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Race Matters: Midlife, Black Female Doctoral Students Navigating Racial Undercurrents

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of midlife, Black, female doctoral students. The overarching question guiding this study was: What meanings did midlife, Black, female doctoral students attach to their doctoral experiences? Data were collected from nine participants using in-depth semi-structured interviews and critical incident reflections. As this study was concerned with examining the experiences of midlife. Black, female doctoral students and how the intersection of these three locations impacted the doctoral experience, a conceptual framework incorporating Black feminist thought and intersectionality was also used in order to analyze the phenomenon. Participants were selected from various institutions and from a diverse group of programs. Findings suggest that as older Black women, these doctoral students were subject to different academic and social expectations that influenced their doctoral journey. This study contributes to the limited body of research on older Black women in higher education and gives institutions strategies for supporting this population.

Keywords: Adult education; Black female doctoral students; Black studies; higher education; intersectionality; midlife doctoral students; phenomenology; women's studies

INTRODUCTION

Decades after Brown v. Board of Education (1954), which gave equal access to education to all Americans, Blacks have made significant strides in educational attainment (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Approximately 45 percent of Blacks have attended college as compared to approximately 53 percent of Whites (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). These factors point to the progress made by Blacks in closing the educational gap between Blacks and Whites. Even with these gains, however, Blacks are still less likely than Whites to earn a college degree. The disparity in educational attainment can be seen by the high college attrition rates experienced by Blacks. A widely held belief is that the reason for the difference in academic success and retention between Whites and Blacks is that Blacks are not as well prepared academically (Levin & Levin, 1991). However, there are other studies which contradict the notion that the lack of academic preparation is the primary reason for the low academic success and retention of Black college students. In fact, there is research that supports the belief that Black college students experience difficulties outside of academics that influence their ability to be successful (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Adding to a growing body of literature, examining the challenges and obstacles to success faced by Black women in higher education in general and at the graduate level in particular, this study looks specifically at the experiences faced by midlife Black women enrolled in doctoral programs.

The Black Woman's Experience in Higher Education

Alfred (2001) characterized the Black woman's experience at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) as one of marginalization and isolation. Although some students have a positive doctoral experience at PWIs, many do not, often facing misjudgment, unfair treatment (Grant 2012), double marginality (Spurlock, 1984), flagrant and disguised racism (Ross-Gordon, 2005), and what Johnson-Bailey (1998) refers to as experiences with blatant hostility. Black doctoral students are often not afforded the same privileges as their white counterparts (Grant 2012). For example, when Black doctoral students propose researching an area of interest related to their culture, they may be met with skepticism or even dismissal of their ideas (Walkington, 2017). Higher education in the United States has faced many challenges recently to include limited resources, changes in demographics, diminished public confidence and more accountability for the success of students (Whitt et al., 2008).

A Shifting Age Landscape

Lachman (2004) has suggested that while for many years there was little interest in research on midlife adults or they were studied tangentially as part of studies on children or older adults, there is finally growing interest in

studying this group. She noted "The population explosion of middle-aged adults and the increased knowledge about this age period have led to the identification of midlife as a segment of the lifespan worthy of study in its own right" (2004, p.307). Lachman also has acknowledged that while midlife has often been associated with the image "midlife crisis," increasing study of this age group has contributed to multiple perspectives on midlife, including a view of this period as one associated with growth and renewal, even if that growth emerges as an outcome of dealing with life transitions and crises. Such transitions have often been associated with adult learning, including beginning or returning to higher education (And & Brickell, 1980; Anderson et al., 2022). Lachman indicated that "those between 40 and 60 are typically considered middle-aged" (Lachman, 2004, p. 311) although she acknowledged that ages associated with middle age have ranged widely from 30-75. For purposes of this study of midlife doctoral students, we included women between the ages of 45-65.

