

CREATING OUR OWN STORIES AND TRUSTING OUR OWN VOICES: MIDLIFE,
BLACK, FEMALE DOCTORAL STUDENTS NAVIGATING THE CROSSROADS
OF AGE, RACE AND GENDER

by

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DEDICATION

To Black women, those who paved the way for me to pursue an education, those who were unable to pursue education themselves but championed the cause for other Black women, those who have completed doctoral study, setting an example of perseverance and success, those who are still on the doctoral journey and those whose support was critical in my staying the course, I am in awe of you and eternally grateful for your varied contributions to *this* Black woman's accomplishments.

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ABSTRACT

Black women have a long history of struggle in the United States, which Collins (2000) referred to as a legacy of struggle. Despite gaining access to higher education hundreds of years after Whites and even over a decade after Black men, Black women attain graduate degrees at a higher rate than White women and Black men. Regardless of this extraordinary accomplishment, there are few studies examining the experiences of Black women in higher education and even fewer that are focused solely on middle aged, Black women in higher education.

Thus, 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? Subsidiary questions were a) What motivated study participants to pursue doctoral study at this stage in their lives? b) What challenges and barriers did participants experience as Black, female, midlife doctoral students? c) What factors did study participants perceive as facilitating their persistence? and d) What did study participants perceive as the value of their experiences? Data were collected from nine participants using in-depth semi-structured interviews, artifacts, critical incident reflections and member checks. Participants were selected from various institutions and from a diverse group of programs. Findings were generated using Colaizzi's phenomenological data analysis method as a guide. Six themes emerged from this analysis a) time is of the essence, b) I cannot do this alone, c) race matters, d) the woman in the mirror, e) is age

just a number? and f) it will all be worth it. 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, intersectionality and midlife development was also used in order to analyze the phenomenon. Findings from this study point to the resilience and determination of midlife Black women in doctoral programs. Occupying educational spaces allowed these women to interrupt negative images and perceptions of Blacks in general, and older Black women specifically. Findings from the study will add to the paucity of research focused on older, Black, female doctoral students.

I. INTRODUCTION

Prologue

As a young girl growing up in the South, there was no question about my attending college when it was time, as I realized at an early age the importance of education. Since my parents were not able to attend college, they encouraged my siblings and me to further our education, not only for ourselves, but also as a representation of our parents. Education was, in my parents' view, the gateway to success and financial freedom for their children. Hence, upon graduating from high school, I did what was expected and attended college.

As a first-generation college student, I was not able to seek assistance from my parents with navigating the uncharted higher education waters. I found the institution to be unsupportive of my needs, but not necessarily in an uncaring way. All the questions that I posed were answered. However, because I did not know which questions to ask, I made decisions without having all the necessary information. I was often the only person of color in my classes. Additionally, I only had two professors of color during my entire five years of undergraduate studies. With inadequate support from the institution, no support in the classroom and my parents' limited ability to provide support, my experience was one of isolation and confusion. However, despite these challenges, I was able to persist to graduation.

Unfortunately, I did not find that my degree opened as many doors as I had anticipated. One day while working on a job that did not require my hard-earned bachelor's degree, I looked around and wondered how I had gotten to this place in my life. And during that moment of reflection, I realized I had experienced some sort of

disconnect during my previous education experience, and that disconnect first happened in high school. Therefore, many years after earning my bachelor's degree and because of my inability to secure a job equivalent to my education, I returned to school to pursue a master's degree in counseling in order to become a resource for students like me.

With my undergraduate experience under my belt, I was better prepared with the questions I needed to ask in order to navigate these more familiar waters. Because I had waited many years before returning to school, I had other obligations to balance with school. Once again, I only had one professor who was a person of color. And again, I was one of a few students of color in the classes. None of my friends at the time had pursued a master's degree. Therefore, they were unable to fully understand my experience. Moreover, I found that my friends were not always respectful of the time I needed to devote to school, calling and requesting time for visits after I explicitly indicated that I needed to study. Thus, once again, this experience was sometimes a lonely and isolating existence.

Unlike the bachelor's degree, my master's degree did open doors to appropriate career opportunities. However, after over a decade of doing the same types of jobs with little upward mobility, I, once again, began to reflect on where I was in my life. As I sat in my office in between seeing students one day, I decided it was time to return to school for what I considered the daunting task of pursuing a doctorate degree. So, I began the process of looking at various schools and putting my finances in order. It would be approximately two years before I would apply to doctoral programs.

Even after obtaining acceptance to two out of the three schools to which I applied, I was questioning whether this was the best decision, more so because the one program

that would be the least disruptive to my life did not grant me admission. Now what am I going to do? Surely, I could not leave my full-time job to become an unemployed student. Could I? Although I accepted both offers, it would be two weeks prior to moving when I made the final decision to step out of my comfort zone and move 1600 miles across the United States without a job to start a doctoral program at an institution in the southwest.

I recall a conversation I had with the one friend with whom I shared my plans to pursue doctoral study. Instead of giving me her support, she decided to discuss my age with me. In her estimation, when I completed the program, I would be at such an advanced age that it would be hard to find a job, let alone recoup the amount of time and money spent pursuing the degree. After that conversation, I decided it would be best not to share my plans with any of my other friends, partly because I did not want to deal with any more negative reactions because I needed my energy to move and get settled into a new environment and new circumstances. If I am honest with myself, another reason I was hesitant to share my plans was because I believed if I told people what I was planning, I would have to answer too many questions if I was unable to complete the program.

After attending the first class and discovering that I was swimming in a sea of much younger learners and a teaching style so very different from that which I had become accustomed, I began to question my own sanity in attempting this endeavor. Having been a member of two marginalized groups all of my life, women and people of color, I was accustomed to addressing the challenges that go along with these memberships. However, I now belong to another marginalized group, older adults. It is

my combined membership in these three marginalized groups and my experiences in the doctoral program that sparked my interest in researching the experiences of older Black women in doctoral programs.

Moreover, I have discovered that being an older adult student pursuing an advanced degree is a very different experience than when I was a younger learner in pursuit of my undergraduate and graduate degrees. My experience has been that my institution, while claiming to embrace diversity, still focuses primarily on younger students. Also, I often believed I was misunderstood by my younger cohort members. Thus, my research will examine the experiences of Black, midlife females in doctoral programs.

Problem Statement

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, 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 popular 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).

A problem facing institutions is that many of the students who enroll in doctoral programs leave before completing the program, as many as 50 percent (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). Johnson (2012) defined attrition as a “departure from all forms of higher education prior to completion of a degree or other credential” (p. 3). Attrition incurs costs to universities, to academic departments, to society and to students in the form of wasted academic and administrative resources, possible loss of academic programs, a loss of a knowledge and talent base and financial, personal and professional losses to students (Lovitts, 2001).

Among the reported factors contributing to the elevated rates of attrition for doctoral students were advisors or mentors who were ineffective (Lipschutz, 1993). Ellis, in her 2001 study of 60 doctoral students (equal numbers of Black and White women and men), found Black women, reported worse relationships with academic advisors than any other group in her study. In Lovitts’s (2001) study of 816 PhD students of different racial/ethnic and gender identities she attributed program design issues as a major factor to doctoral attrition instead of the belief that students’ backgrounds and/or a lack of student commitment were causes of doctoral attrition (Ali & Kohun, 2007).

Research supports the notion that strong relationships with faculty are an imperative aspect of college student success, especially for students not in the majority (Braddock, 1981; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000). Despite this knowledge, there are studies that point to the frequent inability of Black students to develop these

strong relationships with White faculty at predominantly white institutions. Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) suggested that one possible reason for the inability to connect with their White professors is that many Black students see White faculty as culturally insensitive, including generalizing one Black student's opinion as a representation for all Black students or failing to acknowledge or include the Black narrative in curricula (Guiffrida, 2005).

A study conducted by Guiffrida (2005) examining Black undergraduate, male and female students' perceptions of the characteristics needed by faculty in order to facilitate meaningful relationships with Black students found that students perceived Black faculty as more willing than White faculty to go beyond the status quo in helping students to be successful. According to the students in this study, Black faculty were willing to provide comprehensive career and academic advising, they advocated for students at school and at home, and they believed in the students' academic abilities. While students did not find White faculty unsupportive, White faculty were not as willing to go beyond the normal roles of teachers and advisors. Students in the study also indicated that Black faculty held them to a higher academic standard with continuous monitoring and pushing them to strive for new limits in academic work, which several participants perceived as another way Black faculty went beyond the status quo. Results from this study suggest that institutions that seek to understand the various challenges faced by Black students at predominantly White colleges can provide support that will help facilitate their academic success.

The Black Woman's Experience

Regardless of how hard one's family members, friends, or colleagues try to understand the nature of doctoral degree pursuit, they are outsiders who cannot fully comprehend the phenomenon, or more important, give advice that is grounded in the context of doctorate education and/or academe." (Roberts & Plakhotnik, 2009, p. 49)

Alfred (2001) characterized the Black woman's experience at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) as one of marginalization and isolation. Although there are some students who 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 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. 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 and educational outcomes (Whitt, Nesheim, Guentzel, Kellogg, McDonald & Wells, 2008). Given these factors, it would be prudent for departments and institutions of higher education to consider strategies to increase the success and graduation of doctoral students in general and Black female doctoral students in particular.

Shifting Landscape

The increased numbers of middle-aged persons in the United States and the increased knowledge about this period of life has made midlife worthy of study (Lachman, 2004). Lachman (2004) also argued that it is important to study midlife not

only because of the vast number of people living in this group but also because middle age spans many years of the lifecycle. She noted that in the preceding decade there had been efforts to collect what is known about midlife and to proceed with an organized method for examining this period. Lachman (2004) went on to suggest the importance of determining whether our current knowledge about midlife is tied to a specific cohort like the baby boomers.

The decision to pursue doctoral study can be a daunting endeavor that takes time and consideration, especially for older students. Black women face considerable obstacles when deciding to pursue an advanced degree. Along with the usual barriers faced by adult students, Black women also have to contend with issues related to race and gender. As the population continues to shift in age, there will be more Black women pursuing advanced degrees during middle-age. However, it is not only important to give Black women access to higher education, but it is imperative that systems are in place to ensure the retention and success of this population. While there is a scarcity of research examining the experiences of Black female doctoral students, there are even fewer studies focused on midlife doctoral students. Instead, studies either focused on Black female doctoral and graduate students or older students, but not the intersection of the three.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of midlife, Black, female doctoral students. This information adds to the paucity of literature regarding older, Black, female doctoral students and allows institutions to better understand this population. Moreover, this study provides visibility to those who are often unseen and

allows a platform for the voices that frequently go unheard. Given this purpose, the overall research question and subsidiary questions guiding the study were:

What meanings did midlife Black females attach to their doctoral experiences?

- a. What motivated study participants to pursue doctoral study at this stage in their lives?
- b. What challenges and barriers did participants experience as Black, female, midlife doctoral students?
- c. What factors did study participants perceive as facilitating their persistence?
- d. What did study participants perceive as the value of their experiences?

Conceptual Framework

Maxwell (2005) defines theoretical framework as “the system of concepts assumptions, expectations, belief, and theories that supports and informs your research” (p. 33). Merriam (2009) stated that theory underpins all research, making it impossible to have a study that is not theoretical. This framework according to Merriam (2009) stems from the orientation and stance that the researcher brings to a study. Often used interchangeably with theoretical framework, a conceptual framework, according to Jabareen (2009), is defined as “a network . . . of interlinked concepts that together provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon or phenomena (p. 3)”, with these concepts acting as support to each other. 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, this study employed a conceptual framework utilizing lenses of Black feminist thought, midlife development and intersectionality.

Midlife Development

Research suggests that midlife or middle age is a time of transition characterized by a variety of physical, psychological and social changes (Lachman, 2001). It can be a time filled with opportunities for growth and fulfillment as well as the option to explore new areas of interest (Ryff & Seltzer, 1996). Middle age can be perceived in extreme ways, as a time of turmoil (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978 as cited in Lachman, 2001) or a time when the pinnacle of functioning and experience is realized (Neugarten, 1968 as cited in Lachman, 2001). As the older population has begun to not only live longer but to live healthier and more active lives, the perception of when middle age ends has been extended (National Council on Aging, 2000). This perspective on midlife makes it difficult to use life events and the age of occurrence of life events to determine age groups (Neugarten & Neugarten, 1987). The women in this study could be perceived as not fitting what would be considered the typical age for pursuing doctoral study. However, as research has suggested, the participants' ages align with the time for pursuing new interests.

