standards that researchers should abide by to increase the responsibility of their studies. Those standards require that a study be conducted using rules that are suitable and competent, in a manner that honorably represents its participants, and with a level of sensitivity to the research topic and setting (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

Institutional Review Boards. Before any inquiry commenced, the dissertation process required approval by two Institutional Review Boards (IRBs): first of the institution where the study was administered and second of Rowan University. As part of the IRB process, I submitted an IRB application to the appropriate institutions. The

applications detailed the study, the administered assessment tool, and the target group

recruited as participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The application emphasized the

use of participant consent, and the use of pseudonyms in place of participant names to

ensure anonymity. Once approval was granted by both IRBs, the methods component of

the study commenced.

Participants. Ethical considerations weighed consisted of not only my respect for

the topic and significance of the study, but for the participants as well. Race, gender, and

class continue to be sensitive topics that deserve thoughtful deliberation on my part as the

researcher. This included an exhaustive search of the literature, and a study based on care

so that all aspects of the study were addressed with comprehensiveness.

Prior to its commencement, full disclosure about the study was shared with each

prospective participant. Participants were presented with an introduction to the interview

protocol, which discussed the following: the use of an audio recorder to capture the

interview conversation; the destroying of all recordings after three years; the

confidentiality of all information; and the signing of a participant consent form

(Clandinin, 2013; Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The introduction was

used to explain that participation was voluntary and participants could chose to decline to

answer any question they wish or withdrawal from the interview at any point. This is of

particular significance since the intention was not to inflict harm to participants, which

was also relayed in the introduction. In addition, the introduction listed the approximate

time the interview would last, and reiterated the purpose of the study.

As the researcher, it was my responsibility to create a non-threatening

environment where participants comfortably responded to questions (Rubin & Rubin,

2012). As a qualitative study with narrative inquiry, participants lent their voices to relay opinions, perceptions, and experiences. It was my responsibility to collect all data with discretion and confidentiality in an effort to honor the participants.

Personal beliefs, assumptions, and experiences. As an African American woman, it is important for me to understand how young African American women perceive the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. I have my own beliefs, assumptions, and experiences that may have shaped how I conducted the study, related to participants, phrased questions, and relayed findings. However, as the researcher, I made every attempt to be aware of my biases prior to the start of the study. I piloted interview questions to avoid inferences and leading questions, and I reviewed the interview protocol for structure and guidance to assist in managing my biases. Avoiding inferences and leading questions may also reduce the risk of social desirability, which is the act of participants to present themselves in a "favorable image" by distorting responses they believe to be more acceptable (Fisher, 1993, p. 303). Finally, I also maintained a journal, where I recorded my personal responses and insights throughout the research process (Maxwell, 2013). This assisted me in tracking of my thoughts, reflections, and next steps.

My positionality. While it was important that my positionality did not bias my study, it also inspired me as the researcher. Positionality is created from an identity based on features that include age, religion (Peshkin, 2001), and in the case of this study, my race, gender, and class. Many unique experiences emerge from our identities, which in turn position us and shape our perceptions and comprehensions (Peshkin, 2001; Takacs, 2003). In the case of research, those experiences can assist the researcher with a comprehensive understanding of the research topic (Takacs, 2003). My experiences as an

African American woman provided me with unique insight to information and knowledge that other individuals cannot dispute (Takacs, 2003). It was the lens through which I chose my research topic for further exploration (Peshkin, 2001). This is similar to hooks' (2000) incorporation of her personal experiences to guide her works of scholarship (Validivia, 2002), including her "outsider within" approach to relay the reality of African American women (Collins, 1986, p. S14).

My belief is that African American women are survivors of oppression. They continue to battle against stereotypes and preconceived notions, and at times thrive within oppressive systems arranged by the dominant culture. This same culture is pleased when African American women are not as successful as they (African American women) would like to be, and are surprised when African American women exceed the expectations set forth by the dominant culture. It is also my belief and experience that these systems of oppression historically have included education, employment, housing, and healthcare. Scales-Trent (1991) provided the following description regarding the impact of inequalities on the conditions of our communities.

> Our poor health is connected to the kind of work we are allowed to do. Our inability to find good work is related to bad education, which is in turn related to segregated housing. Segregated housing, often dangerous housing, in turn affects our health, which, in turn, affects our ability to work. It is all of a piece. Pull any one of these strands and our lives unravel. (p. 1361)

Oppression has a profound impact on the lives of those being subjugated. It has a way of disrupting and destroying the continuum of life, as described by Scales-Trent (1991). Employment is a part of that continuum, and I believe career development must be

unique to African American women whose lives are comprised of unique experiences. As the researcher, I used my positionality as a part of my own social accountability to other African American women and to encourage the accountability of others.

Chapter 4

Findings

This chapter reflects the experiences and perceptions of five African American women. All five women were born in one state in the Northeastern United States, where the study took place, and are affiliated with the same predominantly White liberal arts institution in the study. According to The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2017), the institution is categorized as a four-year institution of medium size and is primarily residential. The enrollment profile is categorized as very high undergraduate, as the institution is comprised of seven individual schools with 33 undergraduate study programs, nine master's degree programs, and two doctoral programs. Additionally, the institution offers post-masters programs, certificates in graduate study programs, as well as three dual-degree programs. The institution employs approximately 1,150 individuals with Whites representing close to 75%, Blacks/African Americans 11%, and Hispanics/Latinos 7%. The personnel number includes faculty and staff.

In Fall 2016, approximately 7,700 students were enrolled as fulltime undergraduates with Whites representing 70%, Hispanics/Latinos 12%, and Blacks/African Americans 7%. As it pertains to this study, data were collected during the early summer following the 2016-2017 academic year. The five African American undergraduate women met the criteria for participant selection. Selection was based on their identification as African American, which was defined as having at least one parent who was African American, and a student status as either a 2017-2018 undergraduate senior or a May 2017 graduate. Collectively, participants represented a variety of majors

and various levels of campus involvement. The study's participants were recruited with the assistance of the Office of Student Development, the EOF program, as well as two professors of color who serve as mentors within the institution.

Each of the women chose this particular institution of higher education for a different reason. Nonetheless, this institution is a part of their educational journey in fulfilling their professional aspirations and goals. They willingly volunteered their time to participate in this study and recounted their lived experiences as children, and then as African American undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution. Their stories were guided through the process of narrative inquiry in an effort to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White liberal arts institution develop career aspirations?

RQ2: How do African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White liberal arts institution understand issues of race, gender, and class as pertaining to career goals?

The interview protocol used to answer the aforementioned research questions consisted of six open-ended questions and additional probing questions. The interview protocol functioned as a guide for each participant's narrative about her background, career aspirations, and experiences as an African American undergraduate woman.

As the women were interviewed, their narratives were audio recorded. I repeatedly listened to the recordings for a better understanding of participants' responses. I transcribed all recordings and then checked transcriptions for accuracy against the audio versions. If any responses were unclear, I followed up with the participant(s) for

clarification. Each participant received the transcription of her interview for the purpose of member checks, which assisted with validating, elaborating, and revising interviews if needed (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

Pseudonyms were used in place of the participants' names to protect participant privacy and uphold confidentiality. Additionally, the name of the institution was not used for the protection and confidentiality of the study's five women.

Introducing Lisa, April, Vivian, Shawna, and Kimberly

The following stories are summaries of the lived experiences of the five African American women recruited and selected for this study (see Table 1 for summary of characteristics). The inquiry began with participants telling me about their backgrounds and families. They also focused on particular memories they felt characterized how they grew up.

Lisa. Born and raised in an urban area of the state, Lisa was reared by her mother and stepfather, who are both African American. Her biological father, who Lisa described as mixed, was in and out of her life due to multiple reasons, including addiction. Lisa is the middle child, and has an older brother and younger sister. Her mom has been employed as a food service worker and her stepdad, who passed away when Lisa was in high school, held different service positions that included employment as a warehouse worker and sanitation worker. According to Lisa, her parents often were not around due to their work schedules, with her mom working two jobs most of the time.

The highest level of education attained by both her parents was a GED, which Lisa acknowledged made her a first generation college student on both sides of her families. Lisa described being a first generation college student as the following:

It's a lot of pressure. I'm very nervous, but at the same time, because I've come

so far, they understand that it's a lot and that I put a lot of pressure on myself. But

I feel like being first generation college, I can't stop.

Lisa viewed herself as a role model for her younger sister. In addition, Lisa painted the scenario that if she did stop, her sister might one day surpass her. She speculated this would lead to family members questioning Lisa's level of motivation. Lisa shared that the pressure made her "continuously go harder." She stated, "No one in my family has done what I'm doing right now. It's just me and I am trying to figure out who I am through different activities."

When recounting her background, Lisa spoke most descriptively about her mom's role within the family.

But my mom took care of a lot of children that weren't hers, like a lot of my

cousins. A lot of people stayed with us my entire life and it still happens now. She

does that. It was all family, but it just got crowded at times. I mean I had time to

grow up but it just felt like I never had time to breathe or be in my own space

because there was always someone there.

Lisa shared she now understands that her mom was "in a better position than a lot of people" and that position allowed her to help "even though it took away from us some time, but I get it because whenever I can help someone I help them now." Lisa is in her senior year as an undergraduate student.

April. April grew up in a suburban area, and attended schools that were diverse. She is the oldest of four sisters. Growing up, April lived with her mother and father, both of whom are African American. When she was approximately 11 years of age, her

parents divorced. Her mom eventually remarried, and her family moved in with her stepfather. April and her two younger sisters share the same parents. However, her youngest sister, age five, is from her mom's second marriage with her stepfather. April recalls that throughout her childhood her parents focused on particular values.

> My mom and dad definitely relied a lot on making sure we got our homework and stuff done, and good grades, and just trying to make sure we got a good education and we did the right thing. I know they were big on respect and all that stuff.

Regarding her parents' education and careers, April's mom started her career as an elementary school teacher and is now employed as a guidance counselor. She is currently working on her doctorate. Her mom studies at a religious seminary and is interested in motivational speaking. April's dad completed some community college credits and owns his own landscaping/property management business. April works for her dad by assisting him with invoices and other paperwork. Prior to owning his own business, April's dad worked at a local department store. Like April's mom, her stepfather is also in the field of education. He serves as an administrator at the same institution of higher education where April is a senior and a commuter student.

Vivian. Vivian's household consisted of her father, mother, and younger sister. She commented that her mom and dad frequently moved, and as a result she did not have an extended family. While talking about her parents, who are African American, Vivian shared that both her mom and dad attained their associates' degrees. Her dad works for the government, while her mom works in retail. Vivian elaborated that her mom wanted to become a nurse but her opportunities were limited. Her family continues to hope that

her mom will return to school for nursing as her sister is currently in a nursing program, which might serve as motivation for her mom.