As the demographic landscape continues to change, it can be expected that more Black women will seek advanced degrees during middle age, with both an aging population and given a greater proportion of students of color beginning and completing undergraduate degrees later than the traditional age (Jain & Crisp, 2018; Rose et al., 2024) The pursuit of a doctorate is often an intimidating venture, requiring extensive time and effort, perhaps more so for older students whose work and family responsibilities are likely to be greater than younger students enrolling directly after undergraduate studies. In addition to the typical barriers experienced by adult students as noted by Ross-Gordon (2005), Black women can encounter considerable obstacles during doctoral studies because they also contend with issues related to race and gender. An examination of the literature points to a scarcity of research focused on the experiences of Black, female doctoral students, but there are even fewer researchers examining midlife doctoral students. Instead, literature tends to focus on one or two of the identities, rather than the intersection of all three: Black, female and middle-aged.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to chronicle the experiences of middle-aged Black, female doctoral students in hopes of providing more visibility to and a platform for voicing their struggles and successes, as these voices are frequently unheard or muted. This study contributes to the research knowledge base by addressing this gap in the research literature. It was hoped that an enhanced understanding of this population would enable institutions, programs, and graduate faculty to better serve and support midlife Black females pursuing doctoral studies, facilitating the completion of their studies. Given this purpose, the central research question guiding the study was: How did midlife, Black females perceive their doctoral experiences?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The African American female has been tasked with becoming a healthy, happy, and productive member of society (Turnage, 2004). This task has been made difficult considering the history of racism and sexism in the United States. The Black female must contend not only with issues surrounding being Black but also those issues that confront her as a woman. The African American woman cannot just be Black or just be a woman; she is a Black woman. The race-gender aspect of her identity is more powerful than either aspect of her identity viewed separately (Turnage, 2004). For instance, in a study by Thomas et al. (2011), participants were able to state how their identity was affected by race and gender. However, when study participants were asked about the aspects of their identity as separate constructs, their responses were based on gendered race. For example, one participant stated:

> It's very hard to distinguish like being a woman, and being Black, you are a Black woman, it's one. Like it's no, I'm a woman then I'm black. It's not I'm black then I'm a woman, it's, um, "I'm a Black woman" (Thomas et al., 2011, p. 535).

Black women have a complex history within the United States. As noted above, it is important to consider their intersected identities when researching Black females. According to Torres et al. (2003), to understand the totality of a person requires examining multiple identities. After all, "few individuals define themselves with just one identity; all of us simultaneously develop multiple identities throughout our life" (Torres, et al., 2003, p. 67). Furthermore, the double marginalization that Black females experience makes their experience different from that of White women whose marginalization is linked to sexism alone (Walkington, 2017). As the Black woman ages, she also faces a triple marginalization, with age becoming the third issue to be addressed.

Black Women in Higher Education

The educational system in the United States is permeated with inconsistencies, false expectations, and masked racism (Margolis & Romero, 1998). Black women are typically affected the most by behaviors and challenges stemming from these experiences (Collins, 1986; Williams et al., 2005; Patton, 2009). Unfortunately, Black women have been experiencing racism and sexism throughout the history of the United States, with these inequities still playing a pivotal role in their modern-day experiences (Collins, 1989). Although Black women are a diverse group, it is difficult to grasp their higher education experiences without recognizing their struggle against the double oppressions of sexism and racism stemming from their gender and racial social locations (Carter, 2010).

White males have had access to a college education since the 1600s (Carter, 2010). However, it was not until the 1800s that White women were

allowed entrance into a college-level institution. Alexander Lucius Twilight, the first Black male to receive an Artium Baccalaureatus (AB) degree, earned it in 1823. However, it would be 1837 before Oberlin College became the first college-level institution to admit women of any race and 1850 before Lucy Stanton Sessions, a Black woman, graduated there (Carter, 2010, para 4). Carter noted that many of the legal barriers preventing the inclusion of Blacks and women in higher education were eliminated by the start of the 1970s, however, Black women have continued to be affected by institutionalized racist practices that have impacted access to higher education programs and supports (Carter 2010).

Using a Black feminist thought framework in their qualitative study, Borum and Walker (2012) examined the undergraduate and graduate experiences of 12 Black women in mathematics who attended historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) versus those who attended institutions that were not an HBCU. Women attending an HBCU noted supportive faculty and a nurturing environment as positive factors of their experience. The women reported similar aspects of what made their experience pleasant or distressing no matter which institution was attended for doctoral study. Two of the women who did not attend an HBCU indicated that they did not feel racial or gender discrimination; however, they revealed that they were usually the only Black student in their classes. Three of the remaining women attending a non-HBCU described experiences that were colored with feelings of alienation and discrimination at their undergraduate institutions.

A study conducted by Morales (2014) of 62 Black students, which included 32 men and 30 women ages 18-30, discovered that these students experienced racial microaggressions related to gender and class during their daily interactions with peers who were not Black. Additionally, many of the Blacks were seen as totally different and foreign from non-Black students, with non-Black students tending to exhibit a fascination with the alleged uniqueness of Blacks, resulting in the objectification of Black students. Findings of this study suggested that race does not exist in isolation but is gendered and classed as well, such as assuming Black students were low income or working class or that female students were the authority on cooking soul food or braiding hair. Moreover, findings from this study illuminated how these racialized meanings are interlocked with different social locations in shaping the experiences of Black people, even in spaces that are considered liberal such as higher education institutions.