Black Feminist Thought

Collins (1997) suggested that the term Black feminist has been primarily applied to African American women. However, some contend that men can also be Black feminist. Black women's experiences with racial and gender oppression create problems distinct from those of white women and Black men, with Black women fighting for equality as women and as Black women. It is suggested that Black women's distinct experiences fuel a Black feminist sensibility.

Collins (1986) noted three key themes of Black feminist thought. One theme, self-definition and self-valuation, involves the replacement of stereotypical and negative images of Black women derived from the dominant culture, with authentic images defined by the Black women they represent and the attributes of the actual self-definitions. A second theme, according to Collins (1986), is the connection of race, gender and class oppression. It is essential to understand the importance of mitigating all forms of oppression not just to minimize one form of oppression. In other words, it is important to attack the interlocking oppressions that concern race, gender and class. The third key theme noted by Collins is the significance of Black women's culture. The three themes are not exhaustive, but are a representation of the gist of the current dialogue.

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw is credited with coining the term intersectionality, which took its origins from Black feminism. Crenshaw (1989) argued that there is a tendency in antidiscrimination law, feminist theory and antiracist politics to look at race and gender as mutually exclusive characteristics when examining experience and also for analysis. However, intersectionality is used to study and understand how gender intersects with other social locations and the role these connections play in the unique experiences of oppression and privilege (Morris & Bunjun, 2007). Intersectionality aims to describe various systemic conditions differing in time, place and condition that contribute to the continuation of inequality.

Combined with the lens of Black feminist thought, intersectionality will serve to provide a more thorough analysis of the experiences of the midlife, Black, female

doctoral students in this study. The use of intersectionality to examine these three locations, race, gender and age, will give a more accurate depiction of the unique experiences of the participants than would be possible by only examining each location in isolation. As it was my intention to situate this study in a way that respected the participants' experiences and allowed for authenticity, I believe that midlife development, intersectionality and Black feminist thought were appropriate lenses for this study.

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, 1988). The focus on participants and their meaning making and the focus on understanding how phenomena occur are additional distinctions of qualitative research methodology.

Research Approach

Phenomenology was an appropriate methodology for the study in that the aim of phenomenological research is to identify and highlight phenomena as they are perceived through the lived experiences of those experiencing these phenomena (Lester, 1999). A phenomenological study is interested in capturing the experience from the individual and with bracketing or putting aside the researcher's assumptions and typical ways of perceiving. 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” (p. 1).

Husserl (1970) argued that true phenomenological research is concerned with describing phenomena instead of explaining phenomena and doing so from a position without hypotheses or preconceptions. However, some researchers dispute the possibility of being without prejudice, instead supporting the need to be transparent about situating the researcher as an interested and subjective participant rather than an impersonal and unbiased spectator (Lester, 1999).

Additionally, Lester (1999) posited that phenomenological methods call attention to the experiences and perceptions from the individual’s personal perspective. Thus, in the case of midlife Black female doctoral students, a phenomenological approach gave a platform to the voices that are often relegated to the margins or even worse, silenced all together. Additionally, a phenomenological study can be effective in challenging widely accepted assumptions.

Data Collection and Analysis Strategies

Data were collected from nine participants selected from various institutions and from a diverse group of programs. To ensure thick rich descriptions of the phenomenon, multiple data collection methods were used, including two in-depth interviews, critical incident reflections and artifacts. Colaizzi’s phenomenology data analysis method was used as a guide instead of a strict method 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 lenses of Black feminist thought, intersectionality and midlife development.

Researcher's Perspective

As a midlife Black female doctoral student, I understood that I was currently experiencing the same phenomenon which I was studying. Therefore, I brought to this research inquiry practical and current knowledge of the phenomenon. This knowledge helped me to understand what was required to pursue a doctoral degree for midlife Black female doctoral students. I also recognized that my experience, although beneficial in providing insight, could also be a hindrance, creating a possible bias in interactions with participants and with interpreting the findings. As the researcher, I made it clear to the participants my shared status as a midlife, Black female doctoral student during my initial communication. I was also committed to capturing the experiences of my participants. Thus, I focused on continuous self-reflection by having critical discussions with my advisor and other professionals and by keeping a reflective journal. Moreover, as outlined in the methodology chapter, various methods were employed to establish credibility such as the use of various methods for data collection and the use of member checks. It was my goal to share experiences of my participants that were as free as possible from the influence of my own experience.

Significance

This research study contributes to the limited body of research on older Black women in higher education. The limited number of articles focusing on Black female graduate students, and doctoral students in particular, seldom focus on Black female students at midlife. As previously mentioned, Lachman (2004) argued for the need to study midlife not only because of the length of this period but also because it has been under researched. Moreover, Ross-Gordon (2005) advocated for additional research

related to underrepresented groups. Illuminating the lives and experiences of middle aged Black female doctoral students and providing thick rich descriptions regarding their perceptions has aided in understanding the needs and challenges of the older than typical Black female pursuing doctoral study. Moreover, this study provided information regarding the persistence of these women, which can be used by institutions to implement appropriate support strategies for other students in a similar situation.

Having the opportunity to share their lived experiences and have those experiences reported using their own words was an affirming experience for these women. Etter-Lewis and Foster (1996) suggested that having a researcher serve as the narrator between the audience and the subject, “we are deprived/removed from the intimacy of the first-person perspective” (p. 8). The reporting of these women’s experiences can be used to encourage current or future students pursuing a doctoral degree during midlife that they are not alone in their journey. It can also provide encouragement to those who may feel unheard to continue striving to have their voices heard.

Definitions of Key Terms

Attrition—“refers to the failure of a student who has been enrolled to continue her or his studies; that is, the student has dropped out of the program” (Isaac, 1993, p.15); “departure from all forms of higher education prior to completion of a degree or other credential” (Johnson, 2012, p. 3).

Black/African American—terms were used interchangeably to describe people of African descent who were born in the United States or completed the majority their primary and secondary education in the United States

Doctoral Student—students enrolled in a doctoral program in the United States which requires a dissertation

Microaggressions—racial stereotypes, insults and alienation experienced by Blacks from non-Blacks (Morales, 2014)

Midlife/middle-aged— period from age 40-60 (Levinson, 1986); terms were used interchangeably; for this study, age 45 or older at the start of the doctoral program

Persistence—successful continuation from one term to the next term until academic goal is completed

Third age— “a transition stage of active learning and social engagement that may last two, three or even four decades due to individual’s increased longevity and better health” (Lear, 2013, p. 377)

Summary

This chapter described the rationale for studying the experiences of middle-aged, Black female doctoral students. As noted, the attrition rate is relatively high among doctoral students. However, as studies of adult students of color suggest, Black women participating in doctoral study at midlife may face particular challenges. As the aging population continues to increase, the educational landscape will undergo a shift. Yet, the limited literature on Black, female doctoral students does not include a focus on middle-aged women. Thus, this study has served to address this gap in the literature. A brief overview of methodology and theoretical frameworks are also presented.

Chapter II presents an in-depth review of the relevant literature as it relates to middle-aged Black female doctoral students. This review provided the context for the study, illuminating the gap in the literature. An examination of identity development is

presented to include Black identity development and Black female identity. Next, motivations and benefits for learning later are discussed. Then, research literature related to Black women in higher education, and in particular, Black women pursuing doctoral study is presented. Finally, the conceptual framework underpinning the study is reviewed in more detail.

Chapter III details the research design of the study. It includes an overview of the research approach, to include the rationale for the chosen methodology used to examine the experiences of the participants. Following this is a description of the methods used to recruit and select the sample, and the data collection methods employed. Next, a review of how data were analyzed and synthesized is presented. Finally, issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations are summarized.

Chapter IV outlines the findings of the study. The nine participants are introduced using their chosen pseudonyms. A brief educational biography for each participant is presented that covers participants' educational experiences prior to doctoral study. The six themes that emerged from the data are presented in detail using the voices of the participants to chronicle their experiences.

Chapter V discusses study findings considering the research questions and related literature. It also highlights conclusions that can be drawn from the study. Recommendations for practice and future research based on the study findings are detailed. Finally, I provide my reflections as the researcher for the study as well as my reflections on my own doctoral journey.

II. Literature Review

A deductive approach is used to outline the applicable literature used to examine the experiences of midlife, Black, female doctoral students. A search of the relevant literature did not yield research devoted specifically to midlife, Black, female doctoral students. Therefore, the following literature review surveys identity development for Blacks and Black females, motivations and benefits of learning in later life, Black women pursuing doctoral study and lastly, the conceptual framework, consisting of midlife development, Black feminist thought and intersectionality.

Black Identity Development

There were no models of identity development specific to Blacks prior to 1970, and those models of identity development that were available marginally applied to ethnic or minority groups (Burt & Halpin, 1998). Additionally, models existing prior to 1970 addressed the believed deficits of Blacks. Burt and Halpin (1998) go on to state that even renowned theorists, who may have had little to no contact with Blacks at the time, suggested that education and freedom would interrupt the healthy development of identity for Blacks. Moreover, Blacks perceived as having a positive identity were submissive, mild, needy and eager to serve. Historically, Blacks have been seen and defined from the perspective of the dominant culture—the same culture that enslaved them, took their language and refused to allow them to be educated, which are critical components to identity development. Any view of Black people from this perspective would invariably be an inaccurate and negative portrayal.

William E. Cross's Nigrescence Theory, developed in 1971, and revised in 1991 has played an important role in understanding Black identity development, (Worrell,

2001). Cross's theory helped to explain the change of terminology from the Negro to Black during the 1970s. Nigrescence Theory states that Blacks see themselves as a combination of their individual identity plus their group identity, (Burt & Halpin, 1998). Cross's original theory consisted of five stages: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization and internalization-commitment (Worrell, 2001). During the pre-encounter/encounter stages, Blacks were said to present a "pro-White" attitude. During the immersion/emersion stages, the pro-Black feelings of Blacks are equal in intensity to the anti-White feelings they experience, (Vandiver, 2001). The internalization/internalization-commitment stages are characterized by an immersion in Black culture and rising above racism with an ability to confront methods of oppression, (Burt & Halpin 1998).

The Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) suggests there are four dimensions of racial identity for African Americans: salience, centrality, regard and ideology. Salience and centrality identities indicate how important race is to the person's self-definition. Regard and ideology refer to the meanings individuals attach to being Black (Neblett, Smalls, Ford, Nguyễn, & Sellers, 2009). Having a parent who stresses the importance of culture, history and heritage produces children with an increased positive self-concept (Neblett et al., 2009).

Additionally, adults with a sense of closeness to other African Americans and who advocate for Black separatism, report receiving emphasized messages on racial pride (Neblett et al., 2009). Messages on prejudice and discrimination encourage children to explore the worth and meaning of race. Moreover, Neblett et al. (2009) suggested that two important factors in African Americans attaching meaning to their race are messages

about pride and self-respect and activities that involve African American culture.

Messages from parents and other social context messages about the meaning of race prepare adolescents to navigate the myriad experiences they will encounter in the larger American culture.

Black Female Identity

Focusing on the various factors of identity honors the complexity of the intersection of multiple identity factors. However, when these factors are considered, they are reviewed as individual occurrences. Research suggests that development of a racial identity happens before the development of gender identity (Thomas, Hacker & Hoxha, 2011).

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 has to contend 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 woman; she is a Black woman. The race-gender aspect of her identity is more powerful than just viewing each aspect separately (Turnage, 2004). 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.