Growing up, Vivian resided in a predominantly White suburban neighborhood. From grades kindergarten through eighth, Vivian was one of several Black students. Vivian noted her biggest influences growing up were not only her parents, but also her school and peers. Neither her school nor peers were diverse, yet both occupied most of her time. Regarding other African American or Black students, Vivian felt as though she "never clicked with them."

> I never had any friends of color, even when I got into high school, never had any until junior year when I forced myself into that population when I became manager of the basketball team. I did that on purpose because I knew I wasn't comfortable around Black people, like never. I thought that I was too White to really fit in because I grew up with all White friends. Yeah, I forced myself into the population, had a great time, brought my best friend with me as a little comfort. It wasn't necessary, completely corny but it really made me feel good about it. That's when I started becoming more comfortable with Black people.

In relaying her story, Vivian recalled a conversation with an African American female peer, who said to both Vivian and her sister, "you know light skin girls are uppity or entitled." Vivian and her sister are light in complexion, while their peer was of a darker complexion. She portrayed her reaction to this comment as not understanding what the peer was implying. Vivian shared "I said wait a minute, I don't know what you're talking about. I just exist as myself. I don't really know what that means." Vivian, an undergraduate senior, relayed this conversation as if she was still dismayed.

Shawna. Shawna, also in her senior year as an undergraduate student, began her narrative by saying that her "memory is kind of bleak" in reference to sharing her background. She and her two younger brothers lived with their mother. Similar to Vivian, Shawna lived in a predominantly White suburban neighborhood and attended predominantly White schools. Growing up, Shawna was one of several Black students and had limited interaction with other African Americans.

> Back then I really didn't know so much about my history and my mom doesn't claim to be African American even though she is. She'll say she's Native American, very odd, but I deal with it. It was like, I really didn't get to know my culture. I was always around White kids. That's my mom. My senior year I moved in with my dad. He taught me so much about my culture. He showed me this side that my mom never showed me. I was always around African American people when I lived with my dad, so it was totally different. I still went to my same high school but when I went home it was different.

Shawna explained that she and her mom "never really got along" and "never saw eye to eye." Shawna shared that she and her mom eventually started to "battle." She said of her mom, "she was trying to instill in me to be like her when I just wanted to be myself."

Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) as well as law enforcement frequently intervened between Shawna and her mom. In turn, the interceding police officers had a significant impact on Shawna's future. Her relationship with her mom is why Shawna ultimately moved in with her dad, who is African American. This move changed her life. The move also caused Shawna to go between suburban and urban areas.

She continued to attend the same predominantly White school district, where she was raised in a suburban area, and then return to the urban area where she lived with her dad.

Kimberly. Raised in a Baptist Christian household, Kimberly lived with her mother and father, who are African American. She portrayed herself as having "a pretty good life." Kimberly has two older siblings, who are her father's children and lived with their own mother. However, on the weekend they visited Kimberly's house, which is located in a small town.

When discussing her parents' education and career choices, Kimberly believed the following about her parents:

> I know they never expected to be where they're at today. My dad is a computer programmer and my mom is a computer analyst, but growing up my dad grew up one of eight, struggled with stuttering problems, didn't go to college. My mom didn't go to college. They just worked their way up.

Like Lisa, Kimberly is a first generation college student. She depicted her childhood as her parents frequently working and life being hectic because of their schedules.

> They ended up working up the corporate ladder. When I was younger they worked. It was hectic because I guess you do what you have to do. There was a lot of travelling and sometimes I lived with my grandmom because they both would be gone at the same time but once they got the means to, they both worked from home and they've been working from home for maybe half my life.

Kimberly is the only participant who is a May 2017 graduate. However, she remains in contact with the institution as she prepares for graduate school.

Table 1

Characteristics of Participants

Name	Year	Childhood Dream	Major	Career Choice
April	Senior	Teacher	Psychology	Family Therapist or Teacher
Lisa	Senior	U.S. President	Business	Chief Operating Officer
Vivian	Senior	Lawyer or Forensic Scientist	Biology	Educational Leader in Student Affairs
Shawna	Senior	Special Education Math Teacher	Criminal Justice	Probation Officer
Kimberly	Graduate	Architect	Health Sciences	Physical or Occupational Therapist

Imagining the Future at 10 Years Old

After each participant began her narrative with an account of her background, I guided each conversation toward early career aspirations held at the age of 10. It was apparent that all five women found this question amusing as each one responded with either a laugh or smile. A few chose to pause in an effort to gather their thoughts and reflect on the careers they believed, at the age of 10, they would pursue as adults.

Both April and Shawna wanted to be teachers. As described in her background, April's mother and stepfather are both in education. According to April, this may have influenced her career choice to become a teacher when she grew up. Moreover, she shared that her maternal grandparents are retired educators.

I feel like most of mom's side of the family were all in education. My pop-pop was a superintendent. My grandmom was a teacher. My mom, obviously, was a

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teacher and then a guidance counselor. So I don't know if that's where it came

from or if I just wanted to be a teacher or not. It's all I've known basically or if I

actually really feel like I want to be a teacher, which is the same thing now. I am

not sure if that's all I have ever seen or if I just really want to be a teacher.

This was not the last time during her narrative that April expressed her uncertainty about career influences and choices.

Similar to April, Shawna considered becoming a teacher. However, her influences at 10 differed from April's influences. Shawna expressed that she was never one of the kids that thought about what they wanted to be when they grew up. She stated "I was always living in the now kind of thing." Shawna shared the years between sixth and seventh grades were horrible for her. Shawna reiterated that she and her mom did not get along, and her schoolwork suffered. Subsequently, her sixth grade teacher considered retaining Shawna. Although she was promoted to the seventh grade, Shawna was placed in special education classes. It was in these classes that Shawna thought about becoming a teacher.

When I got into these classes it was easy for me. I got my work done like this

(snaps fingers), but I saw other kids struggling so I helped them and that's when I

learned I wanted to be a special education math teacher.

Shawna repeated multiple times throughout her story that she had an interest in helping people. She specifically stated "I would give the shirt off my back to anyone if they really needed it."

Helping others was significant to not only Shawna, but Vivian as well. As a 10 year old, Vivian was a fan of the television series "Law and Order," which influenced her

dreams to become a lawyer or forensic scientist. She explained that both careers were interesting, but equally important they involved helping people.

I just get the warm and fuzzies when I help people. I guess I'm pretty selfish because it really makes me feel good seeing someone smile. It means a really genuine thank you. Sometimes you get thanks but the genuine thank you, you did a great job with explaining things or I don't know, just when you see true gratitude, I don't know, it just warms me up.

The career dreams shared by Kimberly and Lisa differed from the responses of the other participants. Kimberly shared that at the age of 10 she wanted to become an architect when she grew up. She explained that her dad inspired her career dream. Kimberly enjoyed building with blocks and doing something with her hands. Her dad, as a computer programmer, introduced her to computer games that also involved the building of houses. In reference to their father-daughter relationship:

It was me and my dad's biggest bonding moment. He's a computer guy obviously being a computer programmer. We would bond with our computer games and it was just a part of my life that I loved just being with him building houses. Something I wanted to keep doing at that age.

When her elementary school had its first "What do you want to be?" project, Kimberly chose architect.

Unlike the other four women who paused to reflect before sharing their career dreams, Lisa without hesitation exclaimed she wanted to be the president of the United States.

I just felt like the president had the most power, and I knew there was never a

Black president and there was never a woman president. I was, I am going to be

the first…Then Barack Obama became president and I was like that's cool. I'll

leave that to someone else now. I wanted to be the president for a very long time.

I just felt like I didn't know much about politics when I was 10 years old, and to

me the world is fine. People are working and things are just fine. It definitely

wasn't what I thought it was when I got older. I read about the recession, the

depression, and the housing market crash. It was a lot.

As we continued our discussion, Lisa's drive was apparent as we moved from career

dreams to choices during her narrative.

Transitioning from Childhood Dreams to Adult Aspirations

Participants shared their journeys from career dreams as 10-year-olds to career

choices as undergraduate students. Academic subjects that participants excelled in as high

school students largely influenced their declared majors, while making a difference in the

lives of others motivated their career choices. Additionally, life at a predominantly White

institution for the study's African American undergraduate women impacted their

experiences and perspectives. Participants further described their journeys in discussions

that focused on the small number of Black students in their programs as well as on

campus, the impact of national political events, and the shaping of intragroup dynamics.

Moreover, their discussions included the presence of supportive individuals who assisted

them along their paths.

As participants relayed their journeys, four themes emerged from their narratives.

Those themes were: Lack of College Preparation; Commitment to Helping Others;

Campus Experiences as African American Women; and the Significance of a Support System. Each theme was generated by common key words and phrases identified within the narratives.

Lack of college preparation. Participants shared their declared majors, the influences behind their selections, as well as their career aspirations. In doing so, they also revealed sentiments about either their own college preparation or the preparation of other students.

April remained the most connected to what she wanted to be at the age of 10. She is a psychology major with a concentration in elementary education. Again, April is from a family of educators. Her interest in psychology was sparked as a high school student in an Advanced Placement (AP) Psychology class. However, April expressed frustration with both her major and concentration multiple times during our conversation.

> When you first start, the lack of knowledge and stuff, being younger than I am now, and not knowing all the possible options that you have, I went with Psychology. It's definitely interesting but I don't know if it was the best choice for a major…And then teaching, the teaching program here is interesting. I think it's, I don't know if it's teaching programs all across NJ or if it's just here, but I think it's very strenuous given the fact that teachers don't make that much money and they're needed. It's just like the program was so hard…I feel like I am too far in it now because we're almost done but if I had known all of the stuff that they were going to ask us to do for teaching especially given the fact that other people can go alternate route, I wouldn't have done it. I would have just done the alternate route on the side if really I wanted to be a teacher.

April expressed that she would have tried another major, such as Accounting, or another concentration. She was very concerned about not finding a job or career with her current major. She felt that no one from the institution presented career options, which April believed would have been helpful. She vacillated between a career as a family therapist or school administrator.

Similar to April, Kimberly reported that her favorite high school subjects, math and science, led to her major in Health Sciences with a pre-physical therapy track. She also identified her mom as one of the biggest influences regarding her choice of major and future career as either a physical or occupational therapist. Like April, Kimberly spoke about the lack of awareness in choosing the appropriate path as an undergraduate student.

> When I came here the first thing they ask you is what do you want to do, and I told the orientation leader I want to be a physical therapist. He said "Health Sciences or Biology?" and I froze and I just said "Health Sciences" because those were the only two options he really gave me, kind of rushed me through it. I'm thankful that I ended up loving that major but as far as doing research on it I didn't know anything. Both of my parents didn't go to college. I didn't know how to pick classes. I didn't know there were really different majors. I thought physical therapy was its own major 'cause I just really didn't know anything. So when he asked me that, it took me by surprise. Everyone else [prospective students] in the classroom just kind of knew what they were saying and I just said Health Science so he [orientation leader] would go away.