Black Women Pursuing Doctoral Study

An advanced degree can provide the needed education for professional careers and create opportunities for African Americans to better

serve their communities, as suggested by the words of one participant in a study of Black women in doctoral programs:

> I want to be successful. I want to be able to provide for those in my life and to be an asset to my own community as well as to – not only to my own community professionally which is social work, but also to my family and to the African American community as well (Shavers & Moore, 2014. p. 25)

Because African Americans are underrepresented in advanced degree attainment, earning an advanced degree is especially important. This underrepresentation is still a concern even with the 88.4 percent increase in graduate school enrollment by Blacks from 1996 to 2004. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), 13 percent of the master's degrees conferred between 2009 and 2012-2013 were earned by African Americans, the highest share of degrees conferred among nonwhites. Among nonwhites, Blacks earned eight percent of the doctor's degrees (which includes professional degrees) between 2012 and 2013, exceeded only by Asians. Black females earned 71 percent of the master's degrees and 65 percent of the doctor's degrees awarded to Blacks between 2009 and 2010. With Blacks seeming to lead proportionally in master's degree attainment among nonwhites, especially for Black females, but not maintaining this same lead among nonwhites in the earning of doctor's degrees, it is important to understand their experiences in the pursuit of the doctoral degree.

Although enrollment for Black students has increased and Black women are earning doctoral degrees at a higher rate than some other nonwhite groups, concern for a lack of diversity among students remains an issue for administrators, faculty, and policy makers (Ellis 2001). To provide a larger pool of Black faculty candidates, more nonwhite students, specifically Black students, will need to earn doctoral degrees. In a study of sixty doctoral students (equal numbers of Black and White women and men) Ellis (2001) found that Black women, more than any other group reported poor advisor relationships, including limited communication about program hurdles and expectations and incomplete feedback on dissertation proposals. Because findings in this study suggested that race was an important aspect of doctoral students' positive experiences with faculty and timely dissertation progress, she suggested that deficits in faculty relationships could be mitigated with a more diverse faculty who have experience engaging with diverse student populations.

Grant and Simmons (2008) shared their own experiences in the academy as an African American doctoral student and a tenured professor in their narrative study of the experiences of two Black women at different academic stages. Their study suggested that there is an absence of Black

female mentors for African American females who are current and emerging scholars. Conclusions from their study point to the importance of having Black faculty support and mentoring. They go on to counsel against Black females enrolling in doctoral programs lacking in "Black female faculty representation and/or mentoring support" (p. 512). Moreover, they suggested that those moving into tenure-track roles might want to investigate whether an institution has culturally supportive programs prior to accepting job assignments.

Black women pursuing learning activities are subject to similar barriers as other adult learners, such as poor academic self-concept, diverse role responsibilities and difficulty with support services (Ross-Gordon, 2005). However, such barriers, although common among adult learners, are more pronounced with Black adult learners. Additionally, marginalized groups, according to Ross-Gordon, can face additional challenges, to include a lack of institutional role models, scarcity in content related to their culture, overt and covert racism and trouble establishing connections. Similarly, a Johnson-Bailey (1998) study of Black reentry women that included some doctoral students indicated that the usual psychological and situational barriers that reentry women faced were minor when compared to the blatant hostility they experienced. In a more recent review of scholarship on the experiences of Black women faculty and graduate students titled "How far have we really come?" Walkington (2017) concluded that microaggressions and limitations to academic opportunities and resources were still faced by Black female graduate students, based in persistent stereotypes.

Turner (2002) suggests that Black women believe if they are to be successful in academe, they must leave themselves outside of the school doors, relegating who they are to the background to conform to hegemonic standards. Women in a study by Coker (2003) were keenly aware of living in the White male-dominated academic world where they were expected to be silent participants and act in a demure manner while also living in their Black, mostly male-dominated world with strong, independent, and outspoken Black women. These women found it difficult to be themselves while navigating the academic world. This sentiment was mirrored in a Shavers and Moore (2014) study in which participants indicated the need to adjust their language, grammar, interactions, and outward appearance, attempting to project a professional posture to manage their departments' perception of them as students. The cost of this posturing often resulted in students not being authentically themselves. As Johnson-Bailey suggested in her 2001 book *Sistahs in College: Making a Way out of No Way*, this posturing becomes a means of survival.