Black women have a complex history within the United States. As the above studies indicate, in order to research Black females, it is important to consider their intersected identities. “The use of a single lens or perspective or a ‘melting pot’ view of

diversity, cannot help all students, particularly African American women...doing so anyway results in a loss of individualism as well as gender and cultural constraints” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 21). According to Torres, Howard-Hamilton and Cooper (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, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003, p. 67). The double marginalization that Black females experience makes their experience different from that of White women. As the Black woman ages, she will face a triple marginalization, with age becoming the third issue to be addressed, a factor missing from the studies above.

Higher Education

Since Mary Jane Patterson became the first American Black woman to graduate from college in 1862, the history of Black women’s higher education documents that their paths have consistently been one of struggle, confrontation, resistance, negotiation, and marginality (Johnson-Bailey, 2001 p. 91).

In the following section, the motivations and benefits for learning as one ages are explored. As previously stated, education for Blacks is critical to their identity development. Is the earning of one degree sufficient? Despite the challenges Black women face in the academy, some not only seek additional education beyond the bachelor’s degree, but pursue doctoral study. Hence, the motivations, challenges and benefits of Black women pursuing doctoral degrees are also reviewed.

Motivation for Learning Later

As in younger adulthood, older adult women tend to engage in higher education at a greater percentage than their male counterparts, (Findsen, 2005; Findsen & Firmosa, 2011). Educational engagement may be motivated by an attempt to return to the work

world or to change careers. Another consideration may be due to the lack of identity because the role occupied for the first part of the woman's life has changed. Hence, the search for a new identity and meaning in life will propel these women to pursue educational activities. As previously indicated, these women are experiencing what Wolf (2009) refers to as a "midlife transition" and see this transitional time as an opportunity for further development. Wolf's use of the phrase midlife transition is in agreement with research previously mentioned in which midlife is viewed as a transitory time (Brooks-Gunn & Kirsh, 1984; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001; Brown, Matthews, & Bromberger, 2005). An increasing number of *third agers* see learning as a primary objective (Delahaye & Ehrich, 2008). It will be important for organizations and institutions to be sensitive to the needs of this population.

Benefits of Learning Later.

There are a number of benefits that older adults, to include older women, gain from learning activities associated with higher education. A study by Villar, Pinazo, Triado, Celdran and Solé (2010) of University Programs for Older People (UPOP) participants in a lecture course and a university experience course, which included a majority of older women, identified positive results for university program attendance to include feeling more active and useful, acquiring friends and personal satisfaction. However, contrary to other research outcomes, participants did not perceive that engagement in educational programs had much of an effect on their personal relationships or their health.

In a study of *third age* women by Lear (2013), she suggested that women's civic engagement activities established connections that bonded them to their home place.

Wolf (2009) suggested that older women need connections in order to successfully navigate transitions experienced during older adulthood. Merriam and Kee (2014), in their article examining lifelong learning of older adults from a social capital perspective, posited that lifelong learning has a positive impact on community wellbeing, which they define as “the notion of a locality where people are socially interconnected to healthy and prosperous ways” (p. 130). Moreover, Merriam and Kee suggested that enhancing human and social capital will have a residual effect on cultural and physical capital. Additionally, older adults who are actively engaged live a better quality of life.

Re-entry Women

The number of students entering postsecondary institution directly from high school has decreased while nontraditional student enrollment has increased (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). This group is primarily made up of women, who are the fastest growing population in postsecondary education admissions (Clayton & Smith, 1987; Donaldson & Graham, 1999). Therefore, in order for higher education institutions to remain successful, it will be imperative for them to not only understand but to accommodate the unique needs of nontraditional female students.

Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) conducted a study of 63 mostly undergraduates with a few female graduate students ages 21 to 55 which examined the social support, psychological functioning and academic performance of both traditional and nontraditional students at a Canadian university. Although the nontraditional students experienced more stressors such as family commitments and fewer support sources, they performed better academically than the traditional students in the study with no difference in psychological functioning. Studies (Kevern, Ricketts & Webb, 1999;

Makinen & Pychyl, 2001) suggest that psychological and academic performance improve with age. Hence, the more mature chronologically the student, the better the psychological and academic standing. Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) suggested that one possible reason for this contradiction to other studies might be that women in their study could have chosen to return to school once their children were more independent and their familial obligations were lessened.

Findings from the Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) study illuminated an optimistic view that suggested that although nontraditional students have more obligations and fewer supports, they can and do navigate the higher education environment successfully. Students in their study decided to return to school with a greater understanding and willingness to adapt to the requirements of academic life. The women in the study may have experienced what Breakwell (1986) described as *anticipatory restructuring*, which means to anticipate and then restructure expectations and identity prior to undertaking something that could be a potential threat to identity. Moreover, Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) suggested that although nontraditional students face many challenges and stressors that are different from traditional students, they are more than capable of competing academically and have the resilience needed to participate in the world of academia.

Padula and Miller (1999) conducted a multiple case study of four middle-class women, one African American and three European American, with an age range of 32-48 years old. The purpose of their study was to detail the experiences of women pursuing a doctoral degree in psychology at a Midwestern university. Their study found that all the women viewed their return to school as important to their career goals and for job

security. Participants also considered the return to school for at least one year prior to their re-entry as full-time students. Findings also suggested that participants did not have the experience they expected. Some expressed not learning as much as they anticipated while others expressed disappointment in having to “jump through hoops” (p. 335).

Another finding of the Padula and Miller (1999) study was that although faculty could play an important role in the experience of reentry women, the women in the study found that they often did not. Study participants did not feel that they had mentors even though they desired them. Findings of two studies highlighted in Thomas (2001) noted that the women in the studies experienced barriers and challenges comparable to those identified by Cross. Yet, these women tended to experience only situational and institutional barriers and not dispositional barriers to their college re-entry.

A limited amount of research on re-entry women focused on Black re-entry women. In 1965 the typical re-entry female was middle class, in her late to middle thirties with some college education (Thomas, 2001). Now re-entry women are more racially diverse, with a growing number of Black women from different socio-economic backgrounds among those reentering college. Because of the economic status of African American women who are in early to late midlife along with the demand for a more skilled workforce, the increase in nontraditional African Americans reentering college will probably continue. Thus, it will be important for institutions of higher education to provide support for an environment that is inclusive of all sociodemographic factors to include age and ethnicity.

The contemporary re-entry female may often face barriers that can impede academic success. Some of the challenges experienced by older students can include a

variety of commitments and responsibilities, no same age cohort in the classroom, limited support and social acceptability (Benshoff, 1991). Studies indicate that students of color face more academic problems, inconsistencies and isolation than other students (Ferguson, 1992), with Black women being more likely to experience these challenges (Thomas, 2001). However, there is a scarcity of empirical data on this group of students. Moreover, it is difficult to generalize the results from studies of primarily White women to Black women since they bring different experiences, expectations and psychological dynamics to the postsecondary environment.

A quantitative study conducted by Thomas (2001) of 147 women enrolled in a Weekend College program at a women's college in the northeast, of which 42.6 percent were African American, found that more African American women than European American women felt that their relationships with partners was negatively affected by their re-entry to college. African American women more often than White women named a supervisor as the person who encouraged them to return to school. Moreover, more Black women than white women identified a parent as the primary person who encouraged the return to school. The Thomas (2001) study highlighted the notion that women returning to college are more heterogeneous than they were a few decades ago. Additionally, Thomas noted the differences in experiences of White women and African American women during their college re-entry.

Thomas (2001) documented a follow-up qualitative study conducted a year later of 19 African American women from the first study described above, with the majority of the women being partnered, employed full-time with a mean age of 41.7 years. The purpose of the follow-up study of only African American women was to spotlight the

experiences, perceptions and transitions of this particular group of women. Results from this second study of only African Americans, suggested that a significant percentage of the participants identified challenges that were greater for African American women including finances, divergent responsibilities, inadequate support systems as well as racism and sexism. Interestingly, the women noted that although they experienced additional burdens, the majority of the women were optimistic and resolute in their efforts to accomplish their goal (Thomas, 2001). They believed that the benefits of their re-entry experience went beyond the potential opportunities for career mobility. However, many of the women indicated that African American women would not be able to benefit from their re-entry experience as fully as their European American counterparts.

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, Brewley, Reed, White & Davis-Haley, 2005; Patton, 2009). Unfortunately, Black women have been experiencing racism and sexism since the genesis 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). The social and economic barriers faced by Black women have

been consistent from the time of African enslavement through the 21st century and extend to college degree attainment.

White males have had access to a college education since the 1600s (Carter, 2010). However, it would not be until the 1800s when 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 a college-level institution would admit women of any race, opening the doors for Black women to pursue higher education.

During the first part of the 20th century, most of the Blacks who attended college irrespective of whether they lived in the North or the South, attended a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). By 1960 Blacks were making significant gains in their admittance to predominantly White institutions (PWI). Moreover, the 1972 case of Adams versus Elliott Richardson resulted in a requirement to increase integration efforts for Black as well as White higher education institutions. Carter (2010) 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. She observed that although national and local laws ended much of the explicit discrimination and racial segregation policies were eradicated, there was an increase in subtle experiences of discrimination. Black women were affected by the institutionalized racist policies, which impacted Black women's access to higher education.

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 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. However, 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 seen as liberal such as higher education institutions.

Black Women Pursuing Doctoral Study

For African Americans, an advanced degree can be seen as an avenue to provide better services to their communities and also be the highest level of education needed to

access professional careers (Bonous-Hammarth, 2010). This is especially important given the underrepresentation of African Americans receiving advanced degrees in the United States. This limited representation of Blacks remains a concern even though there was an 88.4 percent increase in graduate school enrollment by Blacks from 1996 to 2004. African Americans earned 13 percent of the master's degrees conferred between 2009 and 2012-2013, the highest percentage of degrees conferred among nonwhites (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Between 2012 and 2013 Blacks earned eight percent of the doctor's degrees (includes professional degrees such as MD and JD), which was second largest percentage of degrees conferred among nonwhites, exceeded only by Asians. Of the degrees awarded to Blacks, females earned 71 percent of the master's degrees and 65 percent of the doctor's degrees between 2009 and 2010. With Blacks seeming to lead in master's degree attainment among nonwhites, it is important to understand, especially for Black females, their experiences in the pursuit of the doctoral degree in that Blacks fail to maintain the lead among nonwhites in the earning of doctor's degrees (see table 1).

Table 1 Degrees Conferred by Race

	Master's Degrees 2002-2003	Master's Degrees 2012-2013	Doctor's Degrees 2002-2003	Doctor's Degrees 2012-2013
White	77%	69%	76%	72%
Black	10%	13%	7%	8%
Hispanic	6%	8%	5%	7%
Asian/Pacific Islander	6%	7%	11%	12%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1%	1%	1%	1%

Data are for postsecondary institutions participating in Title IV federal financial aid programs. Doctor's degrees include comparable professional degrees at the doctoral level.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2016)

Even though Black women pursue and earn doctorate degrees at a higher rate than most nonwhite groups and the number of Black students has increased, administrators,

faculty and policy makers are concerned with the lack of diversity among doctoral students (Ellis 2001). An increase in doctoral degree attainment among minority students will provide a larger pool from which Black faculty can be selected. In her 2001 study of 60 doctoral students (equal numbers of Black and White women and men), Ellis found Black women, more than any other group in the study, reported poor relationships with academic advisors. One recommendation for this deficit in relationships was to have a more diverse faculty with experience in interacting with various student populations because findings suggested that race was found to be an important factor in the doctoral students' experiences.

Grant and Simmons in their 2008 narrative study of the experiences of two Black women at different academic stages, shared their experiences in the academy as an African American doctoral student and a tenured professor. Grant and Simmons (2008) 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 tenured faculty might want to investigate whether an institution has culturally supportive programs prior to accepting job assignments.