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Kimberly, too, vacillated between two specific careers, physical and occupational therapy. However unlike April, Kimberly expressed no reservations about her major or either career choice.

In addition Kimberly shared her observations regarding other students. She elaborated on how other students entered the institution better prepared, academically. Kimberly identified these students as White. She discussed her feelings when she first picked classes as an undergraduate student.

There were people that their parents set them up with hospitals, and they would shadow physicians or anyone really…they already would have a leg up. There were a lot of kids who actually came in with college credits. I don't know if it was just the group I was with. It made me feel that is was a general sense of this is what everyone else did that I didn't do, and a lot of people just seem to know what classes they had to take to get to where they were going.

Kimberly was not the only participant who declared a science as her major. Vivian chose Biology as her area of study. Like April and Kimberly, Vivian's choice was based on her interest as a high school student. However, Vivian shared that her parents, who emphasized the importance of earning money and being secure, also influenced her decision.

I chose Biology because I love science but I also think I chose it because it sounded good because I was in my senior year of high school and my parents were putting pressure like what do want to do, you can't just go to school and you're not going to a four year college without an idea. You're going to go to

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community college if you don't know what you're going to do. That's fine but I

didn't want to do that. I wanted the full college experience.

Despite parental pressure, Vivian expressed that she really likes Biology, and is

optimistic about what she has gained from her major, which included applicable skills

such as relaying her ideas, and ensuring that her message reflects what she is actually

saying.

While Vivian had no regrets about her major, she admitted, "I didn't think beyond

the major and what I would be studying. I didn't think too career wise. When I came here

I talked to someone and she said Biology is a great major because you can do whatever."

Vivian also chose Africana Studies as her minor, which she planned to immerse herself in

the program's courses. Because of her upbringing she did not want to be disconnected

from or scrutinized for a lack of awareness regarding her culture.

In reference to Shawna, at the age of 10 she wanted to be a special education math

teacher when she grew up. To reiterate, Shawna reported the she was placed in special

education classes because her schoolwork suffered as a result of problems at home.

However, as an undergraduate student, her career aspiration shifted from education to

criminal justice. Shawna was specifically interested in a career as a probation officer.

> You never know what you are getting yourself into. I like that spontaneous part
>
> about it. I wanted to be a cop but then I realized I really still want to work with
>
> kids. Then I realized that I wanted to be a probationary [sic] officer, steering kids
>
> on the right path, working with the community.

While other participants recognized their parents as influential in their college process, Shawna credited one of her high school teachers as the most significant influence on her attending college.

> Getting to college, I would have to say my English teacher... She was the one who had my back getting me here. She took a day off from school, drove me here, met with…[Assistant Director of Admissions]. She's the reason I'm here today. I definitely got to give her credit because like I don't know if any other English teacher or any teacher in general, if one of their students was struggling at home, would you know [say] you need to go to college. She would push me. She got me here.

> While Kimberly and Vivian declared majors in health and life sciences, and April and Shawna in social and behavioral sciences, Lisa shared her experience as a dual degree major in Business with a concentration in Management and a minor in Economics.

> After I decided I didn't want to be president anymore, I was just like I'm going to own my own business. I find it weird that after saying I was going to study business when I went to college since I was like a sophomore in high school and people were like well when you get to college you're going to change your major so many times, it's going to be okay because you don't know what you like. I was never one of the students who came in and changed their major. I came in I think my second semester Freshman year, I am going to start my business classes because that's what I wanted to do.

Lisa was particularly excited about her love for Economics. She applied course teachings to the conditions in the city where she was raised, and described it in the following:

I learned about everything but I didn't know about supply and demand, guns and butter, the deficit, I didn't know about GDP. I didn't know about how they split up the national budget and stuff. I didn't know about any of that. I was like this is really interesting and I just connected to how…[the city] has progressed over the years since I've been here [college]. I was like look at this gentrification happening. I wouldn't even known what was happening if I didn't take this Econ class. I would just think wow this is cool. They opened up a Sonics, a Popeyes, a MacDonalds, and a Taco Bell right across the street from one another, which just happened in the last two years. If I didn't take Econ all of that's nice, but now that I've taken it's like this is a problem. I feel like Econ forces me to look at things that are issues but I wouldn't have thought they were issues a few years ago.

In reference to her career aspirations, Lisa's decision rested between a chief operating officer (COO) of a major company or a role in the redevelopment of her hometown, which is in an urban area. "Right now I'm tied between COO of a Fortune 500 company, not sure which company yet but I just like the position of it or because I'd love to go back."

Similar to Kimberly, Lisa spoke about other students and their preparedness for college. She recognized that if other students entered prepared "it's because of the school district they came from." With Economics, in particular, Lisa shared that "a lot of people come in and if they're prepared it's because they had an Econ course in high school that was very in-depth and very detailed and very structured."

Commitment to helping others. All five participants expressed the importance of being able to help others through their future professions. The aim to assist other

individuals motivated the career choices of participants. For example, at the encouragement of her mother, Kimberly became a certified nursing assistant (CNA) while pursuing her undergraduate studies. This confirmed her decision to become either a physical or occupational therapist and affirmed her desire to help people. Kimberly shared,

> It was the best decision I ever made in my life. I was able to see the nurse, the practitioners, the therapists, and when I worked with them that's when I made my decision. That's what I wanted to do for the rest of my life because they're impacting these people. I worked with the patients, so I'm helping them when they get dressed in the morning they're telling me how wonderful it is to go see their therapists and that's what I wanted to do.

Vivian, who declared Biology as her major, was not interested in the medical field or research. She decided on a career in student affairs in higher education, where she could assist both students and parents.

> So student affairs, I got this job as head orientation leader and I love everything that I had to do. I love the hiring. I love the training. I love working with people, working with different professionals, and just the networking part of it. It's just gives me the warm and fuzzies. It started with last summer when I did regular orientation and I saw parents. I'm 19, 20, and these parents were coming up saying thank you so much for helping my student. You don't have adults really coming to you saying thank you with such feeling. I've never had that … Having a parent who comes to you and says thank you for taking care of one the most important things in my life, I was like wow this is, I don't know it gives you kind

of a purpose. I finally felt like yeah that's it. I finally felt like I had a purpose in helping someone.

Similarly, Shawna shared, "that aspiration of being a cop is just like being out there and helping people." Like the career dream of being a teacher, Shawna's career choice of a probation officer was motivated by her childhood as well as her undergraduate experiences.

> You know cops came to our house. They were just there for me. They didn't have to be. They could have just sent me back to mom, didn't care about me, put me in the system. You know stuff like that. They just still came back, talked to me. If I'd seen them while I was walking to school they would like ask "how are you doing, how's your mom?" situations like that. That really impacted me to like wow these are officers who could go just about their day, not care about me. They could just visit me at my house one time but they reached out to me to make sure I'm good.

Shawna's positive relationship with law enforcement extended to campus police once she became an undergraduate student and part of the institution's EOF program.

> Just from being in the EOF program we met with them [campus police] during the summer program. They came outside with us, played volleyball with us. I was like here it is more officers trying to impact these children, make sure they have a safe environment around and that's something that I wanted to do. It's just each year I would get closer and closer to each one of the officers, and it just impacted me more to do and be what I want to be.

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Confident with her choice of major and future career Lisa, similar to Kimberly, Vivian, and Shawna, believed in helping people. Lisa shared this about returning to her hometown:

> I think going back and rebuilding…[the city] is like my purpose. I would love to work for the housing office. I drive around…[the city] often and I just look at either the abandoned houses or the empty lots and I wonder why it is the way it is. So it's either working in the housing office there. I feel like before I retire, if ever I retire or before everything is over, I would like to open up a new recreation center in…[the city] for a lot of after school activities because that's where also I got a lot of my support from and I literally, in elementary school, for as long as I can remember every year I was there … I do want to open up a summer camp because I never got a chance to go to camp.

Lisa acknowledged that because she watched her family struggle, she wanted to make money as a COO. However she understood that money should not be her only motivating force. Lisa's words of making an impact were similar to Vivian and Shawna wanting to help people, when she told me the following:

> Money is definitely a factor but I just felt like being a role model and when you see a Black woman in a position of power, because you don't see it often, it just ignites something in you. You never know who you can reach or who you can touch.

April was the participant who struggled the most regarding her major and a future career as an educator or as a family therapist. However, she was confident about helping people. This was her main motivation behind becoming a therapist. "I feel that [being a

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therapist] would be a good career because I am actually helping somebody and I can see their progress, and just help them to get better no matter what the issue is."

Campus experiences as African American women. Participants discussed the realities in their lives as African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White school. In discussing these realities, participants relayed that there were too few Black students, that national political events affected their experiences, and that intragroup dynamics also played also played a role. Each is detailed below.

Too few Black students. In fulfilling their career aspirations as undergraduate students, each woman candidly spoke about how she was, most times, the only African American student and/or woman in sections of her academic program. Regarding both the Psychology and Education departments, April was surprised by the lack of African American students.

> It's more surprising now how I am the only African American in general, I was going to say female, but in general in my section of the teaching program. I haven't seen anyone else. There is one [African American] girl who works in the [Education] office but she couldn't pass the Praxis test that she needed to get further past. So really I just see myself and I don't really see anybody else especially there. Psychology is mostly female and mostly White females as well, so really there's just like one or a few, not really a lot of African Americans around here.

Due to the institution's lack of diversity, April also discussed the idea of being an HBCU student.

> It's overload here. In my high school, it was very diverse. You had some of every

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ethnicity and every race. I felt like at least within the few classes you were in throughout the day, but it's different here and I don't know if that would really help. Every once in a while I think I should have gone to an HBCU. I don't know how much that would have helped either but I feel like I would have been able to connect to some more people than I have here. You don't see too many other races here besides White people.

Similar to April, the realization of being the only Black student at times resonated with Lisa as well. She shared, "Most of them are White, because the majority of students here are White, and the majority who come in to study business are White and they are male students." She also stated, "They all come more from high schools that are structured and give them more freedom to tap into other interests." However, Lisa used this reality to fuel her aspirations.

> I started taking my business courses and I realized I was either the only Black person or I was the only woman in the class, and I said there is something missing from the business world. I am smart, but not because I was one of the only students sitting in econ or in business courses. It was like there's a disconnect with the Black community and understanding the value of our money and how to not sell ourselves but market ourselves and market the products that we make because we are very intelligent, very creative people. But when I go home and see different kinds of stores in my neighborhood, but not a lot of Black businesses, I knew there was an issue. As I kept taking my business classes I was "yeah this is where I need to be." I have to be the catalyst that changes something.

While April and Lisa spoke specifically to their programs, Vivian spoke about the difference between what was marketed by the institution and the reality of the institution. She expressed her feelings as the following:

Coming from a predominantly White neighborhood, going into a predominantly White institution, I was fooled because their public relations was really good and they put a Black person on the cover of the pamphlets, and I was like okay we have some color in here, seven percent. [Once I got here] I was like, "Oh! Well, where they at?"