For example, Black women who challenge the status quo can be seen as aggressive and difficult, and a study by Shavers and Moore (2014)

indicated it was important for Black women to present a professional posture. The presence of women of color in the academy can serve to interrupt the stereotypical narrative that situates women of color as unintelligent (Harris et al., 2015). As one participant interviewed by Shavers and Moore explained: "Well, I've got to come off as somebody who is professional, … and also someone who works very hard, always comes to class with my reading done, ready to participate in discussions. (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p. 28). Shavers and Moore went on to point out that employing such a "prove them wrong" coping strategy to rebuke negative stereotypes, while also living up to internalized stereotypes of the "strong Black woman," often took its toll on participants. In the words of another of their study participants: "Being emotionally resilient has its place but many Black women ignore signs that they need mental or psychological help because they do not want to be seen as weak" (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p. 30). They concluded that for the women in their study, persistence and overall welfare were often conflicting facets of their experience, which could not be experienced at the same time. Similarly, Johnson-Bailey (2001) suggested that the women in her study sacrificed their well-being in pursuit of higher education.

Another challenge to the pursuit of doctoral study for Black women is the availability of funding. Maher et al. (2004) in a study of factors that affect the progress of female doctoral students, suggested that some of those who finished their degrees late experienced an inability to secure consistent funding. In her book *Leaving the Ivory Tower*, which describes her study of 816 of doctoral program completers and noncompleters of different racial/ethnic and gender identities, Lovitts (2001) indicated that while finances were not the top-ranked reason for noncompletion of doctoral programs, the inability to meet expenses was the number one financial concern among students who did list finances as a reason for not completing their degree. Furthermore, she reported that women were significantly less likely than men to have received financial support of any type, and that when provided financial support, Black students were more likely than White students to have received fellowships rather than research or teaching assistantships which typically promote higher levels of social and professional integration within their respective departments.

Although Black women face numerous obstacles when pursuing a doctoral degree, some nonetheless cope with these challenges and persist to graduation. The women in a Simon (2011) study examining doctoral degree attainment of African American women from 1995 to 2005 who were able to earn their degrees despite the lack of social integration within their departments. Support from family and the community can help to mitigate these challenges and influence academic success (Louque, 1999). As noted by Harrison (2000), Black women understand that completion of the doctoral

degree is not just for themselves but has significance to the Black race and is a testament to those in the past, in the present and in the future.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Because this study was concerned with examining how the intersections of being Black female, and older than many of their doctoral program peers impacted the doctoral experience, intersectionality was used to analyze the phenomenon. Additionally, to center study participants' experiences and allow participants to control their own narrative, this study also used Black feminist thought as a lens by which to examine the participants' experiences.

As observed by Collins (1997) decades ago and substantiated by more recent studies of Black women in higher education the problems faced by Black women are different from those experienced by either White women or Black men (Bartman, 2015). Black women experience problems that are not only gendered but also racial. To center study participants' experiences and allow participants to control their own narrative, this study used Black feminist thought as one lens by which to examine the participants' experiences.

According to Collins (2000), Black feminist thought provides a unique thought process for Black women referred to as standpoint. This unique view is a direct offshoot of their subordinate status in society and the many intersecting oppressions resulting from their experiences. In a society the centers being white, male, and wealthy, Black women are confronted daily with discriminatory and exclusionary tactics that are exacerbated by the intersection of their race, gender, and class (Evans-Winters & Love, 2015). The separate experiences because of oppression and subjugation form the Black woman's individual thoughts, but when combined, form a group standpoint for Black women.

Although Black women can have similar experiences with oppression and discrimination, Collins (2002) notes that the way each woman understands, interprets, and responds to these situations may differ. These differences can be attributed to the diversity of Black women's sexual orientation, ethnicity, class etc. Collins (1989) stressed the importance of avoiding a standardized version of consciousness, instead advocating for individuality in consciousness. Intersectionality has its roots in Black feminism, with the term being coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. As noted by Mitchell (2014), Crenshaw used the term "to explain the experiences of Black women who, because of the intersections of race and gender, are exposed to exponential forms of marginalization and oppression" (p.1). Mitchell further explains:

> Because of increased recognition and appreciation for intersectionality as a framework, it is now used more broadly to define (a) the intersecting identities of individuals beyond women of

color (b) power relations among groups, and (c) research paradigms used to design empirical studies exploring multiple and interlocking identities.

Thus, the concept of intersectionality also suggests that Black women can have differing experiences with oppression and privilege, based in other facets of their social positions. Identity is not defined solely by gender, race, and class, but also age and ableness among other social positions (Shields, 2008). According to Bowleg (2012) a major tenet of intersectionality is the focus on the departure of a one-dimensional view of identity to multi-dimensional and intersecting identities. The utility of the intersectionality framework in the current study is that it assists in understanding and framing the experiences of older Black doctoral students and the persistent patterns that present in graduate students in academia (Williams & Lewis, 2021). Using intersectionality as an analytical tool in this study also respects the differing experiences of study participants.