As Black women pursue learning activities, they will be faced with various challenges and obstacles. They will face similar barriers as other adult learners, such as poor academic self-concept, diverse role responsibilities and difficulty with support services (Ross-Gordon, 2005). Although these barriers are commonly experienced by

adult learners, they are likely to be more pronounced with Black adult learners. Moreover, Ross-Gordon (2005) also suggests that as members of a marginalized group, Blacks experience additional barriers such as an absence of institutional role models, a dearth of content related to their culture, blatant and masked racism and difficulty establishing connections. A study conducted by Johnson-Bailey (1998) of eight Black female reentry women, some of which were doctoral students, indicated that the women believed the typical psychological and situational barriers experienced by reentry women such as insecurity with school performance, scheduling challenges and insensitive administrators were minor obstacles when compared to their encounters with blatant hostility. 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 in order 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 echoed in a Shavers and Moore (2014) study of 15 African American female doctoral students ages 23-35 when participants reported attempting to present a professional posture by filtering their language, grammar, interactions and outward appearance. Because of the heightened awareness of stereotypes of Blacks, participants wanted to control the perceptions departments had of them as students. The cost of this posturing often resulted in students hiding their true selves. In her book *Sistahs in College: Making a Way out of No Way*,

Johnson-Bailey (2001) indicated that the Black reentry women in her study often held their tongues as a means of survival.

Harris, Haywood, Ivery and Shuck (2015) explored racial *microaggressions* that women of color experienced while pursuing a PhD in education. The most commonly reported microaggression was having their intelligence questioned. In her paper presentation, Harrison (2000) reported that when Black students' intellectual abilities did not match the assumptions that Whites held, the response was an expression of surprise. The narratives of the Harris et al. study highlighted how race complicates the efforts to address and remedy the racism that has become a normal part of the academy. In response to these experiences, isolation may be used in order to cope. In an attempt to be seen as an insider, participants would resist challenging comments that would normally be challenged in an academic setting.

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). Black women in Shavers and Moore's study (2014) were forced to make the choice between academic success and well-being, also a finding in a Johnson-Bailey (2001) study of reentry Black women. Moreover, Shavers and Moore (2014) suggested that for the women in their study, persistence and overall welfare were conflicting facets of their experience, which could not be experienced at the same time. Johnson-Bailey (2001) suggested that the women in her study sacrificed their well-being in pursuit of higher education.

A challenge to the pursuit of doctoral study for Black women is the availability of funding. Maher, Ford and Thompson (2004) in a study of factors that affect the progress of female doctoral students suggested that some of those who finish their degrees late experienced an inability to secure consistent funding. Lovitts (2001) in her book *Leaving the Ivory Tower*, which describes her study of 816 PhD students of different racial/ethnic and gender identities, suggested that the inability to meet expenses was the number one financial concern for students who did not complete their degree. However, in her study, participants indicated that finances were not the most important reason for leaving the program. Instead, academic reasons such as integration related issues, academic failure, dissatisfaction with faculty or program and/or problems with adviser were reported as major reasons for not completing the degree.

Despite the number of challenges Black females encounter on the road to earning a doctoral degree, there are those who are able to cope with these difficulties and persist to graduation. Simon (2011) in her study of African American women awarded doctoral degree from 1995 to 2005 noted that even without being socially integrated within the academic departments, the women were successful in completing their degrees. The majority of the participants in a study by Louque (1999) asserted that family and community involvement were primary factors influencing their academic success. All of the participants agreed that being proficient in Standard English was important to achieving the PhD. Harrison (2000) suggested that Black women understand how important pursuing the degree is to Black people in the present, past and future. “The degree was not theirs alone” (p. 238).

Conceptual Framework

As indicated in the introduction, a combination of Black feminist thought, midlife development, and intersectionality were used as lenses for this study (see figure 1). During the review of the relevant literature, it was noted that Black feminist thought was often the lens used for studies examining Black females and was the important to this study. As Merriam (2009) noted, previous research is important in developing a framework for a study. The gap in the research is that few studies focused solely on the older Black female doctoral student. Therefore, midlife development and intersectionality were also used as part of the conceptual framework for this study.

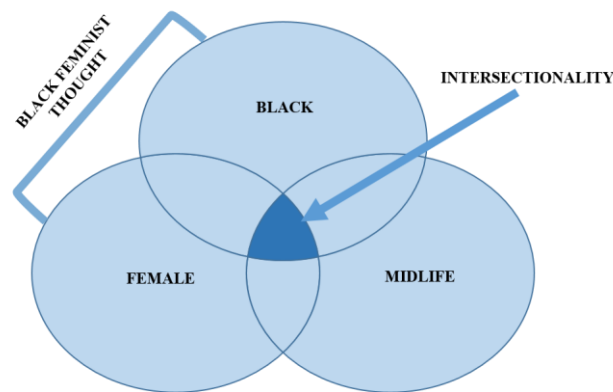


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Midlife Development

The shock . . . of middle age is a threshold shock. A door is closing behind us and we turn sorrowfully to watch it close and do not discover until we are wrenched away the one opening ahead. (Fromm-Reichmann, 1959 as cited in Brooks-Gunn, & Kirsh, 1984 p. 11)

What is midlife? Midlife is seen as the period between young and old age (Lachman, 2001). Prior to advances in contemporary medicine, knowledge about midlife was limited because only a small percentage of the population experienced midlife (Ovenstone, 2006). However, this has changed in recent decades, with life expectancy in

2006 at 79 years for men and 82 years for women. Instead of a precise phase in the life cycle, midlife is considered a transitory period (Brooks-Gunn & Kirsh, 1984; Brown, et al., 2005; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001) and a time of optimistic development (Brown et al., 2005). Brooks-Gunn and Kirsh (1984) posited that even though midlife may not be viewed as favorably as youth, it is more desirable than the negative baggage that is associated with being old. Additionally, they suggested that although the age boundaries related to midlife are fixed in the minds of individual people, they are actually rather fluid.

Neugarten and Neugarten (1987) suggested that as society has changed so have the social definitions of age. They went on to observe that it has become a challenge to distinguish the different age groups when it comes to life events and a specific age at which those events happen. Contributing to this line of thinking may be the fact that events that once happened at certain ages are now happening at different times, for example as women have children later in life, families experience the empty nest later (Brooks-Gunn & Kirsh, 1984). Additionally, with an increased life expectancy, the age at which a person experiences midlife shifts. Although visible in earlier historical periods, with the increase in complexity in society, these types of age irregularities are a more frequent part of our societal reality (Neugarten & Neugarten, 1987).

According to Lachman (2001), a substantial amount has been learned about midlife during recent years, however, less is known about midlife than the later years of the life span. There seems to be no clear demarcation for midlife with the age limits being somewhat ambiguous. Midlife is typically seen as lasting from 20 to 40 years and usually said to include those age 40 to 60 or 65 with a 10-year range on both ends

(Lachman, 2001). Levinson (1986) noted that each developmental period has a distinct beginning and ending with plus or minus two years around the mean. He indicated several phases to midlife.

The *Midlife Transition* (40-45) cross-era shifts, serving both to terminate early adulthood and to initiate middle adulthood.

The *Entry Life Structure for Middle Adulthood* (45 to 50), like its counterpart above, provides an initial basis for life in a new era.

The *Age 50 Transition* (50 to 55) offers a mid-era opportunity for modifying and perhaps improving the entry life structure.

The *Culminating Life Structure for Middle Adulthood* (55 to 60) is the framework in which we conclude this era. (p. 7, italics in the original)

Levinson (1977) referred to the transition from early middle adulthood to late adulthood now known as the midlife transition, and suggested that it lasts for approximately five years from ages 40 to 45. Levinson suggested that this life period is characterized by asking oneself critical questions concerning the life structure to include questioning the fulfillment of early dreams. Although Levinson conducted an intensive study, his participants were 40 men ages 35 to 45. Hence, as the study was conducted using men, women, with their different biological and psychological make-up could be expected to have some varying characteristics of midlife.

More recently, the National Council on Aging (2000) conducted a study in which almost half the participants age 65 to 69 saw themselves as middle aged. According to their study, approximately one third of seventy-year-old Americans see themselves as middle aged. The upper end of midlife is extended as people in the US are living longer

and healthier for longer periods. Because many people see old age as beginning when health starts to decline, even those who are in their seventies and healthy may consider themselves to be middle aged.

Lachman (2001) suggested that when thinking about midlife, pictures of a variety physical, psychological and social changes such as thinning hair, weight gain, sagging skin, memory loss, hot flashes, sick and aging parents, are imagined. It is obvious that there are many perceptions of midlife with one extreme suggesting that midlife is a time of crisis and turmoil (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978 as cited in Lachman, 2001) to midlife being a time when peak functioning and responsibility are experienced (Neugarten, 1968 as cited in Lachman, 2001).

An American Board of Family Practice (1990) (as cited in Lachman, 2004) survey found that the physical, mental and health changes were seen as the worst characteristics of middle age. Feelings of personal control and freedom were seen as the more desirable aspects of midlife. Having life experience and a sense of feeling settled were considered the best features of midlife with financial freedom and feelings of independence often listed. According to Ryff and Seltzer (1996), midlife can be a time when gains may be discovered in what would appear to be losses. For instance, the loss of fertility at menopause may translate into gaining sexual freedom, or the loss experienced when children leave home may be experienced as satisfaction within the marriage and opportunities for growth, fulfillment and the exploration of new interests.

Black women answer the call to midlife with a similar response as their white counterparts (Spurlock, 1984). However, suffering from a double marginality often explains differences when Black women are compared to White women. Midlife Black

women represent a diverse group in which education and career opportunities have in many cases helped them to gain financial security. Spurlock goes on to indicate that midlife Black women are depicted in modern writings as both a stereotypical and a diverse group.

In a study of midlife Black and White women by Brown et al. (2005), the women had similar ratings for aspects on adjusting to the midlife. However, Black women, when compared to White women indicated a better awareness of identity and security at midlife. Interestingly, Black women in the study who experienced more stress and financial need during their lives were among the women who indicated an increase in identity and security. Brown et al. (2005) suggested that one possible explanation for this phenomenon could be that after arriving at middle age, Black women may see that they have not only survived but thrived despite the many adversities they have experienced. Additionally, these women have developed strategies and coping skills to combat the many years of stress which has led to the indicated growth and mastery reported.

Research cited above indicates that midlife is a relatively fluid time rather than a static or fixed period. As the population began to benefit from advances in modern medicine, more information was learned about the transitory period called midlife. As with examining identity for Black females, it is the combination of marginalities that can explain differences in how Black and White women experience midlife. Moreover, the reviewed research suggests that surviving the struggles of being a Black female in the United States has contributed to a resiliency that has engendered a sense of security and increased identity development. It is this secure sense of self and resiliency that enables the midlife Black female to be successful in her education pursuits.

Black Feminist Thought

I suggest that Black feminist thought consists of specialized knowledge created by African-American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women. In other words, Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it. (Patricia Hill Collins p.243)

In order to honor the authenticity of the participants' experiences and allow them to situate their own viewpoint, this study used Black feminist thought as a lens by which to examine the participants' experiences. Black women's experiences result in problems that are uniquely different from those of White women and even Black men (Collins, 1997). The Black woman struggles with issues that are gendered as well as racial. Coker (2003) in her study of 10 African American adult learners in higher education used Black feminist theory in order that her participants' standpoint could be conceptualized.

Black feminist thought is used broadly, but is not often well defined; it has an array of different and opposing meanings (Collins, 1997, 2000). In Collins' view there are two intertwining tensions that point to the issues regarding defining Black feminist thought. The first tension is who is considered a Black feminist. Based on one perspective, Black feminist consciousness is stimulated with the experience of living as a Black woman. However, Collins suggests that this type of labeling only serves to fuse the terms woman and feminist and allows the fact that one is of African descent to be the only factor in determining Black feminist consciousness.

Collins (1997) goes on to purport that the term Black feminist has been primarily applied to African American women, although some contend that men can also be Black feminist. Black women's experiences with racial and gender oppression create problems distinct from those of white women and Black men, with Black women fighting for equality as women and as Black women. It is suggested that Black women's distinct

experiences fuel a Black feminist sensibility. On the other hand, Collins argues that anyone who ascribes to Black feminist ideas could be labeled as a Black feminist, including Black men.

Ambiguity in defining Black is tied to what represents Black feminism (Collins, 1997). A definition for Black feminist thought is needed that does not assume that just being Black and/or female automatically produces experiences that lead to a Black feminist consciousness. Collins (1997) argues that some take the position that Black feminist thought exclusively belongs to Black women irrespective of experiences or worldview. Nevertheless, it is important that a definition of Black feminist thought not be examined apart from the groups that created it.