Similar to Lisa, both Vivian and Kimberly believed that they would be prepared for the world beyond college though the institution is predominantly White. Vivian relayed her belief through the following description.

It prepared me to the extent of knowing that you're going to be told "no" all the time, and you just need to try really really hard. People are going to say crazy things and sometimes you are going to have to smile and nod. You have to know how to pick your battles.

Kimberly conveyed a similar outlook to Vivian's.

If I could just say being here is a strange dynamic for my future. I wasn't surprised by it because I went to an all White school my whole life, so nothing…when I came here surprised me… You feel a general sense of feeling out casted at a predominantly White institution but that's in everything. In my sense it kind of does prepare me for my future. Whether its PT or OT that's the field I'm in and I'm okay with that because I'm just as good as anybody else. It's wrong, I don't like when other people say I don't see color. You do and you

should still appreciate it, you should understand it. It's there. You should respect.

I expect to get to this place. I know it's predominantly White. I don't particularly

care because that's just what I want to do with my life. I hope that one day it

changes. I don't know where the disconnect is really but it really does get me

prepared for it.

Shawna, on the other hand, expressed how her perspective had changed between

sophomore and senior years.

If you were to ask me this maybe my sophomore year I would have said that you

know it taught me that everything is going to be good when I get into my career,

but you ask me now, I'm a little scared. You know the world is totally different

now, and you know learning so much that I've done in a year [junior year], it's

actually opened my eyes to some of the obliviousness that I've had. I would say

you know it's a little scary now that I think about it because I'm looking at

people's true colors and you know you never know who you can trust nowadays.

Being at a predominantly White school, I've only learned to trust predominantly

White people, but now I don't know if I can trust them and I'm learning that I can

trust more people more understanding of my culture and where I've been, and you

know what I haven't learned yet. I would say it's good and it's bad. It's eye

opening.

National political events. During their narratives, participants described the

impact of the national political events had on the campus. In response to other students'

opinions about these events, participants were keenly aware of how to respond in an

effort not to create an image that would be perceived as negative or oppositional.

Regarding the recent presidential campaign, Lisa shared her perspective.

> I feel like I am well prepared, more prepared than a lot of people I know, because of the political climate that was going on. I don't think there was a shift in power; I just feel like people realized who really has power.

Both Lisa and Vivian depicted how they learned to respond when arguments ensued over different opinions with other students. Lisa shared the following:

> Before there was a time when I just wouldn't say anything, and then I would be like very loud and obnoxious and now I understand that both of those outlets did not get me to the solution that I wanted…you have to learn how to keep a level head because you blowing up, you getting upset, and cursing at them, and things like that, that's exactly what they want because that's just proving their point …You have to listen to that person and you have to give them time to listen to you. You can't just jump the gun every single time. There're times where you may get people who are rude and who just think they're right. Everyone thinks they're right and there's nothing wrong with that but then you'll get people who'll actually listen and I think both times in every single situation you have to keep a level head, you have know how to present your argument. I was always told, improve your argument, never raise your voice.

Lisa was assured that if she was able to deal with the different races and personalities encountered in college, then she could deal with different individuals once she graduated. Vivian also was careful when choosing her battles.

> I think as a Black woman on this campus I have to pick and choose very carefully

what I say to people because I don't want to come off as the angry Black girl

that's all involved and that's too whatever, that's too much. There's always that

balance that I have to make sure I keep … I made sure I always put my best foot

forward in terms of whenever I met someone new whether they were Black,

White, Hispanic, or whatever it was. I was going to present myself in the best

light because I'm a Black female. I always made sure I was very well spoken.

April spoke specifically to racism on campus and the 2016 presidential election,

particularly regarding Trump supporters.

Again with me be the only Black person in the class, and I usually don't even talk

in class that much, it was just I don't know some of the other students are just

oblivious to the fact that there's still racism and all that other stuff. I remember

this one girl had said I don't even get it, racism doesn't even exist anymore. I

really think they just don't know and some of them do know. It's a lot different

even though it's not blatant it's still there and just the fact that you haven't seen it

or don't recognize it, it's just crazy to me. It happened here … The last election

with Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, a lot of different stuff with that. Like it

just opened your eyes to who was who, more so than anything. The people who

were more so promoting Donald Trump I feel like they had a hidden agenda, like

an alternate reason, because you could have voted for him and not meant anything

by it. Then there were some people who were so proud and excited and all that

stuff, and it's just worrisome. There's a difference in wanting to vote for someone

for their reasons politically and then there's a difference for wanting to vote for

somebody who wants to try and stop the progress of others. I feel like the people

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who were promoting him were voting for him for the other reason, his ulterior motives as opposed to his political reasons.

Shawna's perspective on trusting White people was most interesting since she is pursuing a career in law enforcement. She found this to be challenging considering the image held by many people of color regarding White police officers.

Being like a cop, it's scary going into being a cop right now. You never know. Like last year I was ecstatic to be a cop, I'm like "I'm going to one of the best officers" and now it's just like you got people like "cops are horrible nowadays." You just shooting people for nothing and African American people, it's scary to think about. You want to go and change something but it's so big that you're only one person and you've got everybody looking at your career like why are going into this field. It's such a horrendous field but this is something you love, so it's definitely hard.

Shawna makes no excuses for her career choice, though people question her decision. Questions frequently come from other people of color, including Shawna's father, who has been in and out of the criminal justice system.

Intragroup dynamics. By the participants' responses, they were keenly aware that they were African American women in a predominantly White institution. They understood the importance of bonding with other African American students at the institution, and expressed disappointment when those bonds were not formed. Vivian believed "there are so many people of color in this community that don't stick together in a way."

Kimberly discussed the difficulty with losing friends along her journey because of her balance between both cultures, White and Black.

There was a lot of divide here. The Black population was small. They would sit by themselves and watch everyone else succeed and blame the successors for them. I know racism is real because I've dealt with it but you got to take what you get. You are the minority, that shouldn't stop you. You should have enough faith in yourself to keep going. A lot of the Black population, it's like I couldn't rely on anyone of my friends, my Black female friends particularly, that want to be woke but aren't helping each other. You're bashing each other. I'm getting blamed for talking White. I take offense to that because I'm Black. What is talking White? You are trying to say I talk proper. You're saying a Black woman can't talk proper or you can't be intellectual. You're making yourself look bad. We should all be able to become doctors, become physical therapists, and it should not be a surprise.

Though she has lost African American friends, Kimberly believed she should not have to sacrifice her African American culture to be successful. She relayed her thoughts by saying, "The thing I just don't want is for people to feel like I have to assimilate to it. My culture, I like hip-hop music. That shouldn't determine my intelligence or my work ethic, and here [on campus] it did, I should say." Even Shawna was met with speculation from other people of color, including her father, due to her career choice of a probation officer. This was yet another example of intragroup dynamics.

Significance of a support system. All five women participated, to some degree, in activities outside the classroom. Vivian was the most active as head student orientation

leader and as a member in multiple student organizations including a sorority, which was multicultural. Both Lisa and Kimberly have served as volunteers for student orientation. Also important were programs such as EOF, of which Lisa and Shawna are students. Lisa shared the following about being an EOF student:

I came in as an EOF student so I didn't have so much of a financial burden as a lot of people, which causes them not to finish school. I was here. I had a platform. I had some form of support behind me and I was like people do it with no support at all and no knowledge of what they're doing, blindly go through it, and they still succeed. If I had the slightest amount of help there's no reason for me not to continue.

Regarding the EOF program, Shawna said,

They do everything for me, literally…helping me out with my financial aid, if I need to talk with anybody, if I need a shoulder to cry on…so I definitely give them credit to keeping me here, keeping me focused, keeping me stress free, making sure I'm good. That's them.

In addition to being an EOF student, Shawna was the only participant involved in collegiate athletics, where she is in her fourth year on the women's basketball team. "As much as they stress me out, that's my family…I want to tell somebody one day, the things they help me accomplish in basketball and school in general."

April is a member of an African American sorority. "I think it's important because at least you're not the only one here. There's more and they probably have some of the similar struggles." However, as April began to share more of her narrative, she conveyed the struggles in staying engaged with school as she commutes from home and

has had additional responsibilities.

> That was something I could have told you. I help with my sister. My sister's five
> so I had to put my sister on the bus in the morning so I had to be home. I can't
> stay here. Before, it was my freshman year and part of my sophomore year I had
> to take her to daycare before I went to school and then I had to pick her up before
> 6 [pm]. I was focused on that. So Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays is when I
> was here [on campus] freshman year, I had to make sure I was home to get her
> from daycare. There was that, I forgot, that was a big part. My mom needed
> help. It's getting easier now because her dad works here and his hours are later so
> he can put her on the bus. She stopped going to daycare last year so I stopped
> getting her off the bus or wherever it is. So I don't have to do that
> anymore. Basically if he can put her on the bus in the morning then I'm fine. Then
> I can kind of relax a little bit this semester [Fall 2017] and next semester [Spring
> 2018]. But the first years were a lot.

Equally important to the participants were the professors and advisors who took
an interest in their academics and overall well-being. Lisa described the relationship she
has with her academic advisor.

> You just get those people who like don't allow you to stop because I've sat in his
> office many times with like the sad face. It was just like I think this is it, this is
> my last semester. He's just been like one of those people who's like "this is your
> last semester? Do you know how many people look like you who need you to
> succeed? You are like one of the first, you have to keep going." Sometimes it's
> not that nice but he's very headstrong and he's been extremely supportive and

he's been following me throughout my entire college career so far. I feel like if wasn't for him I would not be graduating on time. I wouldn't be still as ambitious as I am.

Kimberly spoke about her time at college, and those professors who impacted her journey.

My anatomy professor that was the hardest class I ever had to take here and she made it bearable. Just knowing that they're [professors] human because there some professors you don't get that vibe. You think oh my goodness I'm not going to make it through their class and might not even be a class you need to get to where you're supposed to get to. It's kind of like they took me in. They were fond of me enough to understand how to get me as an individual. They treated me like an individual.

She also reflected on her graduation, the lack of graduates of color, and the impact of having professors who care about students of color.

When I graduated I was the only one and it was a shame. I don't know why because I can't put words into other people's mouths but seems like no one was catering to them. It seemed like if you didn't have the smarts for it or the background in it already you were kind of left in the dust. There was only one professor that I remember that was here. He taught differently. He doesn't work here anymore. I guess they got rid of him or he left. He taught differently and by differently I mean he singled out those kids that no one else really took any effort in. The ones that were maybe falling behind. The ones that were Black or Latino. The ones that still have the same goals as everybody else to become a physician's assistant, one wanted to become a veterinarian, you know all those things. He was

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the only professor that looked at them like "you guys can get to this point with everyone else," but actually you know he was a Black professor.