METHODOLOGY

Research methods entail forms of data collection, analysis, and interpretation that researchers propose for their studies (Creswell, 2009). Scholars note differences in the methodology of qualitative research and quantitative research that are inherent in the research design. Instead of using a lifeless instrument as in quantitative research, the researcher is the instrument in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). The focus on participants and their meaning making and the focus on understanding how phenomena occur are additional distinctions of qualitative research methodology. For this study, phenomenology was used as a research approach to place emphasis on the experiences of the participants.

Research Approach

Phenomenology, according to Patton (2002), seeks to examine how humans make sense of their experiences and then how these meanings become a part of the persons' consciousness, both on an individual level and as shared knowledge. Because emphasis is placed on the personal outlook of participants and interpretation of the phenomena being experienced, phenomenological approaches are "powerful for understanding subjective experience, gaining insights into people's motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom" (Lester, 1999, p. 1). Thus, in the case of midlife Black female doctoral students, a phenomenological approach provided a platform for the voices that are often relegated to the margins or even worse, silenced altogether.

The multiple data collection methods used included two in-depth interviews and critical incident reflections. Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenology

data analysis method was applied with some modification when analyzing the data. Because the study focused on examining the experiences of midlife, Black females, it was also appropriate to analyze the phenomenon through the lens of Black feminist thought.

Study procedures were designed to protect the privacy of participants and ensure their understanding of the study's purpose and consent to participate. The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Participant Selection

This study sought to find participants who were enrolled in a variety of doctoral programs requiring a dissertation and who were at various stages in their doctoral studies. Study participation was limited to individuals who met the following criteria:

- Black female who was educated in the United States, preferably born and reared in the U.S. to increase the likelihood of common understandings of race, gender and age as experienced in the U.S.
- Currently enrolled in a doctoral program requiring completion of a dissertation for at least two terms or a graduate within two years of doctoral program completion.
- At least age 45 at the start of their doctoral studies.

Data was collected from nine participants selected from institutions in several parts of the country and from a diverse group of programs and fields of study. Participants ranged in age from 45 to 65.

Data Collection

As is common for a phenomenological approach, this study made use of two in-depth interviews for each participant. A two-part interview guide was used to uncover the participants' perspectives (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). The guide explored topics selected by the researchers, informed by the review of the literature and associated conceptual frame, but the semi-structured nature of the guide allowed flexibility in following up additional topics introduced by participants brought up during the interview. The interview guide included questions about participant motivations for pursuing the doctorate at this stage in their lives, challenges and barriers faced, factors they perceived as influencing their persistence, and the perceived value of the experience. Several questions focused specifically on their doctoral experience as a Black, midlife female.

Each participant was asked to share a written critical incident reflection about an experience that had been the most impactful during their doctoral study (Flanagan, 1954; Gremler, 2004). The request for this reflection was shared during the first interview, with an email writing

prompt sent to participants following that interview. The reflections were to be sent prior to the follow-up interview, with some collected orally during the follow-up interview if not submitted in writing in advance.

Data Analysis

The first step in the Colaizzi (1978) analysis process was to transcribe the interview audiotapes immediately after conducting the interview. Interviews were professionally transcribed immediately after each interview. Transcripts were compared to the audio recordings of the interviews by the researcher. Audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews were repeatedly reviewed to gain a sense of the experience instead of parts. Hycner (1985) indicated that transcription is an important step in phenomenological analysis. The second step in Colaizzi's analysis is to extract important statements from the transcripts. As the transcripts were reviewed, critical statements were selected from the interviews. Next, according to Colaizzi (1978), the researcher develops meanings as they emerge from the important statements. Then, these statements were condensed into significant meaning categories. These meanings were then organized into clusters of themes. Repeated comparison of the themes to the original transcript helped to ensure that the meanings were valid with nothing being added or left out. Results were integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study. The sixth step is to develop the core essence of the phenomenon. The final step in Colaizzi's analysis method is to validate the description of the phenomenon by completing member checks to make sure participants agree with the findings. Participants were emailed a copy of their brief educational biographies to review for accuracy. Additionally, participants were also asked their response to a survey requesting their agreement or disagreement with the initial overall findings. Then, the remaining data were integrated into the final description.

KEY FINDING: RACE MATTERS

This section presents a summary of the key theme and subthemes identified through phenomenological analysis of data collected focusing on one of the research questions guiding the study: *What challenges and barriers did participants experience as Black, female, midlife doctoral students?* Analysis of data related to this research question revealed one central theme—*race matters*. How race factored into the challenges and barriers participants experienced was the focus of this theme, not only in terms of microaggressions but also in terms of external and internalized expectations held of them as Black women. Data subsumed within this central theme reflected three sub-themes: *having to prove myself, nuances,* and *divergence*.