According to Collins (2000), Black feminism maintains its importance because of the oppressed group status of Black women. Black women engage in a dialectical relationship that connects them to activism and oppression. Black feminist thought is considered a critical social theory, and as such, its purpose is to empower women within the frame of social justice that is continued with linked oppressions.

One distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought is race, although not the only important indicator of group variance (Collins, 2000). However, for Black women, the visible and tangible effects of institutionalized racism remain in place. Additionally, for Black women, the experiences with institutionalized racism depend on discriminatory and segregation practices used to deny Black people equitable treatment in the United States. Black women in the United States live in a world that is different from that of those who are not female and Black.

Tensions of connecting experiences and ideas is the second distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000). In one regard, all Black women experience similar challenges as a result of living in a society that continually disparages those of African descent. However, African American women will not have every experience alike nor will they attach the same importance to these differing experiences. Moreover, Collins (2000) contends that although there are differences in age, class, religion, etc., Black women in the United States are relegated to substandard housing, schools, jobs and public treatment disguised behind a number of widely held beliefs about the intelligence, the work habits and the sexuality of Black women. As a result of these common difficulties, there is a repeated pattern of experiences for group members, such as, similar treatment in stores (e.g. being watched with suspicion or waiting on only after other customers who may have arrived later).

Links between being a Black woman and their experiences as a diverse group and their subsequent group understanding or viewpoint is a third distinguishing feature (Collins, 2000). Because self-defined viewpoints can engender resistance, the views of oppressed people are stifled. Collins suggests that the historical experiences of oppression for Black women can lead to this self-defined viewpoint which can nurture activism for Black women. The empowerment of Black women is an outgrowth of these alternative practices and understandings.

Collins (2000) asserts that the contributions of Black female intellectuals is another distinguishing aspect of Black feminist thought. It is important for diverse Black women scholars to ask the appropriate questions and work with and for Black women. Connecting scholarship and activism is a significant depiction of tradition that can be

fostered by Black female scholars. As indicated by Collins (2000), Black women scholars (not defined by academia or other establishments) are key to Black feminist thought for several reasons. First, their experiences give them a unique perspective of Black womanhood to which other groups have no access. In addition, these Black women are less likely to turn their backs on the struggles of Black women even when there are obstacles and few rewards for remaining. Collins (2000) goes on to proclaim that Black women scholars understand the importance of self-definition because key factors in empowerment are the ability to speak for yourself and design your own agenda. Finally, this diverse group of scholars can foster group independence that in turn encourages alliances with other groups.

Another distinguishing aspect of Black feminist thought revolves around the importance of change. The theory and practice of Black feminist thought cannot afford to remain static, but must adjust the knowledge and practices used to resist social condition as these social conditions change. As Black women come to womanhood under these new social conditions, diverse Black women will encounter new relationships with each other. Those who live through situations for which they claim to be an expert are seen as more credible than those who only read or thought about these experiences (Collins, 1989). Moreover, the united self-defined Black feminist perception will cause problems because dominant groups are interested in silencing these thoughts (Collins, 2000).

A final distinguishing aspect of Black feminist thought is a concern for the wider social justice movement (Collins, 2000). Many Black women scholars participate in forwarding the thought that the Black female struggle is a part of a much broader fight for

empowerment, social justice and self-respect. Political actions such as joining women's organizations, seeking political office or supporting community institutions are seen as a means for empowerment not an end. Collins (2000) goes on to say, "in their commitment to Black women's empowerment within a context of social justice, they advance the strikingly similar theme of the oneness of all human life (p. 43)."

Intersectionality

Bowleg (2012) indicates that intersectionality examines how several social identities intersect at the closest level of a person's experience to show the linking systems of oppression and privilege at the societal level. Intersectionality has its roots in Black feminism, with the term being coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to highlight the exclusion of Black women from White feminist and antiracist discourses. Shields (2008) suggested that the intersectionality framework has its origins in and grew out of a push from feminist and womanist scholars of color concerned with the focus of feminist research on middle-class, educated White women. Additionally, these scholars of color argued that the view of women's positions should recognize the intersection of gender and other important social identities, most specifically race. Moreover, the more marginalized identities an individual occupies the greater the oppression experienced. This intersection of gender with other social identities is the starting point for the intersectionality framework.

According to Jordan-Zachery (2007) as a tool for analysis, intersectionality has been acknowledged as important in analyzing differences. Crenshaw 1989 argued that intersectionality illuminated the different ways in which race and gender impacted the multiple layers of Black women's experiences. During the beginning, discussions of

intersectionality emphasized connection between race, class and gender. The genesis of intersectionality proposed a tool of analysis for understanding the lives of Black women. Moreover, this framework could be used in order to contest the existing structures of oppression experienced by Black women.

Hankivsky (2014) highlights several key tenets of intersectionality. First, the lives of humans cannot be explained by examining individual categories such as race, gender or socioeconomic status. Because of the multi-dimensional and complex lives of people, their lived realities are influenced by many different factors and social dynamics that function together. Secondly, when examining social problems, the significance of categories and structures are not determined in advance but are discovered through the investigative process. Thirdly, there is a connection between social locations (e.g. ageism, racism, ableism, sexism) and relationships and power dynamics. Moreover, people can simultaneously experience privilege and oppression depending on the context and situation they are experiencing. To illuminate how power relations are formed and experienced, analyses on multiple levels that connect individual experiences to larger structures and systems are important. Thus, when using intersectionality as a theoretical framework, it is important to consider one's own social standing, role and power. Finally, intersectionality is explicitly concerned with establishing coalitions, transformation and social justice.

According to Shields (2008), intersectionality focuses on the qualitative variances among differing intersectional statuses instead of assigning, according to minority status, a combined disadvantage. As a theory, intersectionality ensures better accuracy and amenability when addressing the lack of language for discussions regarding gender when

including other dimensions of identity that are central to gender operation and meaning in the United States. Additionally, intersectionality is viewed as an appropriate descriptive solution to the various characteristics that provide meaning for social identities. It is not solely gender, race and class, but also age and ableness among other social positions.

Intersectionality illuminates the fact that there is no one category for identity that will adequately explain people's response to their social environments (Shields, 2008). Identities are fluid and change over time, but are also stable, giving a person continuity and a sense of self across time. From the way in which various identities are experienced emerged a concern for intersectionality from a theoretical perspective. A distinctive identity creation emerges from the intersecting identities which is experienced as a uniquely combined creation.

As time has passed, scholars have viewed intersectionality to mean the connection between "multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations" (McCall, 2005, p. 1771). This change has allowed other researchers to apply intersectionality to various groups of individuals. Intersectionality allows for understanding of difference between groups but also within groups, which has been instrumental in preventing the essentializing of difference (Crenshaw, 1991).

Jordan-Zachary (2007) noted that her research seeks to understand Black women's lived experiences, but also to understand how Black women can be liberated. She not only examines the influence of intersectionality on Black women's lives in connection to the dominant culture but also in connection to their own localities. She offers a framework that contests the oppressive constructions in the lives of Black women.

Hancock (2007) distinguished six assumptions of intersectionality. She suggested that when considering the complexity of political problems and processes, there are multiple categories of difference that play a role. Secondly, each category of difference requires equal attention in research. In addition, these categories of difference are viewed as construction of institutional and individual factors and are at once contested and enforced at the institutional and individual levels. Moreover, as Hancock noted, there are within group differences among the categories which help in understanding how we view groups as participants in the political arena. Intersectionality studies these categories using analyses that integrate the interaction between individual and institutional levels. Lastly, it is important to attend to both the empirical and theoretical features of research questions when employing an intersectionality paradigm.

Summary

Midlife is posited as a time of transition and opportunity for women. As these women adjust to this new period in their lives, which can often be a time to focus on themselves and pursue interests that have been placed on hold, enrolling in a higher education program can be a pursuit that enables midlife women to continue developing personally and professionally. Middle-aged Black women, as previous studies indicated, will experience challenges in higher education that relate to their race and gender. However, with the additional marginalizing factor of age, these experiences can be even more challenging. The reviewed research described experiences of isolation, hostility and identity complexities. Although faced with many challenges, Black women in these studies were successful in their pursuit of a higher education degree. Lacking in these studies was an examination focused solely on midlife, Black, female doctoral students.

Johnson-Bailey (1998) found that the experiences of the Black women in her study were in stark contrast to that of White, midlife, middle class women examined in the literature. Although Black women as a group may face similar challenges, on an individual level Black women will not have identical experiences nor perceive these experiences in the same manner (Collins, 2000). In order to situate the participants' experiences as legitimate, a Black feminist epistemology, Black feminist thought, was an appropriate lens used for interpreting the women's narratives. As this study will not only examine race and gender, but also age, intersectionality and midlife development were also lenses used for this study.

III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of midlife, Black, female doctoral students. As a result of this examination, it was hoped that a greater appreciation for and understanding of the experiences of this population would be gained. That being said, the overarching research question and subsidiary questions were:

What meanings did midlife, Black, females attach to their doctoral experiences?

- a. What motivated study participants to pursue doctoral study at this stage in their lives?
- b. What challenges and barriers did participants experience as Black, female, midlife doctoral students?
- c. What factors did study participant perceive as facilitating their persistence?
- d. What did study participants perceive as the value of their experiences?

This chapter details the design and methods for this research study of midlife, Black, female doctoral students. It includes an overview of the research approach used to examine the experiences of the participants, a description of the methods used to recruit and select the sample, the data collection methods, a review of how data were analyzed and synthesized, issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative researchers examine phenomena in their natural environment in an attempt to understand or interpret the meanings place on the phenomena by people (Creswell, 1998). According to Creswell (1998) qualitative research is:

. . . an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher

builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (p. 15).

He placed emphasis on the holistic and complex nature of qualitative research which allows the reader access to varying facets of a problem presented in a study.

Creswell (1998) suggested a need for a rationale when selecting a qualitative approach. One reason to select a qualitative approach is the make-up of the research questions. Qualitative research questions tend to look at what and how, which is in contrast to quantitative research which typically looks at why. A qualitative approach is valuable when there is a need to view the topic in detail and to examine a phenomenon in its natural environment. Moreover, qualitative research is able to bring the researcher into the study with a storytelling form of writing. Finally, a qualitative approach is used so that the researcher can present the participants' stories from their own point of view.

Phenomenology Methodology

Phenomenology refers to both a research philosophy and a research methodology (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith, 2013). As a philosophy, phenomenology is viewed as revisiting and examining life and living. It is a way to describe phenomena as it is seen by the person who experiences the phenomena. In other words, phenomenology allows the person experiencing the phenomena to be the authority on his or her own experience. Tuohy et al. (2013) asserted that the two schools of phenomenology are descriptive and interpretive. A key feature of interpretive phenomenology is that it is acknowledged that the researcher is unable to remain completely separated from preconceptions and biases regarding the phenomena being studied and that these influences should be incorporated into the study (McCance &

McIlpatrick, 2008 as cited in Tuohy et al., 2013). On the other hand, a key feature of descriptive phenomenology is epoché or the putting aside of biases that might influence the study.

Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher, first used phenomenology in the development of a demanding science (Patton, 2002). He is credited with developing the phenomenological methodology which has become a legitimate method for examining consciousness (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). According to van Manen (2007), phenomenology is thinking about the lived experiences of human existence and this thinking requires thoughtfulness and should have an absence of theories and prejudices. Additionally, van Manen (2007) stated, “. . . phenomenology is also a project that is driven by fascination: being swept up in a spell of wonder, a fascination with meaning (p. 12).” Tuohy et al. (2013) included bracketing as a core element of phenomenology, which is necessary in order to be able to limit the influence of extraneous issues on the interpretation of the phenomena being experienced.

As this study was interested in gaining a deep understanding of the experiences of midlife, Black, female doctoral students, a phenomenological methodology was utilized. The goal of phenomenology is to gain a deep understanding of the nature and meaning of people’s daily experiences (van Manen, 1990). “Phenomenological understanding is distinctly existential, emotive, enactive, embodied, situational, and nontheoretic . . .” (van Manen, 1977, p. 346). 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.