Finally, Kimberly and Shawna mentioned the use of spirituality and personal mantra in balancing their lives. For example, Kimberly believed her spirituality played a role in achieving her goals.

> It was kind of hard. I was able to lose a little bit of my spirituality being here while trying to achieve my goals because there's a lot of different people from different places or whatever but it's something [spirituality] I grew up with to find peace in. So that as I reach my goals I know that everything happens for a reason and that it's possible when people maybe don't believe in me I guess or sometimes I don't believe in myself. We get down on ourselves, but the spirituality is what keeps me motivated to keep going to know that one day even if it's not the way that I planned it. Spirituality is what kept me from going nuts like when I got wait listed or didn't get into the [graduate] schools. That's the one thing that keeps me level headed to just keep going.

Shawna, who was upbeat throughout her narrative, recently accepted advice offered by an EOF advisor.

> The one thing I did learn, actually three days ago, you can't be stressed and grateful at the same time. Recently I've just been you know smiling, just taking it day by day, having fun, enjoying it now. So my goal is just to make sure I'm happy at all times. I want to be grateful for what I have and you know what is to come. That's just how I've been feeling about things.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Implications

Summary of Findings

Lisa, April, Vivian, Shawna, and Kimberly are five African American undergraduate women who participated in this dissertation study. All five women are from different areas within one state, and are affiliated with the same institution of higher education within the same state. The institution is a liberal arts university, and is predominantly White. Lisa, April, Vivian, and Shawna are in their senior year as undergraduate students, and Kimberly is a May 2017 graduate. The women represented multiple areas of study, which included Business, Psychology, Biology, Criminal Justice, and Health Sciences. Both Lisa and Kimberly are first generation college students, and Lisa and Shawna are EOF students. The participants are involved in an array of activities outside the classroom. Those activities include, but are not limited to, student organizations, sororities, and athletics. Among the participants, April was the only commuter student, which was a result of her having to care for her youngest sister. As a commuter student, she resides approximately 35 miles away from the institution. This has impacted her class schedule, co-curricular activities, and overall engagement with the campus.

Participants shared their narratives, which were comprised of detailed information about their backgrounds, childhood dreams, declared majors, and career aspirations. Also discussed were their perceptions and experiences as African American undergraduate women enrolled at a predominantly White institution. Qualitative data were collected and

coded from participant narratives, where four themes emerged from key words and phrases.

Theme one: Lack of college preparation. In sharing their declared majors and career choices, four of the five women spoke either about the advantages they believed other students had upon first entering the institution or about their own lack of awareness in choosing a major and career. Lisa and Kimberly, both first generation college students, conveyed their thoughts on the differences between those students who were and were not prepared. Their discussions implied that socioeconomic status, particularly that of parents (Bourdieu, 1977), might have impacted the level of preparedness of other students. Lisa spoke to the belief that other students were prepared because of the school districts they attended prior to entering college. Kimberly spoke to her lack of preparedness compared to the preparedness of White students whose pre-college experiences were the result of parents linking their children with opportunities to assist them with their career aspirations. She also made inference to her parents' lack of college experience as the reason she lacked knowledge in selecting classes, all consistent with previous research on college students from low socioeconomic status families, and who are first generation students (Walpole, 2003, 2007, 2008). In addition, Vivian and April discussed their own lack of awareness as they entered college. April was uncertain about her choice of major and her ability to secure a job, while Vivian reported not thinking beyond her major into a career. Kimberly and April shared that the institution had not properly identified career options, though Kimberly reported that she was fortunate to have enjoyed her choice of major.

Theme two: Commitment to helping others. Between childhood dreams and undergraduate career aspirations, participants discussed the importance of helping others through their chosen careers, consistent with other literature on African American women (Hamilton, 1996; Pattillo, 2013; Sampson & Milam, 1975). While each participant focused on a different career goal, helping others was a motivating factor in her career choice. From Vivian as an educational leader to Shawna as a probation officer, and from April as a family therapist to Kimberly as a physical or occupational therapist, all four women were motivated by assisting others. Lisa, who declared business as her major, was interested in making money after watching her family struggle as she grew up. However, similar to the other participants, Lisa was interested in using her education and position as a businessperson to better the conditions in the city where she was born and raised.

Theme three: Campus experiences as African American women. Participants discussed how the low number of Black students, debates over national political events, and their awareness of intragroup dynamics impacted their lives on campus. As a result, participants grappled with the idea of adopting a bicultural approach (Alfred, 2001; Bell, 1990; DuBois, 1903; Parham & Austin, 1994).

Four of the five participants spoke to their reality of being the only African American or Black student and/or woman in their classes. April found it most discouraging, while Lisa, Kimberly, and Vivian saw it as preparation for their lives beyond the institution; though Vivian admitted she was surprised at the low number of Black students on campus given the marketing materials to prospective students showed otherwise.

The reality experienced by participants was further reinforced by national events, which impacted the campus climate (Chambers et al., 2009). Campus conversations centered on socio-political issues that stemmed from the 2016 presidential election and topics such as immigration. Campus conversations also included the incidence of police brutality that occurred throughout the country. More specifically, participants shared with me what they believed to be the views of other students on whether racism still exists and who has power in America (Calvert & Ramsey, 1996; Collins, 1989, 1990; Combahee River Collective, 1977; Crenshaw, 2015; Jeffries & Ransford, 1980; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Rothenberg, 2000). Lisa and Vivian conveyed the need to incorporate approaches on how they handled sensitive discussions, in an effort to avoid the misinterpretation of their responses, an example of bicultural approach (Alfred, 2001; Bell, 1990; DuBois, 1903; Parham & Austin, 1994). This reality made Shawna question her trust in White people. Shawna's doubt was produced by her view of the world, which she commented as "totally different now" compared to earlier in her college career.

Furthermore, participants discussed the importance of connecting with other African American students. These connections were significant to participants as the low number of Black students and conversations of controversial national events sharpened their awareness of the differences between their realities and the realities of their White peers. Kimberly relayed it best with her difficulty in trying to maintain a balance between the White world and her African American culture, another example of bicultural approach (Alfred, 2001; Bell, 1990; DuBois, 1903; Parham & Austin, 1994). She found this challenging as other African American students questioned her Blackness (Walpole, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). She was concerned about the need to give up her African

American culture to demonstrate her intelligence and work ethic. Both Shawna and Vivian shared similar sentiments as Kimberly. Family and peers questioned Shawna's career decision to become part of law enforcement as an African American woman, particularly in the midst of current events surrounding the police brutality of other African Americans. Vivian, whose Blackness was already called into question by a childhood peer, discussed her perception that students of color failed to support one another on campus.

Theme four: Significance of a support system. Participants relied on the support of family and friends who recognized the pressures experienced by participants (Bell, 1990; Chambers, 2009; Chambers et al., 2009; Collins, 1989; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Four of the five participants discussed how their parents, to some extent, influenced their decision to attend college. Shawna was the only participant who did not discuss a parental impact on her educational decision. In fact, she credited a high school teacher in prompting and supporting her as a future college student. All five women, as college students, relied on the relationships they had built through campus involvement. That involvement included student organizations, sororities, athletics, and other supportive programs, such as the EOF program. A strong support system for the majority of participants also included relationships with professors and advisors who acknowledged the challenges that participants experienced as African American women at a predominantly White institution. As participants described those professors and advisors, they used key words such as "following me throughout my entire college career," "they took me in," "treated me like an individual," and "singled out those kids that no one else really took any effort in." As part of her support, Kimberly shared the

importance of her spirituality (Collins, 1986, 1989, 1990), while Shawna had recently adopted a personal mantra to approach her daily life.

Literature Review

The four themes that emerged from the data speak to the existing literature in several ways. Discussions raised by participants connected to my conceptual framework, which was social learning theory of career decision-making and social cognitive career theory (Lent & Brown, 1996; Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990). However, discussions also linked to traditional career development theories, specifically age-connected stages as well as diverger as a learning style within experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1981, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005a, 2005b; Super, 1980, 1983). Additionally, the ideas of responsibility, socialization, bicultural approach, and coping strategies linked to the ideological lens, Black feminist thought. I first discuss the conceptual framework, followed by age-connected stages and diverger, and then the ideological lens.

Conceptual framework. Social learning theory of career decision-making (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990), and social cognitive career theory (Lent & Brown, 1996) were the two theories that comprised my conceptual framework. Unlike traditional career development theories, both theories discuss multiple factors and influences that shape career aspirations.

Social learning theory of career decision-making. The combination and relationship of multiple factors are considerations in social learning theory of career decision-making (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990). This theory characterizes socially constructed identities, environmental conditions, and learning experiences as influences on career decisions. Related to the lives of African American women, socially

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constructed identities of race, gender, and class shape environmental conditions, and those identities are connected to a lifetime of social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances. These circumstances, in turn, shape learning experiences (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990), or the lived experiences of African American women.

As a part of the study's conceptual framework, social learning theory of career decision-making established the concept and credence that the social identities of participants have not only impacted their conditions for learning, but their preparedness and experiences as future professionals (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990). Throughout the study, participants made reference to how race, gender, and class either worked in the favor of their White peers or challenged their own progress or existence as African American undergraduate women on campus. The themes of college preparation, helping others, campus experiences, and support systems were driven by factors of race, gender, and class. However these three factors are best put into context through the ideological lens of Black feminist thought, which recognizes the intersectionality of these three strands.

Social cognitive career theory. Similarly, SCCT considers multiple influences that impact the understanding of career goals and self-efficacy, and characterizes certain activities as helping to develop and hone skills, work ethic, goals, and career interests (Lent & Brown, 1996). For participants, the late onset of career exploration and discovery made it cumbersome for them to clearly declare majors and define career goals and aspirations. This caused three participants to vacillate between choices.

Moreover, for a young person, self-efficacy, as well as a sense of competency and value, is produced from early developmental activities that are continual and positive

(Lent & Brown, 1996). Participants did not report any involvement in early development activities. SCCT also believes that a young person's environment is shaped by activities. Key persons, such as family members, friends, peers, and educators, act as guides and influence these activities in a young person's life (Lent & Brown, 1996). While participants did not report involvement in early developmental activities during the pre-college period, key persons played essential roles in their self-efficacy as they continued to persevere as undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution. As part of their coping mechanisms, participants relied on family members, friends, and like-minded peers for support. Key persons for participants also included professors and staff who (1) understood the circumstances in which participants existed as African American undergraduate women in a predominantly White institution, (2) willingly served as mentors, and (3) helped motivate participants.

Age-connected stages. In critiquing career development theories, the literature discusses that early research did not consider the socio-political issues of race, gender, and class as influences on career choices as such research centered on the experiences of White middle class males (Jackson & Neville, 1998; Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996). Consequently, the experiences of other groups, such as African American women, were excluded from early research studies. These traditional theories included Super's Life Span Theory (Super, 1980) and Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), both of which focused on age-connected stages and specific activities that occur within the stages of each theory (Evans, 2011). Based on these theories, the productivity and success of individuals are dependent on participants engaging in specific activities that define each stage and subsequently lead to the next stage of development.