Having to Prove Myself

Participant statements seen as fitting this theme described ways in which they felt the need to demonstrate their competence or legitimacy as doctoral students. In most cases this perception was derived from interactions with faculty, administrators, or peers in the immediate environment. As an example, Vanessa did not believe that her thoughts were accepted like those of her White counterparts in doctoral classes.

> I have to come from a place of facts and figures. Whereas my counterparts can just spout off their opinions. And I get tired of having to prove. Because I don't want to prove. Why do I need to prove to you that my thoughts are valid?

Kimberly echoed a similar sentiment when she said, "As . . . African Americans, we just always feel like we've got to be better. We've got to prove that we deserve to be here." But her comment suggests this perception could also be based in part be based on socialization and prior experience.

Comments made by Gathel also suggest the possible interplay between current interactions and previous socialization and experience in participants' sense that they must overachieve to be seen as equally competent and avoid reinforcing stereotypes. She initially indicated that she did not let race affect her doctoral experience, stating,

> I think race plays into it with me in the sense of just really in a way to say, you know what? Why can't you? Yes, you can do it, this is obtainable. Has nothing to do with your race unless you make it about your race.

A follow-up interview several weeks later which included a member-checking component allowed Gathel to respond to and expand on her first interview. She explained that although she did not experience explicit racial discrimination from others during her experience, race nonetheless governed her interactions with her professors. To clarify, she shared the following story.

> I've had to meet with my chairperson, [who] happened to be a Caucasian male, and the Dean of the program is Caucasian as well. And all of these folks are really mostly white males. So, usually, it comes up in my first interaction with them. It's more of an internal, subconscious thought of how are they going to perceive me as an African American and certainly as an African American woman? I realize that I probably am preparing for those types of engagements, those types of meetings, those conversations. I got to make sure all my Is are dotted and Ts are crossed. And I know in preparation, I'm probably experiencing, not probably, I know I'm experiencing some level of increased anxiety.

Nuances

Another aspect of race relations experienced by the participants was navigating the challenge of dealing with interactions with White professors

as well as students that presented as having racially loaded undertones. Kimberly shared a personal example of this.

> I'm always on alert, I guess, when I am in a class with a White professor. I feel like sometimes I'm hard on them because I'm looking for everything they say. I'm dissecting it. What did you mean by that? What are you trying to say?

Remembering one classroom incident that had her questioning those nuanced communications, Kimberly shared how she felt after the incident.

> There was one class that I had my first semester . . . that there were a couple of times where I was like, hmmm, you know? But nothing, I think it's just a part of the unconscious microaggressions and comments and things that they are used to saying and don't see anything wrong.

In her critical incident reflection, Carmen shared an experience that occurred with the students in her area of concentration group.

> I had an African professor; she was the acting director of the African Studies Department. The white students were so upset about this Black woman and the way she was teaching and the fact that she was not a full professor teaching us. I'm sitting here, and I'm seeing this Black woman being jumped on by all these people. We had a professor ... a young, white professor, who was trying to get tenure. And didn't the . . . senior White professors say, "When you fill out your surveys about this person, don't you dare put anything negative down there because he's going for tenure this year, and we don't want you messing him up." Now, she said that to all, not just our [area of concentration group], but all 60 people in our cohort; told us, "Don't say anything negative." Now, here's this poor Black woman . . . who also, basically, is in the same situation. But they went down, and they just did her in.

Carmen's frustration with this situation was evident in her statement explaining how this experience seemed to reflect the kind of discrimination she associated with the past "The whole civil rights thing just flashed through my mind." She seemed to have difficulty with how the Black professor was being treated in comparison to the White professor and how the students treated the professor in the classroom. "If you're going to go down and complain about her, then you need to go down and complain about all the rest of these White teachers." Carmen believes this type of behavior is nothing new. "This is what we have been going through all of our lives."

Divergence

As Black women, participants believed professors and students held different academic and social expectations of them. Vanessa shared her impression that within her doctoral institution "there are expectations based

on race, based on gender. The White men are expected to be leaders. And they're given that honor, that privilege." She went on to explain how such differences in expectations based on race were manifested in the instructional context, insofar as she received more requests to clarify or justify her thoughts or reasoning when engaging with content not perceived as informed by her direct experience as a Black person.