Van Manen (1984) suggested four procedural methods for phenomenological research: 1) selecting a phenomenon in which we have sincere interest and commitment, 2) examining experiences as they are lived not conceptualized, 3) pondering important themes used to describe the phenomenon, and 4) using the art of writing and rewriting to describe the phenomenon. As a member of the group I was studying, midlife Black female doctoral students, I had a passionate interest in the phenomenon I examined. Additionally, it was important that the lived experiences of the participants were central and not thoughts and perceptions of my own experience.

Descriptive versus Interpretive Phenomenology

Descriptive phenomenology. The emphasis for descriptive phenomenology is describing a phenomenon under study absent biases (Reiners, 2012). While Heidegger argued that it is not possible to separate life influences, a fundamental feature of descriptive phenomenology is the epoché or bracketing, the putting aside of assumptions and preconceptions in order to focus on the essence of the experiences as perceived by study participants. Once epoché is accomplished, what remains are the phenomena to be studied just as it is in consciousness (Kockelmans 1994). Only then can description take place that is free of analysis or explanation. As Giorgi (1992) asserted, no matter what presents itself, it is described without the researcher going outside of the data.

Husserl (1931) listed several distinguishing features of descriptive phenomenology.

- Exploring the way we as subjects know objects.
- Recognizing objects of consciousness as not having a separate existence from us.

- Concentrating on objective phenomena.
- Suspending all belief in the outer world through bracketing.
- Phenomenological reduction (epoché), using free imaginative variation.
- Discovering phenomena exactly as they are presented to consciousness.
- Search for essences.
- Phenomenological description illuminating 'essential connections' (Husserl 1931, p. 385).

Interpretive phenomenology. Over the years, phenomenology has made a transition from being what is known as a true descriptive methodology as argued by Husserl to emphasizing the interpretation of the experience (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). Interpretive phenomenology, which is also referred to as hermeneutics, is concerned with describing, understanding and interpreting the experiences of the participants in a study (Tuohy et al., 2013). Many question whether bracketing or the setting aside of preconceptions and/or biases, as is the foundation of descriptive phenomenology, is actually attainable. Hammersley (2000) also suggested that it is not possible for a researcher to remain totally detached from his or her preconceptions. Creswell (2007) suggested that instead of the researcher attempting to put aside his or her own experiences or notions, the researcher finds a way to introduce that understanding into the research as well as the analysis. A core element of interpretive phenomenology is that the researcher is incapable of separating himself or herself from the biases related to the phenomena being studied (Tuohy et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge these assumptions and preconceptions and account for them in the study in order to minimize their influence. According to McConnell-Henry, Chapman and

Francis, (2009), there is no rationale for bracketing in interpretive phenomenology as it is traditionally understood.

Finlay (2008) posited that it is important to be aware of what influences our understanding of the world. Hence, instead of putting aside these biases and preconceptions, Finlay (2008) suggests that they should be brought to the forefront in order to be free to embrace the meanings of others. In this sense, bracketing is congruent with interpretive phenomenology in that even though the researcher is unable to put aside influences, the goal in interpretive phenomenology is to be cognizant of these influences and how they may impact our understanding or analysis of phenomena.

As a researcher applying descriptive phenomenology, I was concerned with giving an accurate portrayal of the experiences of these women that was as free as possible from my personal biases and which held true to the experiences of the participants (Groenewald, 2004). It was imperative that the experiences of the participants in the study were not diluted by my own experience. However, in utilizing a descriptive phenomenological methodology, I did not feign to be completely removed from all presumptions related to the phenomenon under study, especially since I was experiencing the same phenomenon under study. Nevertheless, I maintained a continuous effort to allow the perspective of the participants to remain the focal point.

Sample Recruitment and Selection

Qualitative research usually examines a relatively small sample of participants, sometimes as few as one case (Patton, 2002). The question of how many to sample is common (Merriam, 2009). Unfortunately, there is no definitive answer. Merriam (2009) suggested that the sample size should be large enough to answer the research questions of

the intended study. Sample size for purposeful sampling depends on the information the study is seeking. In order to maximize the information, sampling should end when no new information is derived from new sampling.

This study employed purposeful sampling using a criterion based sampling strategy to secure nine study participants with data reaching saturation by that point. The selection of participants was based on the identified criteria of age, race, gender and doctoral enrollment. Participants were recruited using professional organizations with a national presence and student membership and student networks. Further, gatekeepers within the higher education community were also solicited for assistance with identifying possible participants. Snowball sampling was employed in order to secure the nine participants. Patton (2002) asserted that “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance . . .” (p. 230, emphasis in original). Criterion-based sampling is well suited for studies that examine individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe 2012; Creswell, 1998). Snowball sampling, the most common form of purposeful sampling, (Merriam, 2014) uses “information-rich key informants” to secure additional participants. “By asking a number of people who else to talk with, the snowball gets bigger and bigger as you accumulate new information-rich cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 237). 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. The selection criteria for participants were:

- Black female who was educated in the United States, preferably born and reared in the U.S. to increase the likelihood of common understanding 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 a doctoral program requiring completion of a dissertation
- At least age 45 at the start of their doctoral studies

Data Collection

According to Patton (2002) there are three types of data collected that is prominent in qualitative research: interviews, observations and documents. The type of study guides the researcher to the type of data collection (see table 2). Patton (2002) posited that in order to gather data that will thoroughly describe people's perceived experiences of a phenomenon, in-depth interviews with those who have directly experienced the phenomenon is necessary rather than acquiring this information as the result of secondhand experiences. As is common for a phenomenological approach, this study made use of one in-depth interview with one follow-up interview for all participant except one who was unable to arrange the second interview. An interview guide (see Appendix B) was used to uncover the participants' perspective (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). The guide explored topics selected by the researcher, but the researcher also remained open to additional topics that participants brought up during the course of the interview. Participants were asked to bring an artifact that was symbolic of their doctoral experiences in order to stimulate conversation. Finally, each participant was asked to share a written critical incident reflection (Flanagan, 1954) (see Appendix D).

Table 2 Data Collection Sources

	Interviews	Critical Incident Reflections	Artifacts	Researcher's Journal
Data Collection	A one-hour semi-structured interview with nine participants with one follow-up interview	Written account of the phenomenon under study collected after first interview and before follow-up interview	Visual representation of an important aspect of the phenomenon under study	Record impressions of interview immediately after each interview
Purpose	Gives a verbal picture of the participant's feelings, emotions and thoughts about the phenomenon	Gain an understanding of an experience related to the phenomenon from the participant's perspective	Stimulate conversation and trigger memories	Make sense of the interview and contextualize information for analysis
Data type	Audiotaped and transcribed	Written or given orally by participant and submitted via email or during follow-up interview	Documents, pictures or items	Notebook with notations of thoughts, biases and impressions

Interviews. A qualitative interview is a conversation between a researcher and a participant with the researcher eliciting information that pertains to a research topic or study (Merriam, 2009). The interview is the most commonly used data collection method for qualitative research. Conversing with a participant allows the researcher to enter the mind of the participant and gives the interviewer a verbal picture of the participant's feelings, emotions and thoughts. Interviews are important when the researcher is unable to gain data through observation. As Patton (2002) indicated, it is not possible to observe every phenomenon. Data involving thoughts, feelings, intentions and things that happened in the past that cannot be replicated are not observable, but can be collected through interviewing.

Merriam (2009) suggested that qualitative interviewing is the best method for case studies involving a small number of specific people. It can also be used for data collection of a large diverse group of people with varying ideas and viewpoints. Interviewing is used to see inside the minds of people and to hear their stories (Patton, 2002). The use of the qualitative interview should be based on the type of information needed. However, Merriam (2009) posited that there are times when interviewing is the only method in which to collect the needed data.

The primary method for collecting information in a phenomenological study is by conducting in-depth interviews (Creswell, 1998). According to Englander (2012), there is no prescribed method for conducting good interviews in a phenomenological study. As noted in van Manen (1990), there are two primary purposes of the phenomenological interview.

1. It may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon, and
2. The interview may be used as a vehicle to develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience. (p. 66)

Giorgi (2009) asserted that “What one seeks from a research interview in phenomenological research is as complete a description as possible of the experience that a participant has lived through” (p. 122). In this study one semi-structured in-depth interview with at least one follow-up interview was used to collect data about the experiences of mid-life Black female doctoral students. Nearly all of the initial interviews were conducted in person with just three being conducted via the phone. In-

person interviews were conducted in locations chosen by participants, which resulted in a number of interviews taking place in participants' homes. All follow-up interviews were conducted over the telephone except one. All interviews were audio recorded, with the initial interview lasting between one and two hours. Participants were given the opportunity and encouraged to share in their own words their perceptions of being a midlife Black female doctoral student. Information solicited during the interviews process is depicted in figure two.

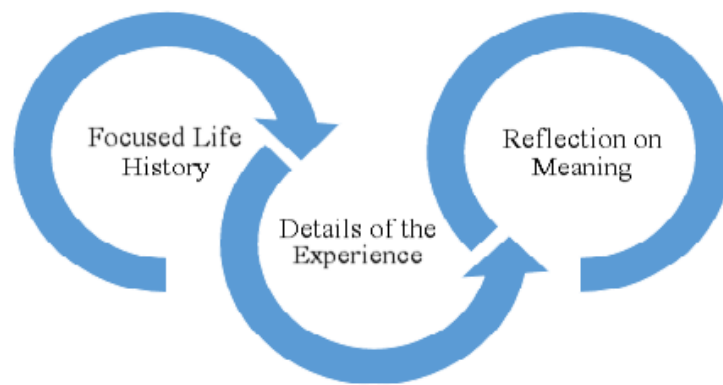


Figure 2 Interview Data (Seidman, 2013)

Critical incident reflections. There are typically two general ways to collect data pertaining to the lived experience of a phenomenon (Englander, 2012). One way is the traditional in-person interview, which is discussed above, and the second method is to request a written account of the experience (Giorgi, 2009). The critical incident technique (CIT), which was developed from the work of Flanagan, is used in a wide range of disciplines (Gremmler, 2004). Flanagan (1954) stated that CIT is used to collect information about behavior in a specific situation. CIT is an interview technique which allows study participants the share in their own words important incidents, how these

incidents were managed and the effects of the incidents (Chell, 1998). However, critical incident descriptions have also been collected in writing. The goal is to gain an understanding of the incident from the participants' perspective. Although critical incidents can be collected in different ways, one method is to have study participants share a story, orally or in writing, about an experience they have had (Gremler, 2004).

Gremler (2004) listed several benefits of CIT. One benefit is that CIT allows participants to select the incidents most relevant to the phenomenon under study and is a foundation rich data to be collected. What is important to the participant is not predetermined by the researcher. CIT is helpful when there is limited information about a topic, helpful in increasing knowledge about a phenomenon that is not well known, and helpful when there is a need for a deep understanding in order to describe a phenomenon. This method can also be used to create accurate, detailed account of incidents.

Participants in this study were asked to write a critical incident reflection about an event they found impactful during their doctoral experiences. The request for this reflection was shared with participants during the first interview, with an email writing prompt sent to participants at the conclusion of the initial interview. Submission of the reflection was electronic and in person and was collected prior to the follow-up interview, with some being collected orally during the follow-up interview.

Artifacts. Artifacts are tangible objects situated within the study's environment (Merriam, 2014). These can be an important data source and used to share information that can be represented by symbols and words and have not been regularly used in qualitative research. As previously stated, artifacts were used in this study as a means of generating conversation about participants' experiences. Participants were asked to bring

to the initial interview an artifact that represented some part of their experience as a doctoral student. These artifacts could be something symbolic to the participants and used as a means of expression or a meaningful photograph taken by the researcher or the participants (Merriam, 2014). Artifacts were copied, photographed or described by participants. According to Merriam (2009), these types of objects can assist the researcher in discovering insights, meanings and understandings related to the phenomenon under study.