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As defined by Super's exploration stage and Kolb's specialization stage, high school and undergraduate students formulate questions as well as identify strengths, interests, and opportunities through occupational and personal experiences (Kolb, 1981; Kolb & Kolb, 2005b; Super, 1980, 1983).

Unlike the theories in my conceptual framework, traditional theories did not consider the presence of problems or conflicts, such as race, gender, or class that could impede a student's productivity and success at each stage. In relationship to the study, the age-connected stages of traditional theories were applicable to other students identified by participants rather than to the participants themselves. For example, participants discussed the advantages that other students, identified as White, possessed prior to their undergraduate studies. These advantages were pre-college experiences that afforded White students opportunities for career exploration and discovery. Moreover, these pre-college experiences assisted students with their declared majors. Participants also remarked that White students might have these advantages because of the connections made by their parents or the school districts they attended. What were advantages for other students were disadvantages for participants. The lack of pre-college experiences did not allow for career exploration and discovery. Rather it created a lack of awareness among at least three of the participants. In turn, they struggled with selecting classes and declaring majors.

Diverger. In addition, Kolb (1981) identifies four specific learning styles within his experiential learning process. While Kolb's scholarship is linked with age-connected stages that are absent of problems or conflicts, he identifies a learning style closely connected to African American college students and their aspirations. The diverger

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learning style uses concrete experiences and reflective observation as abilities within the process of learning (Kolb, 1981; Kolb & Kolb, 2005a). Individuals who are divergers are people-oriented, and they express their emotions and can examine situations from a variety of viewpoints. Moreover, they tend to aspire to careers that are social service related.

Whether or not participants aspired to hold careers in the social service field, all participants were guided by concrete experiences and reflective observations associated with their lives. Shawna, for example, grew up with DYFS and law enforcement as part of her childhood. She aspires to be a probation officer and have a positive impact on young people just as DYFS and police officers had on her life. Unlike the other participants, April was extremely indecisive about her career choice. However, she reiterated during her narrative that as the daughter and granddaughter of educators, it was difficult not to consider becoming an educator even if her interests resided with becoming a family therapist. While Lisa's choice to become a COO is not social service related, her decision, too, was based on concrete experiences and reflective observation of her childhood. Lisa not only watched her family struggle, but she observed her mother care for family members who could not provide for themselves. Though Vivian's choice is to become an educational leader, her parents influenced her to pursue a career in which she would not have to struggle financially as they did when Vivian was younger, which was very similar to Lisa. These four participants practiced the diverger learning style as each used concrete experiences from and reflective observations of their childhoods to identify career aspirations.

Ideological lens. As the conceptual framework, social learning theory of decision-making and social cognitive career theory consider multiple factors that impact career aspirations and self-efficacy (Lent & Brown, 1996; Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990). However, it is the purpose and history of Black feminist thought that best contextualize how the specific socio-political issues of race, gender, and class intersect and work together (Brewer, 1999; Collins, 1990). It is for this reason that Black feminist thought was used as the ideological lens for my study.

Black feminist thought. Unlike other theorists, scholars of Black feminist thought understand the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. They agree that as three strands these issues cannot be separated; rather all three work in tandem (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Jones & Guy-Sheftall, 2015). Race, gender, and class are socially constructed identities (Brewer, 1999; Collins, 2009; Omi & Winant, 1994), which are also supported by social learning theory of career decision-making (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990). However, for African American women these identities have intersected and created a history of environmental conditions and oppressive circumstances, resulting in inequalities. In fact, Black feminists describe African American women as having faced the "triple whammy" as discrimination relates to race, gender, and class (Schiller, 2000).

Black feminist thought recognizes the impact these social identities have on the lives of African American women. In fact, it expressly recognizes the conditions and circumstances of African American women as devised by the dominant group to thwart their advancement (Collins, 1989; Schiller, 2000). This is evident as African American women historically were limited to positions of labor, domesticity, and service (Collins, 1990; Evans & Herr, 1991).

Power, privilege, and resources. Using Black feminist thought as my ideological lens, I attentively listened to participants and their understanding of how race, gender, and class intersect and connect to their career readiness and goals (Bell, 1990; Brown et al., 1990; Kerka, 1998; Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996; Parham & Austin, 1994; Perrone et al., 2001). Overall, the intersectionality of these issues was threaded throughout their narratives. Similar to the incongruences in power, privilege, and access to resources discussed by Black feminist scholars (Collins, 1989, 1990; Combahee River Collective 1977), participants believed race and class were factors in college preparedness. To participants, these factors determined which students were afforded pre-college experiences that prepared them both academically and occupationally. Their families may have possessed social capital that included affluent school districts and a network of contacts, all of which led these students to opportunities prior to college (Bourdieu, 1977).

Furthermore, as it pertains to race and gender, participants noted that in most instances they were the only Blacks and, in some instances, the only women within sections of their educational programs. The limited number of Black women further perpetuates the already existing incongruences between participants and their White peers. Overall these incongruences preserve the difference in realities between both groups, with White individuals as the beneficiaries (hooks, 1981, 2000; Cheng, 1997; Valdivia, 2002).

Responsibility. As aspiring professionals, all five women possessed a sense of responsibility to other individuals and to use their positions to create change, a premise raised in the literature (Sampson & Milam, 1975). In other words, the spirit of social service influenced all five women whose experiences and observations were interwoven

by the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. That sense of responsibility to help others was demonstrated as Shawna discussed why she wanted to become a probation officer, Vivian an educational leader, April a family therapist, and Kimberly a physical/occupational therapist. Interestingly among the participants, Lisa's business aspirations were atypical. However, her remarks were distinctive as she aspired to couple her interest in business with her interest in helping the community, specifically the residents of her hometown. As per her narrative, Lisa reflected that as a child she was a product of after school activities, but she never was able to attend summer camp. She wanted to make sure that her hometown had both recreational services available to its youngest residents.

Socialization. The literature indicated that the motivation of African American undergraduate women to help others is fueled by their socialization to use their education to uplift their community, a residual effect of the intersectionality experienced by African American women (Hamilton, 1996). This is also similar to the socialization of individuals from the African American middle class (Pattillo, 2013). For African American undergraduate women, giving back to the community is a high priority or primary concern whereas personal interests and aspirations are secondary (Hamilton, 1996). Lisa, a future COO, was the one participant who addressed giving back to her hometown, which is an urban area. In this instance, Lisa has been socialized to use her education for the uplift of the African American community. However she did not put aside her aspirations, but indicated using her education, specifically her love of economics, for the betterment of her community. The other participants demonstrated that helping others motivated them and they wanted to do so through the use of their careers.

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A difference noted in participants' narratives and the literature was whether helping others was synonymous with giving back to the African American community (Hamilton, 1996; Pattillo, 2013; Sampson & Milam, 1975). Three of the five participants were raised in predominantly White neighborhoods and attended predominantly White schools. Subsequently, their communities were primarily White. Their awareness of self as African American women came later in their childhoods. For example, Vivian indicated this awareness as she attempted to get to know other African American students by becoming the manager of the basketball team in high school. Shawna indicated her awareness as an African American began when she moved in with her father during her senior year in high school. Prior to this move, Shawna had not been around other African American people.

Bicultural approach. As undergraduate students, the participants were aware that they were African American women in a predominantly White environment. Their experiences reinforced the literature's analysis on maintaining a bicultural approach (Bell, 1990; DuBois, 1903). DuBois (1903) coined the phrase double consciousness to signify the bicultural experiences of African Americans. Double consciousness represented the "twoness" felt by an African American (DuBois, 1903, p. 5) who maintained an awareness of two worlds (Bell, 1990). It is challenging for individuals to adopt a bicultural approach, to balance the value systems of both worlds, European American and African American (Alfred, 2001; Parham & Austin, 1994).

African American women in the throes of intersectionality are challenged to remain committed to their community, while at the same time feeding their professional growth and development at places of employment that are often White and male-

dominated (Bell, 1990). African American undergraduate women, as students at predominantly White institutions, are also challenged to remain true to who they are but are aware that race, gender, and class act as determinants in campus climate and then dictate how they are to respond to their environment (Chambers et al., 2009). As it pertained to the study, participants believed they had to carefully select when and how to present their opinions and perspectives when communicating with other students. More specifically, national political events, such as police brutality, immigration, and the 2016 presidential election gave rise to conversations between participants and their White peers. Two of the participants were concerned about being perceived as angry, a stereotypical label often placed on African American women (Bell, 1990). Vivian specifically spoke about the importance of presenting herself in the best light as an African American woman on campus. This included being well spoken and remaining involved, which Vivian believed was counter to the preconceived notions established by other individuals regarding African Americans. This is an example of an African American woman feeling obliged to comply with the value system imposed by the White world (Alfred, 2001; Bell 1990; Parham & Austin, 1994).

The use of a bicultural approach is distinctive to African Americans when trying to balance two worlds in a professional or academic environment (Alfred, 2001; Bell 1990). It could also be considered a career skill unique to African Americans when trying to navigate the White world. Similar to soft skills, biculturalism can be defined as an intangible skill steered by the ability to interact, listen, negotiate, resolve conflicts, and problem solve (Sophia, 2014). As discussed in the literature, soft skills can be a predictor for future professional conduct (Brown, 1990). Throughout their narratives, participants

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demonstrated the use of this skill-set as they described how they carefully interacted with and attentively listened to their White peers, and then cautiously negotiated when and how to respond during discussions that were culturally sensitive. As students, participants demonstrated their ability to be proactive by problem solving before potential conflicts arose with White peers. Participants understood the importance of self-presentation, as their current conduct was practice for their future professional conduct.

The adoption of a bicultural approach may be more vital for African American women who enter non-traditional careers, where their numbers are low, as opposed to those African American women who enter traditional careers (Bell, 1990). Similarly, the same may apply to participants who found themselves as the only African Americans in their programs or courses. This might have occurred because four of the five participants declared majors that were non-traditional for African American women. Moreover, the number of Black undergraduate students, which was 7% at the time of the study, might have compounded this occurrence.

Frequently highlighted in the literature were the pressures imposed on African Americans by the White world. However, participants also experienced pressures imposed by the African American world, another topic raised in the literature (Walpole, 2009). For example, Kimberly shared that her Black female friends criticized her for talking White. She was offended by the implication that they believed African American women should or could not speak properly and intellectually. Though she was offended, she did not want other African Americans to view her as having assimilated nor did she want White individuals to base her intelligence on whether she embraced her African American culture.

For Kimberly the management of both worlds was a balance that created struggles, as one world tried to dominate the other, a frustration echoed in previous research (Bell, 1990). Similarly, Shawna had an additional challenge with balancing both worlds as she prepared for her future as a probation officer. In light of recent events surrounding the police brutality of persons of color, Shawna's family members and African American peers questioned her decision to pursue such a career. Despite this scrutiny, Shawna was determined to become a part of law enforcement. However she said she was more ecstatic about her career choice during her sophomore year compared to the current time of the study.