> All the professors know that I'm the oldest Black. And so, when I do something, they kind of look at me like, you came up with this? How did you come about this? What was your thought processes for this? Then, I have to map out the thought processes. Now if it's something that I'm doing that you would expect a Black woman to do, like I wrote a paper about irrational Black consumerism. They expect me to talk about Black issues. Even if it's an uncomfortable Black issue. They expect that from me. I didn't get any problems out of that. When I'm talking about governance, when I'm talking about using military strategy to solve economic problems. Well, tell me about your thought processes. What made you go that route?

Vanessa believes that her White professors do not ordinarily give much thought to Blacks, but she is an ever-present reminder of the existence of Black people. "I remind them that they are teaching to a Black person, a Black woman. And I am not a traditional twenty-something Black woman who hasn't experienced life. Because when we're having conversations, you know I've experienced life."

The racial separation is underscored when Vanessa is in class. "And if you are observing our classroom, you can see the racial divide. Not just physically but inside the classroom we sit Blacks on one side, Whites on the other." She has had only one professor of color, "with the exception of one, all of my professors are White males. Despite this atmosphere, Vanessa is determined to complete her program.

> I'm a Black woman, I can't quit. Because when you start talking about the failures of this program, you are not going to point to me. And you're not going to make it difficult for the next Black woman to come behind me. I'm not going to be the reason why another Black woman can't come through this program. I have a duty and an obligation to the Black women that will come behind me.

When Kimberly steps on her campus she too is reminded that race matters. She has a constant reminder of past injustices that live on in the present.

> We're in [the southwest]. Probably every university campus in the state . . . has statues of slave owners, KKK members across their campuses that are being held up as models, of academic or

entrepreneurial pull yourself up by the bootstraps mentality or whatever.

Kimberly also struggled with whether her hairstyle would be considered professional, commenting "as an African American woman and being natural, just the whole, again, making sure my hair looks professional. You know, can I wear my afro, or can I braid it up."

Exceptions to the Theme

Although most participants shared experiences that corresponded to one or more of the sub-themes subsumed under the central theme of *race matters,* Barbie described her experience as follows,

> In the divinity program versus a business or any other discipline, honey, the common thread, people . . . want you to know is that they love Jesus and by loving Jesus, you love people. So, they're not going to show me they don't like me because I'm a woman and Black.

Similarly, Wendy was the only Black and only female in her cohort of 18 students at a Christian institution. She believed that she did not have any adverse experiences related to her race because "I think it might be the fact that it is Christian oriented, I do."

The key findings of this study reveal how complex race and race relations within the academy can be for midlife Black women in the academy. Experiences shared by study participants highlight how the pervasive nature of racial bias and stereotypes impacted their interactions within the learning environment. The experiences of the two participants attending Christian institutions spotlights the varied nature of racial interactions within academic settings. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of examining how race can negatively impact the academic experience of midlife Black female doctoral students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As Black women, study participants believed they had to prove themselves to other students and/or professors. Consistent with Black feminist thought's theme of self-definition which involves an interruption of the negative images of Black women shaped by the dominant culture (Collins, 1986), study participants, including Vanessa and Kimberly, were determined not to allow others to define them. Similarly, Collins (2000) states that Black women are determined to define their own reality and be the artist of their own identities. Their experiences give them an outlook of what it means to be a Black woman that is not accessible by other groups. bell hooks (1989) contends that "as subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history" (p. 42), however, "as objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject" (p. 42). For

example, Vanessa noted that her professors expected her to only do research related to Black people. However, she wanted them to know that she had the ability to conduct research related to a myriad of topics. This sentiment was echoed in a study by Harrison (2000) where participants reported expressions of surprise from Whites when they displayed intellectual abilities different from what was expected. Vanessa also made sure her professors knew they were not dealing with a person who was not experienced but one who had life experience. Collins (1986) posits that Black women will define themselves with more authentic images. This comment also points to her identity as a mid-life student (Anderson, et al. 2022; Spurlock, 1984).

Harris et al. (2015) suggested that the questioning of Black students' intelligence was the most reported microaggression in their study. In the same vein, current study participants reported that professors and students had different academic and social expectations of them than for other students. This perceived inequity of treatment may have led Gathel to make sure that she presented herself in the best light when she interacted with her professors. Another participant, Kimberly, questioned whether her hairstyle was acceptable and professional because she wanted to make sure that she presented herself in what was deemed a professional manner. As Turner (2002) suggested, Black women often believe they must adapt to the dominant culture's standards to be successful within the academy. Collins (2000) suggests it is difficult to break free from the accepted images of beauty controlled by the dominant culture. Hence, even study participants, who were determined to define their own realities could be influenced by hegemonic standards of beauty. Moreover, Turnage (2004) noted, Black women cannot just be Black or female, but the intersection of these two locations is more powerful than when viewed separately. Thus, Black women must contend with challenges associated with their race, but also, all those challenges that deal with their gender such as being concerned with hair, as was indicated when Kimberly was concerned her hairstyle may not be perceived as professional. These intersections of gender with other locations have a unique influence on experiences of oppression and privilege (Morris & Bunjun, 2007). Thurston (2002) noted that participants in her study believed they had to mask their true feelings to survive in academia. Additionally, the face participants presented to the world was predicated on the situation in which they found themselves. Thurston suggested that participants were not deterred by these hardships but were determined to succeed through hard work and perseverance.