Researcher's field notes/journal. The researcher recorded impressions of the interviews at the end of each interview session. These notes help transform what is seen and heard into data by noting perceptions that happen in the field (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Immediately after the interview is the time to note details regarding the setting and any observations concerning the interview (Patton, 2002). They provide time to reflect on the interview location and conditions. It is also a time to reflect on the interviewees' reactions to questions, the researcher's skill in asking questions and the rapport between the researcher and the interviewee.

Patton (2012) also noted that the answers to these questions can help make sense of the interview and create a context for interpretation of the interview. It is important to reflect on the quality of the information garnered. Researchers will ask themselves if they discovered what they were looking for and if not, why? Was it a problem with the questions, topics or rapport? Patton goes on to suggest the importance of making notes on these reflections as soon as possible after the interview in order to record the experience while it is still fresh in the mind. These reflective notes are critical to quality control to ensure the usability, reliability and authenticity of the collected data.

Data Analysis

According to Hycner (1985), phenomenologists can be reluctant to reduce analysis of data to some predetermined steps, the concern being that they may be proceeding in a similar fashion as the natural sciences. To employ a rigid set of steps in the analysis of phenomenological data threatens the integrity of the phenomenon being experienced. However, in order to guide the analysis process, Colaizzi's (1978) seven step method of analyzing phenomenological data (see figure 2) was used to analyze data collected in this study. In order to be true to the method of phenomenology, this method was used more as a means to guide the analysis process rather than a cookbook procedure.

The first step in the Colaizzi (1978) analysis process was to transcribe the interview audiotapes immediately after conducting the interview. Interviews in this study 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 in order to gain a sense of the experience as a whole instead of parts. Hycner (1985) indicated that transcription is an important step in phenomenological analysis. The second step in Colaizzi's analysis is to pull out important statements from the transcripts. As I reviewed the transcripts, I selected critical statements from the interviews. Next, according to Colaizzi (1978), the researcher develops meanings as they emerge from the important statements. In this study, 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 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 the 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 findings. Then, remaining data were integrated into the final description.



Figure 3 Colaizzi's Phenomenological Data Analysis (1978)

Issues of Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that assessing trustworthiness in qualitative research is different than in quantitative research. Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research involves credibility or the belief in the truth of the findings, transferability or illustrating the findings are applicable in similar contexts, dependability

or the consistency and repeatability of the findings and confirmability or that findings are as free as possible of the researcher's bias and the findings are formed by the study participants.

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested ways to increase the credibility of research findings and interpretations. Prolonged engagement is one of the ways to ensure that the findings will be found more credible. Prolonged engagement means the researcher will spend enough time becoming familiar with the phenomenon. Many of the participants and I spent time getting acquainted prior to the initial interview, thus, establishing a sense of trust that was needed for participants to feel more comfortable sharing personal information with me as the researcher whom they had just met. Moreover, as I was researching a phenomenon that I was also experiencing at the time of the study, I believed that I was more easily accepted as a member of the group being studied, mitigating distortions that could stem from a lack of acceptance.

Another technique for increasing credibility is to triangulate the data sources and data collection methods (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Triangulation uses corroborating evidence from a variety of sources to illuminate themes and perceptions (Creswell, 1998). This study used various methods to collect data, including interviews, critical incident reflections and researcher's field notes/researcher's journal, thus, triangulating the data collection method. Additionally, a diverse group of participants were also used, serving to triangulate the data collected. Moreover, discussions of findings and of interpretations with a professional colleague were used in order to maintain the integrity of the participants' experiences. Finally, the researcher solicited feedback from participants

regarding the accuracy of initial findings, an important method known as member checking.

Dependability

In quantitative research, reliability refers to the degree to which findings can be duplicated by similar studies (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Bloomberg and Volpe went on to suggest that qualitative studies typically do not provide an acceptable degree of reliability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that it is more important that findings are consistent and dependable with the collected data. Eliminating inconsistencies is not a goal in qualitative research. Instead, it is important that the researcher recognizes inconsistencies as they happen. Additionally, use of an audit trail by the researcher is a method used in establishing dependability. The researcher's field notes or researcher's journal was the audit trail used to show dependability.

Confirmability

The concept of confirmability means that findings result from the actual research instead of a result stemming from the researcher's biases and subjectivity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). One way to ensure this is for the researcher to be transparent about decisions and processes used. Although qualitative researchers understand the impossibility of accomplishing objectivity in a study, it is still important that the researcher is able to illustrate the origins of the data. The same audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) used to indicate dependability to include, field notes, journaling and transcripts also supported the confirmability of the study. To reduce the impact of my experience on analysis of participants' description of their experiences, I journaled my thoughts about participant interviews and discussed any concerns regarding bracketing

with my dissertation chair, who was able to me monitor for insertions of my own perspective in relating study findings.

Transferability

The use of rich, thick descriptions will allow readers to determine the transferability of the research to other settings (Lincoln & Guba 1985). In addition, participants were chosen from a variety of institutions and programs, thus, providing a greater possibility of the transferability of the research (Merriam, 2009). Moreover, as the researcher, I attempted to address transferability by using thick rich descriptions of study context and participants (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Glesne (2010) noted that these thick descriptions give the reader a clearer sense of the participants' lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Several steps were taken in order to ensure the protection of the study participants. First, approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Texas State University. As a researcher, I followed standards of confidentiality to respect and protect the rights of all participants. In order to achieve this, all participants choose or were given a pseudonym for concealing their identities in any presentations or written reports of the study. Data collected were stored either on electronic devices that are password protected or in a locked cabinet located in the researcher's home. Only the researcher and the supervising professor had access to data collected.

There were minimal risks to study participants. If an interview participant had a negative educational experience, it might have been uncomfortable to revisit the experience. Therefore, participants were encouraged and allowed to share only

information they were willing and comfortable disclosing and reminded they could stop the interview at any point. Each participant was provided with a copy of an informed consent indicating the purpose of the study and informing participants that participation in the study was voluntary and of their right to withdraw from the study at any point. Caution was also taken in writing up study results, to provide participant profiles in a manner less likely to give clues to participants' identities, and to delete names of any institutions when quoting participants.

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed description of the qualitative methodology used in this study. A phenomenological approach was employed in order to bring focus to the lived experiences of middle aged, Black, female doctoral students. This attention to the participants' experiences in their own words allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the meaning these participants made of their experiences. Nine participants were selected using purposeful sampling that is criterion based with snowball sampling used to supplement the sample size. A demographic survey (see Appendix A) was sent to potential participants and used as a method for selecting a diverse participant pool. In order to triangulate the data, four forms of data collection were employed—interviews, critical incident reflections, artifacts and field notes. Colaizzi's data analysis method was employed more as a guide for the analysis process than as a prescribed way to interpret participant data. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation of the data, developing an audit trail with the use of a researcher's journal, member checks and diversity of the sample. Participants were assured that the study would be carried out in an ethical manner. Data collected were stored properly, identities of the participants were

hidden, and participants understood their right to withdraw from the study at any point.

There were minimal risks to participants, with participants expressing appreciation for the opportunity to reflect on their experiences.

IV. FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of midlife Black female doctoral students. As a result of this examination, it was hoped that a greater appreciation for and understanding of the experiences of this population would be gained. Answers to the research questions below were sought.

What meanings did midlife Black females attach to their doctoral experiences?

- a. What motivated study participants to pursue doctoral study at this stage in their lives?
- b. What challenges and barriers did participants experience as Black, female, midlife doctoral students?
- c. What factors did study participant perceive as influencing their persistence?
- d. What did study participants perceive as the value of their experiences?

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from the experiences shared by nine extraordinary women. The chapter will open with an introduction of the nine participants through a demographic table (Table 3) and through a brief educational biographical sketch of each participant. Information extracted from the demographic surveys and participant interviews were used to chronicle a brief educational biography for each participant. As was a goal of this study, the voices of the participants, not the researcher's, are represented in the participants' brief biographies. As expressed by Etter-Lewis (1993), these women, not the researcher, are "the authorities and standard bearers of their own lives" (p. 10). Hence, the educational biographies are presented without researcher commentary. In order to protect their identity, each participant, except one, selected their own pseudonym. The researcher selected the pseudonym for

the participant who did not identify one. The names selected as pseudonyms were Vanessa, Kimberly, Wendy, Barbie, Gathel, Carmen, Divine, Felicia and Willie B.

Table 3 Participant Demographic Profiles

Pseudonym	Age Group	Marital Status	Discipline	Degree	Region	Academic Status	Year in Program
Vanessa	45-49	Divorced	Business	DBA	Southeast	Doctoral Student	2 nd year
Kimberly	45-49	Married	Education	PhD	Southwest	Doctoral Student	1 st year
Wendy	50-59	Married	Ministry	DMin	West	Doctoral Graduate	5 years
Barbie	60-65	Married	Ministry	DMin	Southeast	Doctoral Candidate	2 nd year
Gathel	50-59	Married	Counseling	PhD	Southeast	Doctoral Candidate	4 th year
Carmen	60-65	Single	Education	EdD	Northeast	Doctoral Student	2 nd year
Divine	50-59	Divorced	Health	PhD	Midwest	Doctoral Graduate	8 years
Felicia	50-59	Married	Education	PhD	Southwest	Doctoral Student	3 rd year
Willie B.	60-65	Married	Education	PhD	Southeast	Doctoral Candidate	4 th year

Educational Biographical Summaries

Vanessa

Vanessa, who is in her late forties, began her doctoral studies two years prior to the interview. She is divorced with two adult children, a 29-year old and a 23-year old. Vanessa is the oldest of three girls, all of whom have at least a bachelor's degree. She grew up in a predominantly White community. After elementary school, she was typically the only Black person in her classrooms. Vanessa described her community as staunchly Republican where Blacks did not attend college. Her high school counselor even suggested that she not attempt college, instead encouraged her to take some

secretarial courses and then get a job. She is a first-generation college student, her parents only completing high school.

Even before really knowing anything about school, Vanessa knew that she would attend college because her grandparents told her she would be going. Once she graduated from high school, her grandfather suggested that she attend a Black school in the South because he thought she would get the best education there. Following her grandfather's suggestion, Vanessa applied and was accepted to an HBCU in the South. However, because Vanessa grew up in an all-White community where her only interactions with Black people were her family and her church members, she did not adjust well, with her experience being more complicated because she had a child. Therefore, Vanessa returned home to the Midwest to complete her bachelor's degree at a predominantly White public institution.

After graduating with her bachelor's degree, she was not interested in pursuing additional education. However, after approximately five years, Vanessa was back in school working on a master's degree because it would be the only way for her to receive a promotion in the corporate world in which she worked. Once the master's degree was completed, Vanessa decided to leave the corporate world to pursue a career in teaching. She taught high school in the Southwest before personal tragedies with students caused her to start working in higher education. Again, Vanessa hit a road block in her career because of her educational level. Additionally, she wanted to become a better writer. She was interested in earning a PhD, but was introduced to a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) by a professor she met at a conference. Because she did not consider the DBA as a legitimate degree, she had not considered pursuing this type of

degree. However, after hearing what this professor had to say about the degree, she believed that it would be well-suited for what she wanted to do professionally.

Therefore, eight years after completing her master's degree, Vanessa was back in school pursuing a doctorate degree at a large private predominantly White institution in the southeast. Her program allows her the flexibility she needs during this time in her life. For the past two years, she has been flying to her school's location once a month to attend classes on Friday and Saturday and sometimes Thursday and Sunday. After attending classes, Vanessa returns home to complete homework assigned during her time on campus. Vanessa's program is relatively new, and she is in the second cohort. When discussing her doctoral experience, Vanessa noted, "It's not the most positive experience."

Kimberly

Kimberly is a widow in her forties who has remarried. She was married to her first husband for 10 years and has been married to her second husband for nine years. She has two adult children, a son and a daughter, from her first marriage and is the stepmom to two daughters from her second marriage. Kimberly's father moved in with her soon after her first husband passed away as Kimberly's mother has also passed away, and he lives with her today. She grew up with three sisters. All the sisters have at least a bachelor's degree, two have a master's degree and one has earned a doctorate degree.