Coping strategies. The literature reveals that because African American women are confronted with balancing two worlds, the pressure to maintain that balance could create problems and conflicts (Bell, 1990). As a result, coping strategies are essential to the support and empowerment of African American women (Bell, 1990; Chambers et al., 2009; Collins, 1989; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Traditional coping strategies include support from family members and friends, peers, as well as activities, including those that are faith-based (Chambers et al., 2009; Collins, 1989; Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

Researchers believe building a network of personal contacts is important as part of career development (Schulz, 2008; Vilorio, 2011). Family, friends, peers and colleagues, as well as college professors and staff are included among those contacts. Interestingly, its significance is based on connections for professional networking, advancement, and recommendations (Schulz, 2008; Vilorio, 2011). However, for African American women, the significance of personal contacts is for the purpose of support and encouragement. Similar to research that focuses on African American women,

participants believed support from family and friends was critical throughout their high school and college careers (Collins, 1989; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Both Kimberly and Vivian spoke to the influence that their parents had on their lives from choosing where to attend college to their choice of majors and career aspirations. Lisa discussed the importance of relying on childhood friends who also are African American undergraduate women and currently share the same experiences. Kimberly conveyed the significance of identifying like-minded peers focused on completing college and pursing career aspirations (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Also included among Kimberly's coping strategies was the role of spirituality in her life. Though April discussed the role of church as part of her upbringing, Kimberly was the only participant to mention spirituality as part of her coping strategies. Both spirituality and church represent faith-based activities as coping strategies of African American women, which is echoed in the literature (Collins, 1986, 1989, 1990; Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

Participants identified other coping strategies as well. Shawna, for instance, relied on the support of her basketball coaches and teammates whom she characterized as her extended family, a sentiment seen in previous literature (Collins, 1989; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). She also relied on the support provided by the EOF staff. April's membership in an African American sorority offered her comfort in knowing there were other African American women on campus with whom she shared similar experiences. Extremely important was the connection to certain professors and advisors who understood the circumstances through which the five participants as African American women have come to exist as undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution. According to the literature, these connections were of particular significance as many African

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American women, today, are first generation professionals in non-traditional careers with limited roles models, mentors, or advocates (Bell, 1990).

Another noted difference between the narratives and literature were the people who supported participants along their educational journeys. The literature discusses the importance of traditional coping strategies that are cultural elements for African Americans (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). However, not all personal interactions that serve as coping strategies are culturally relevant. While participants attempted to stay connected with friends, professors, advisors, and program staff who were African American, there were instances when personal interactions, such as like-minded peers, coaches and teammates, program staff, and other professors and advisors, included supportive individuals who were White. Despite race, supportive relationships with individuals who were White were equally important to participants as these supporters understood the demands of college, and could encourage participants to persist (Chambers, 2009; Chambers et al., 2009). However, participants, such as Lisa, April, Vivian, and Kimberly continued their attempts to connect with other African Americans, particularly women, but those attempts were sometimes challenging.

Finally, the literature identifies coping strategies that included withdrawal, avoidance, acceptance, detachment, and suppression when oppression occurs (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). There was no indication that participants altered their career aspirations to avoid the anticipation of racial tensions, as suggested in the literature (Evans & Herr, 1991). However, participants may have used a bicultural approach as a way to accept or suppress oppressive acts when they occurred.

Research Questions

The following research questions were proposed as part of my dissertation study:

RQ1: How do African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White liberal arts institution develop career aspirations?

The five women presented in this study developed their career aspirations through either parental/childhood influences, a need to help others, or a combination of both. April vacillated between life as an educator and a family therapist. As a daughter and granddaughter of educators, she instinctively gravitated toward education. However, of the two career aspirations, she was more enthusiastic about family therapy, where she believed she could help people. Kimberly also vacillated between life as an occupational or a physical therapist, a profession that was introduced to her by her mother. Helping others in either role motivated her to complete her career goal.

Vivian, who will graduate with a degree in Biology, aspires to pursue a career in Student Affairs within Higher Education. Helping others, particularly students along their educational journeys, is her main source of motivation. However, Vivian believed she had a chosen a major that would lead her to future self-sufficiency at the insistence of her parents, who since her childhood wanted her to choose a profession that will always be in demand. Similarly, Lisa developed her career aspirations of becoming a COO after watching her family struggle when she was a child. While making money inspires Lisa, it is not the sole source of her motivation. As a businessperson, Lisa planned to use her education and position to give back to and improve her community. Helping others was not unfamiliar to Lisa, as she grew up watching her mother provide for family members.

The childhoods of April, Kimberly, Vivian, and Lisa helped develop their career aspirations in a positive manner. The manner in which Shawna's childhood helped develop her career aspirations was more challenging. As a probation officer, Shawna wants to impact the lives of young people just as those police officers who intervened and impacted her life did when she lived with her mother. Shawna felt supported by those officers, who she said could have simply responded to her home. Rather, the officers extended themselves by repeatedly checking on her. In turn, Shawna wants to support other individuals.

RQ2:   How do African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White liberal arts institution understand issues of race, gender, and class as pertaining to career goals?

Participants understood issues of race, gender, and class as pertaining to career goals as they were keenly aware of their own positions as African American undergraduate women among a White majority student population. Through their narratives, participants acknowledged how race, gender, and class shaped their pre-college and college experiences, which differed from the experiences of their White peers.

Participants viewed the institution as a reflection of the professional world, and opted to use this perception as practice for life beyond the institution when they enter their careers. Their understanding of race, gender, and class required their use of a bicultural approach (Alfred, 2001; Bell, 1990), which participants instinctively adopted. This approach assisted participants as African American women with navigating the waters of a predominantly White institution, where the outer demands and expectations are aligned with the dominant culture (Alfred, 2001). For example, participants discussed

remaining level headed, knowing when to present their arguments both in and out of the classroom, and displaying themselves in a favorable light. Participants understood the importance of remaining involved with campus activities, which one participant believed was not expected of African American students.

Aware of the challenges of being African American women, participants found it invaluable to actively connect with professors and advisors who served as mentors concerned with assisting them along their educational journeys toward their career goals. Mentors, too, were aware of the pressures experienced by the participants as African American women. Sororities and athletics were also a form of support for participants. The EOF program was essential to Lisa and Shawna, who met the financial eligibility requirements to participate. Moreover, Lisa and Kimberly were first generation college students who endured the family pressure to succeed.

Recent Unemployment Rates

In exploring the perceptions of African American women regarding their career aspirations, and the impact that race, gender, and class have on those aspirations, it is important to couple the information with a snapshot of where we are today regarding challenges with unemployment in the United States. For 2016, the overall unemployment rate in the United States was reported at 4.9 % (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). However this percentage varied for Whites, Blacks, and those of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity. Of the three groups, the lowest rate was among Whites at 4.3%, which was under the national average. Blacks held a rate of 8.4% followed by Hispanic/Latinos at 5.8%. Not only were both percentages above the national rate, but also the unemployment rate for Blacks was nearly doubled when compared to Whites, which has remained

consistent despite the fact that the unemployment rate has declined in the last several years for all three groups (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

Moreover, when examining statistics across gender, race, and ethnicity for 2016, White women held the lowest unemployment rate at 4.2% while Hispanic/Latina women were at 6.3% and Black women at 7.8%. Black men held the highest rate at 9.1% when compared to White, Black, and Hispanic/Latino men and women. Among the women who were unemployed, White women experienced the shortest duration of unemployment, which was captured at less than five weeks, whereas Black women experienced the longest duration, which was captured at 27 weeks and over (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017) reported that the differences in unemployment rates can be attributed to a number of factors, but the Bureau noted among those factors was the degree of workplace discrimination experienced by individuals of various groups, a factor echoed throughout the literature (Gill, 2004; Littig, 1968; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Walker, 2008).

For those women who were employed, fulltime and salaried wages increased by educational attainment. However, for women employed and with a bachelor's degree or beyond, the median weekly earnings were higher for White women at $1115 compared to Hispanic/Latina women who earned $988, and Black women who earned the least at $960, another disparity discussed in the literature (Beal, 2008; Higginbotham, 1994).

Implications

In consideration of the literature, the findings from participant narratives, and recent statistics, I offer my recommendations as they relate to the practice, research, policy, and leadership of career development for African American undergraduate

women. These implications, discussed below, are of particular importance as African American undergraduate women seek to successfully transition from students to professionals.

Practice. Socio-political issues, which are based on socially constructed identities, give rise to historical challenges for African American undergraduate students (Omi & Winant, 1994). Socio-political issues perpetuate environmental conditions and shape learning experiences that influence career aspirations, similar to those of the participants (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990). Practitioners, particularly those at predominantly White institutions similar to the one in this study, must be better prepared to assist their African American undergraduate women (Falconer & Hays, 2006).

One approach is for practitioners to incorporate career development strategies that are culturally relevant and reflect the socio-political issues of race, gender, and class that impact African American undergraduate women both as students and aspiring professionals (McCollum, 1998; Perrone et al., 2001). As the literature and this study both reflect, African American women use biculturalism and coping mechanisms as they seek to maintain a balance between their inner qualities and imposed outer demands, which may dominate academic and work settings (Alfred, 2001; Bell, 1990).

As a leader of undergraduate career development, I plan to formalize a process of learning for my African American undergraduate women. I will design and implement an initiative that discusses the history, practice, and management of biculturalism for African American women as a group. Moreover, discussions will include the perceived advantages and disadvantages of adopting a bicultural approach, a skill-set instinctively applied by the study's participants.

Another culturally relevant initiative will include assisting African American undergraduate women with building a healthy support system that encompasses home, school, and professional contacts. If at all possible, support systems comprised of other African American women may prove beneficial for participating undergraduate women. These relationships aid in the empowerment of African American women as they navigate through a system that traditionally has not accepted or validated their realities (Bell, 1990; Collins, 1989; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Such a support system can be a safe space where African American undergraduate women can discover and share their voices, create self-definitions, and build a resistance to preconceived notions and stereotypes (Collins, 1990).

A third initiative will be to facilitate roundtable discussions with institutional actors who have face-to-face interactions with our African American undergraduate women. Roundtable discussions will include actors from both the academic and student affairs sides. Faculty and staff members need to be apprised of the impact they have on African American undergraduate women as it pertains to their retention and persistence. This is of particular importance within a predominantly White institution where campus climates may not be welcoming because of race, gender, and class (Chambers et al., 2009).

Strategies that are culturally relevant to African American undergraduate women may discourage this subset of students from adopting less healthy strategies such as withdrawing, avoiding, accepting, detaching, and suppressing when confronted with oppression (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). It might also discourage future students from altering

career ambitions, which result in lower expectations and decreased self-efficacy (Evans & Herr, 1991).