Although some participants talked openly about racial issues experienced during their doctoral journey, others talked about racial issues encountered during their previous educational experiences but were surprisingly quiet about these types of interactions during their doctoral

journey. Shields (2008) suggests that intersectionality highlights the notion that there is no one category for identity that will adequately explain people's response to their social environments. Instead, identities can be described as fluid and changing over time. A unique identity will emerge from the intersecting identities, which is experienced as a uniquely combined creation. Wendy was the only Black and only female in her cohort. However, she did not report experiencing any challenges related to her race. Participants in a Borum and Walker (2012) study not attending an HBCU also indicated that they did not sense racial or gender discrimination, despite being the only Black student in their classes. Other participants related similar experiences. The internalization/internalization-commitment stage of Black identity development could provide an explanation for this dichotomy. According to Burt and Halpin (1998) this phase of identity development can be defined by rising above racism. On the other hand, Tatum's (1987) assertion about the Black woman's experience as the only Black or female in their environments could be another possible explanation for this. She contends that this solitary situation leads to measuring the behaviors and thoughts of the Black woman by the dominant culture, hence, making it a challenge to distinguish between racism and normal behavior, resulting in the racist behaviors going undetected. Moreover, Tatum (2003) likens racism to smog, "sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in" (p. 6). Finally, Black feminist thought explains that all Black women will not have the same experiences and may not attach a similar significance to these differing experiences (Collins, 2000). Despite the varying experiences reported by the participants, each was acutely aware of how race interacted with their environments and the impact race had on their experiences.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

Although all the participants in this study successfully completed their doctoral programs, research suggests that there are many who never officially complete their doctoral studies (Johnson & Scott, 2023). When students do not complete their doctoral studies, not only does the institution fail to benefit from the financial investment in the students but the student does not gain the return on the time and money invested in the venture (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). Therefore, it would be prudent of institutions to gain an understanding of what may hinder the success of their midlife Black female doctoral students so appropriate resources can be employed to mitigate challenges and facilitate academic success.

Participants in this study indicated that they felt a need to legitimize their role as doctoral students. Institutions need policies that clearly indicate that discrimination will not be tolerated, and consequences need to be implemented for those engaging in this type of behavior. Higher education

institutions should promote diversity among stakeholders and create initiatives that create a welcoming environment for all learners. One way to accomplish this is to provide training for faculty and students on recognizing and addressing bias so that all stakeholders can interact with respect and understanding. Moreover, staff in academic advising and support services need to be aware of the unique challenges experienced by Black female doctoral students in academic settings.

Creating a diverse academic environment that is representative of the larger society requires admissions processes that support the recruitment of a student body that is reflective of the diversity seen in society. In addition to recruiting a diverse student population, higher education institutions must hire and retain diverse faculty so they may act as mentors for Black students. The establishment of mentorship programs can help the Black female doctoral student navigate the racial undercurrents experienced in the academic environment. This will lead to a more inclusive and supportive environment, demonstrating the value of diversity and leading to students feeling more valued and respected, which is important to academic success.

Unfortunately, with the current budget, time, and even legal constraints, it is difficult to implement initiatives that are geared toward a specific group. Instead, institutions may exhibit a one size fits all approach leaving some students with support and services that do not address their unique needs and challenges. Therefore, the Black female doctoral student must often seek support from outside the institution. According to Lane et al. (2022), Black women persist in graduate study because they are able to take advantage of a myriad of supports successfully, many outside of the academic setting. Hence, higher education advisors and faculty must be knowledgeable of these supports in order to encourage students to use them. For example, there are Facebook groups for Black doctoral students. These groups can provide a place for networking, mentorship, advocacy, and emotional support. They are a place for sharing resources such as scholarship and conference information as well as academic tips and research articles. Additionally, these groups can be a place to recruit participants for research. Focused Facebook groups can provide support during challenging times in the doctoral program, empowering doctoral students to believe in their legitimacy as doctoral students, enriching their doctoral experience and providing enriching connections, which lead to thriving in their academic endeavors.

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