Research. As it pertains to employment, historically, the work experiences of African American women have been dictated by oppression based on race, gender, and class. Limited to positions that were labor-intensive, domestic, and other service-oriented work, African American women had minimal experience in other areas of employment compared to the dominant group (Collins, 1990). However, when we look to scholarship on career development, our attention returns to those traditional career development theories, which were based on White middle class males and absent the representation of African American women (Kerka, 1998; Kimbrough & Salomone, 1993; McCollum, 1998). When African American women were the center of research, the focus was on issues such as low-income status, welfare dependency, broken homes, teenage pregnancy, and unwed motherhood (Collins, 2015). It was rare for studies to focus on college-educated or career-oriented African American women (Bell, 1990).

Similar to scholarship which uses Black feminist thought as its lens, this study attempted to build on the work of Black feminism by using the narratives of five women, focusing on the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, and removing the elite perspective of White male points of view, characteristic of traditional scholarship. However, research on career development models is needed for African American women. Research should consider the commonalities discovered among the perceptions and experiences of individual African American women, but it must also consider that as African American women assimilate due to their upbringing or the need to balance two

worlds, perceptions and experiences among groups of African American women may differ. These changes should be researched and examined as well.

Future research should also examine pre-college experiences as the lack of college preparation emerged as a theme from the data. To participants, race and class determined which students were afforded pre-college experiences that prepared them both academically and occupationally with White students benefiting from these factors. Future research should examine the pre-college experiences of African American high school females in comparison to those experiences of White high school females with an additional emphasis on gender and class.

Furthermore, as noted in the limitations, this dissertation was not a comparative study. A study may yield additional information if it compares African American undergraduate women from more than one predominantly White institution or from a predominantly White institution and a historically Black institution. Comparative studies can also be conducted with African American and White undergraduate women from the same institution or with Black women who are African American, African, Caribbean, West Indian, and Afro-Latina enrolled at a predominantly White institution.

Policy. Policy often determines the practices that are implemented. For instance, through the distribution of grant funds, the Obama Administration aimed to encourage states to adopt policies that focused on college and career readiness, opportunities for school choice, and teacher accountability (United States Department of Education, 2010). This federal incentive was done in part as a response to the competitiveness of the 21st century labor market. The Obama Administration believed it imperative for educational leaders to weigh all influences as they planned and led to expand opportunities for all

students preparing for the workforce (St. John, Daun-Barnett, & Moronski-Chapman, 2013).

Policy that requires open conversations and collaborative projects serve as opportunities to foster a supportive educational environment for marginalized groups. In the case of African American undergraduate women, a supportive environment around the issues of race, gender, and class, contributes to their growth, development, and preparation (Johnson, 2015). The campus policy where this study was conducted speaks to the generality of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and the institutional commitment to promote these three elements. However, its policy does not speak specifically to its African American undergraduate women, who are often lost among the different groups that fall under the umbrella of diversity.

Policy that is written with a political consciousness of the impact of intersectionality on African American women may influence institutional practices that foster a supportive environment intended to empower this subset of students (Beal, 2008). Such policy reform would require educational leaders to adopt a more social justice approach in an effort to be "culturally responsive" and to reallocate resources that address matters of inequities among students (Hytten & Bettez, 2011, p. 8). Within the educational system, leaders have adopted social justice as part of their institutional mission statements and employment opportunities, and the same should apply to student achievement and empowerment (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). Empowerment is of particular importance for African American undergraduate women whose next step is to transition from college to a capitalist workforce recognized for its history of racial exploitation and male dominance (Beal, 2008; hooks, 2000).

Leadership. Practice, research, and policy cannot be impacted without the appropriate leadership driving the goals of each. In my capacity as an educational leader with a social justice platform, I will be instrumental in steering these three elements as each relates to increasing the career readiness and employment opportunities of African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White institution. The use of a social justice platform can impact curricula, co-curricula activities, and other aspects of program development. Moreover as a director of career development and planning, I am in a professional position that is acquainted with the needs of students in this area of higher education.

Social justice, as a platform, is appropriate as it is more attentive to issues of equity. The historical background of social justice connects to events such as the civil rights movement, Jim Crow laws, and the women's movement (Bankston, 2010). These historical eras defined and transformed the roles of African American women as these women created a legacy of persistent effort and became change agents (Barnett et al., 1999; Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Collins, 1990). Subsequently social justice is linked to the rights of those individuals from the lesbian, bisexual, gay, queer, and transgender (LBGQT) communities as well as those individuals who are disabled (Bankston, 2010). However when considering these marginalized populations, social justice is most notably connected to the experiences of African Americans beginning with slavery through the racism and discrimination that African Americans experience today (Bankston, 2010). The goal of social justice is to raise the consciousness of the dominant culture by supporting the principle that all individuals are entitled to equal rights, which includes participation in the same liberties and opportunities with fairness and free from bias. This

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consciousness has been typically constructed on respect and care for individuals, and the recognition and advocacy of their rights (Theoharis, 2007).

In addition to social justice, a profound impact by leadership requires change that shifts the cognitive frames of individual educators and the educational system from deficit and diversity to a cognitive frame of equity (Bensimon, 2005). A deficit frame perpetuates stereotypes and preconceived notions (Bensimon, 2005). For example, the assumptions educators have possessed about the race of students have produced negative student outcomes (Takaki, 2008). Educators with a deficit frame maintain beliefs that African American students are intellectually inferior compared to students of the dominant culture, who have been viewed as intellectually superior (Takaki, 2008). As a result, the expectations of these educators regarding their students of color are low compared to their expectations regarding students of the dominant culture. On the other hand, educators who are diversity minded celebrate differences among groups of students. However, equity-minded educators go beyond short-term remedies and examine the root causes of educational inequities (Bensimon, 2005). These educators participate in continuous self-reflection to assess their own personal attitudes and practices (Bensimon, 2005; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004; Ovando, 2003), and believe in both individual and institutional responsibility (Bensimon, 2005).

Today's educational leaders must not confuse the difference between being diversity-minded and equity-minded (Bensimon, 2005). An educational environment may promote and practice diversity, but it does not mean that there is equity between subsets of student groups. In other words, not all students, such as African American undergraduate women, have the same opportunities as those students of the dominant

culture. Educational actors can foster a culture of complacency when on the surface their environments are comprised of student bodies that are diverse. However, underneath that surface are inequities that produce unequal outcomes for subsets of students not a part of the dominant culture.

As a change agent, I will be confronted by individuals who feel threatened by change and use organizational defenses to avert change that impacts future practice, research, and policy (Argyris, 1990). The use of defenses by individuals on micro and macro levels has been commonly practiced throughout American history. Those defenses include the practice of both de jure and de facto segregation (Oldfield, 2004). As defined previously in Chapter 1, de jure segregation was comprised of legal actions, such as Jim Crow laws, executed by individuals and protected by the government (Green, 1999). As new legislation reversed de jure segregation, it is de facto segregation that continued to be the defense of people who were threatened by change and used private actions to avert integration and equality (Green, 1999). Actions were adopted by school districts that based school enrollment on residency or employers who determined hiring practices, earnings, and promotions based on the race and/or gender of the applicant or employee (Higginbotham, 1994; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; White, 1994). As anticipated, these defense tactics have been counterproductive to the advancement of African Americans, including African American women.

The organizational defenses of individuals today are viewed as resistant to new information and overprotective of the current structure (Argyris, 1990). Kotter (1996) offers an eight-step process for leaders who aim to be successful in the change process within their organizations. Described as a vehicle by which leaders can implement

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change (Burke, 2011), those steps are: (1) establishing a sense of urgency that is true rather than complacent or false; (2) creating a guiding coalition; (3) developing a vision that simplifies the decision making process, and motivates and coordinates action among all stakeholders; (4) communicating the vision for buy-in; (5) empowering broad-based action that is prepared for structural barriers; (6) generating short-term wins to be celebrated; (7) never letting up even in times of resistance; (8) incorporating changes into the culture, which can be slow to occur (Kotter, 1996).

As these steps relate to African American undergraduate women and other subsets of students, there is a call for leaders like myself to assess and respond to the educational inequities with a sense of urgency rather than common complacency (Snell, 2003). This urgency embodies a common vision that motivates all actors, including faculty, staff, and students of all colors. It incorporates buy-in to the understanding that race, gender, and class continue to impact communities of students though there are educational actors of the dominant culture who believe that racism, sexism, and classism no longer exist, and that power and privilege are equally distributed. These actors may assist with the removal of structural barriers or may be part of resistance, all of which a leader needs to be prepared. Overall it is the culture of the educational environment that will need to be addressed. This includes attitudes and behaviors that create and perpetuate barriers, and resist change. This culture is unhealthy and detrimental to educational progress and the outcomes of students' learning, including the career development and readiness of African American undergraduate women. It is my responsibility, as an educational leader, to recognize and respond to this damage, as leadership and culture are seen as interconnected and impact educational practice, research, and policy (Schein, 2004).

Conclusion

It is unrealistic to believe that all college students have the same opportunities to cultivate the knowledge, skill-sets, and work history necessary to enter the workforce and attain occupational advancement. When we look at the historical landscape in which African American women have existed, problems and conflicts have been present for all facets of their lives, career aspirations and goals included. Compared to other groups, African American women have remained under-employed and under-compensated as well as underrepresented within the workforce. Despite their attainment of college degrees, these issues persist for African American women, particularly as they enter non-traditional fields of employment where their numbers are low (Higginbotham, 1994).

The purpose of my dissertation was to explore the perceptions of African American women regarding their career aspirations, and the impact that race, gender, and class have on those aspirations. To help accomplish this purpose, five African American women offered their narratives as undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution. While their stories were shared individually, collectively their stories spoke to matters of college preparation, helping others, campus experiences, and support systems, with the intersectionality of race, gender, and class interwoven through each story. The literature characterizes these socio-political issues as distinctive and overlapping forces within the career development of African American women (Brewer, 1999; Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996; Parham & Austin, 1994). The study's implications were offered based on the five narratives as well as the emerging themes and additional topics echoed throughout the literature. As the researcher, I believe African American undergraduate women need an understanding of how the socio-political issues of race, gender, and class

impact their career development, readiness, and goals and subsequently their future

employment and economic opportunities. In my capacity as an educational leader I will

use my own recommendations as part of the study's implications to spearhead practice,

research, and policy relevant to the advancement of our African American undergraduate

women.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your background.

   Probe: Tell me about your family, or how you grew up.

   Tell me about your parents, and their education and careers.

2. When you were 10 what did you want to be when you grew up? Why?

3. Can you tell me the major you have chosen to study and how did you choose it?

   Probe: What in your pre-college and college experience led to this choice?

4. What future occupation or career(s) are you considering?

   Probe: How did you decide on that/those careers?

5. How well did attending a predominantly White institution prepare you?

6. Do you have anything else to add regarding your career goals or aspirations?