Kimberly hated school when she was younger. During her first few years of school, she attended what she calls an urban school in a lower-class area where most of the students were Black. During second grade, her father moved them to what Kimberly called the "better side of town," where she was one of a few Black students. She felt lost.

She described being horrible at every subject except English. So, she hated school from that point through her undergraduate studies. She only attended college to please her parents and because there was nothing else to do. Kimberly admits that college was more fun than high school because she was an athlete and a cheerleader. However, she was still not performing academically. She insisted that “I just really wasn't there for the academics. I was there for my parents and for the social aspects of it.” Upon graduating from college, the little girl who hated school became a teacher. Kimberly remembered, “I think that that is because I wanted to do for someone else what was not done for me. I wanted to make sure that children, young people who looked like me, had an ally.”

Prior to her master's degree, Kimberly said she saw herself as:

stupid, just not smart. People thought I was smart, but to me, I was like, don't say too much. I don't say too much because I don't want to say something that will let people know that maybe I'm not as smart as they think I am.

It was eight years after completing her bachelor's degree when she was working on her graduate degree at an HBCU in the southwest that “I began to realize that I was kind of smart.” According to Kimberly, she had a couple of professors who had a great influence on her and helped her to realize that she was intelligent.

Before pursuing her doctorate degree, Kimberly spent 15 years working at what she described as a private secular high school. She began to feel that she was no longer able to contribute to the school. “The school began . . . to do things that I felt were not in the best interests of the students, just to keep the money coming in. So, I just didn't want to be there anymore.” So, she began working at a junior college as an adjunct. However, when enrollment dropped, the institution's commitment was to its full-time

faculty. At the same time, her youngest child graduated from high school, which meant that Kimberly “felt like it was my time.”

A lady at Kimberly’s church, Dr. C, was instrumental in Kimberly choosing her doctoral institution.

She had talked to me many years before, about going back and getting my doctorate degree at [her institution] but, again, it was not too long after my husband had passed and I was just not in the right head space, nor did I have the time or anything to do that. But she continued to talk to me. Every now and then, I’d see her, and I was like, yeah, I do. I want to do this, it’s just not the right time, I just can’t do it. I just can’t do it. After my son, my youngest, graduated I thought, well, if I’m going to do it, this is the time to do it, because if I don’t do it now, I’m probably not going to do it.

Kimberly is currently pursuing a PhD in the education field. She attends a large public research institution in the southwest. She commutes more than an hour one way to attend classes. Although, her program is not an online program, the summer classes are offered online while the classes during the fall and spring terms are offered face-to-face and usually in the evening. Kimberly is attending full-time and has a scholarship that pays her tuition.

Wendy

Wendy, who has successfully completed her doctoral studies, is now in her late fifties. She began her doctoral program during her fifties and it took her five years to complete her studies. She grew up in the Midwest and has one younger sister. Her sister

has done well in corporate America despite not having a college degree. Wendy is a first-generation college student; both her parents are high school graduates.

She entered elementary school during the beginning of desegregation. Although some Black and White children were being bused to other schools, Wendy remained at her neighborhood school. Wendy indicated that she had a pretty diverse educational experience in terms of the kids and teachers. Then, in the fifth grade she was bused to a white school across town, but never felt any repercussions of that action.

After graduating from high school, Wendy was prevented from going away for college because of finances. According to her, even though one of the top universities was in her home town, she never thought she

was smart enough to go there. No one ever told me that but that's what I believed, that I wasn't smart enough to go to that school. . . . I don't ever remember a counselor preparing me for school or for college, putting that in my mind. Let's look at schools, let's help you file applications, I didn't get any of that. My parents were not college graduates, so, my dad's stance was when you graduate, you either go to school or you work.

Wendy decided to attend a junior college in her area. It took her four years to complete the two-year degree because she would go for a while then stop and begin again and stop. After graduation, she got married and moved to the Southwest, where she completed her bachelor's degree. Immediately after graduating with her bachelor's degree, she attended graduate school. During her first graduate degree, Wendy indicated that she did not believe her professors gave her the time and attention needed to help her to be as successful as she could have been. After graduating, she worked in a field

related to her discipline for many years “until God called me to ministry. Then, I quit and went to seminary.” She earned a second master’s degree from a private institution in the southwest.

Five years after completing her second master’s degree, Wendy began working on a Doctor of Ministry (DMin) at a medium sized private school in the West. She attended full-time and did not work while pursuing her degree.

I do think the fact that I wasn't working, I don't know that I could have done it. I don't know how people do it and they're working middle-age, you know. That's a lot. I'm thankful that I had that flexibility that I could apply myself full-time to it.

Wendy’s program was not an online program, but it was a distance education program. She attended an on-campus residency twice a year for two weeks, Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day. In January, students in her program would receive pre-residency assignments, which, according to Wendy, would typically “consist of probably anywhere from 10 to 12 books to read and seven to nine papers to write. All of that was due when we went in June. We turned that in in June when we arrived the first day of residency.” At the end of each residency, students were given a post-residency project to complete. For Wendy, “that's what I loved about it, because I didn't have to go in and be online and this was due, and this was due. I knew that I might have had 20 books and 10 papers due, but I had until June to get it done.”

During her doctoral studies, Wendy separated from her husband of more than 30 years. The stress of her marital problems would hinder Wendy’s progress on her dissertation. She took several months off from writing to regain her balance. “When I got to that place, when I just couldn't write I just stopped, I just put it away. I took . . .

maybe about nine months, and didn't even work on it.” After seeking help with her problems, Wendy was able to get back to writing her dissertation, and she successfully completed her program.

Barbie

Barbie is in her sixties and has been married for 25 years. She has two adult children, a son and a daughter, who do not live at home. She grew up in the southwest in a segregated community of middle class African Americans; her school principal lived across the street from her family. She is the oldest of her parents’ four children.

“Education, has always been the centerfold of our lives; my mother just was insistent on that.” Consequently, two out of the four children have completed a graduate degree and one sibling completed 15 hours toward a graduate degree.

Corporal punishment was still in effect during Barbie’s school years. “And during that time, we were allowed to get whoopings at school. And because my parents and the principal were neighbors, that meant I was going to get two.” She recalls how teachers

planted this seed of . . . external beauty, but never the internal confidence as a person. It took me years to gain that and even now I still struggle at it. I do know that teachers have a strong influence on children’s lives.

Barbie’s grandfather died when she was in eighth grade. “I just kind of lost it a little bit. It was pretty unimaginable and so, my mother put me in a private school in ninth grade and that was brutal. I had the worst experience there.” It was during that period of time that Barbie encountered a White math teacher who told her that Black people could

not do math. According to Barbie, this statement changed her perception of math and finance.

I just remember how bad I felt. I felt unsafe again. I had been taken out of my neighborhood, put in this Catholic school, didn't understand Catholicism at the time, wore these hot little skirts and thrust into an environment that I didn't know anything about. It was the worst experience of my life.

Barbie managed to graduate from high school at age 16. She remembers always being in a hurry to finish things. After graduating from high school, she attended a junior college for a year before transferring to public university. "It was predominantly White, very White, very, very White. I don't remember it being embracing and warming, but I don't remember it being ugly and hostile." Initially, Barbie found the college experience exciting, but began to experience homesickness. She majored in education as a result of a job she had at 14 years old babysitting a Down syndrome child, "it planted a seed for me to teach children with special needs." Her grades suffered her first semester as she adjusted to the new-found freedom she was experiencing. Barbie improved academically and was able to complete her program early.

Then, Barbie moved back home and got married. When things got a "little rocky," Barbie returned to the place she felt safe. "I always went to school to improve my life. I didn't realize what it was, but I did. I went back, got my master's in education a year after my son was born." She did better academically during her master's program. While working for a local utility company, she discovered that her organization would pay for her to attend school. She decided that it would be beneficial to return to school to earn a business degree in order to understand business jargon. "Education has always

been a key for me to understand what somebody was talking about and the environment in the discipline which I was in.”

For the past three years, Barbie has been working toward earning a Doctor of Ministry (DMin) degree at a private Christian research university located in the Southeast. The program is being completed in an online environment with residencies that require on campus visits. There is no set number of residencies mandated, rather residencies depend on whether the course has a residency or module component attached to it.

It kind of depended on the courses that I was in. Last year, I went five times.

Well, actually, it was four times over a five-week period. Went once in April, I was there two weeks in June, and two different visits in October. So, it just kind of depended on the course I was taking.

Because Barbie has completed course work, she no longer has a residency requirement. When asked to describe her experience, she replied, “Hell . . . put that word down.” She had a huge learning curve because she did not have a Master of Divinity. Additionally, she did not have experience attending class online. However, Barbie has done well in her classes and has adjusted to the online environment.

Gathel

Gathel is in her fifties and has been married for 29 years. She has two adult children who do not live at home and two teenage children who still live at home. Gathel grew up in a city in the southwest. She has seven siblings, but only six are still surviving. All her siblings, except for two, have attended college, three have earned degrees. Two of the siblings have bachelor’s degrees and one of the sisters also has a master’s degree.

Although Gathel's parents did not graduate from high school, their children knew that graduating from high school and even going beyond high school was expected of them.

Education was something that was ingrained in our lives. Not everybody adhered to it as it related to going to college, but it was something that was preached and supported by the community. I think the primary message was more opportunity, a gateway to more opportunity, a better lifestyle, certainly my mom's message was very loud too. She goes, 'I never wanted any of my daughters to have to depend on a man.' So, for her, the message was certainly independence, but also liberation and freedom and you have choices. You have options.

Gathel attended a predominantly White elementary school. She describes her elementary experience as "it was what it was," but admits that she received a great education. Initially there were very few Black teachers, but they were more visible by the time Gathel began third grade. She remembers that in elementary school, girls were not allowed to wear pants and the bus driver making the Black children sit at the back of the bus. "... the scale was still unbalanced. . . . we did see where we were treated different than those of our peers who were Caucasian . . . That was pretty clear."

Initially, Gathel wanted to attend a predominantly White institution for her undergraduate studies. She did not want to attend the HBCU that her siblings had attended. So, she attended a PWI for a semester, then, had to transfer due to financial issues. Gathel ended up graduating from the same HBCU she fought not to attend. She admits that she did not realize how much she needed the support given at the HBCU.

My relationship with some of my professors . . . extended certainly well beyond the classroom, but also in a sense that they were always professional, but they

were also very nurturing and I felt that at my core, felt it, you know, not mothering, but certainly nurturing and caring. The care was translated in many ways and it was seen in many ways, even beyond professionally, even into that of staff members who may have been janitors or who may have been dorm mothers or housekeepers, I mean, even into those areas, it really felt like a community. Certainly, I was near home, but still a community away from home.

Twenty years after earning her bachelor's degree, Gathel returned to school to pursue a master's degree at a private institution in the southwest. She always knew that she would pursue an advanced degree but was delayed by marriage, children and living life.

I remember being in a church service and hearing the Holy Spirit say, "now it's time to go back to school." And always I knew what I was going to go back for, as related to my master's degree. I knew it was going to be in the field of helping people in humanities.

She experienced some doubt about her decision, but remembered that God had sent her there and ultimately was pleased with the quality of education she received.

Then, three years after completing her master's degree, Gathel began working on a doctorate degree. She was at a crossroads; she was approaching 50 years old and had hoped to be finished with school by 50.

I realized that wasn't going to be a reality and I was like, okay, you can't continue to sit on the sidelines and think about this because you're wasting time. So, either you're going to get in it and do it or you just need to scratch it off your list. And I was not willing to scratch it off my list.

Gathel is pursuing a PhD at a private institution in the southeast. The program is basically online. However, there are opportunities to attend on-campus classes or students may attend live classes via a web based program. If a student's schedule does not permit either option, all class sessions are taped and may be reviewed at a later time. Gathel liked attending the live sessions via the web since it gave her an opportunity to engage with the professors and the students. She traveled for the first time to her institution for a week-long residency during her first year. Her second visit was for comprehensive exams and to defend her proposal, and her final visit will be to defend her dissertation. So, her institution has mandated three separate visits to campus during her doctoral studies. The remainder of her work was completed online. This provided Gathel with the flexibility she needed for her lifestyle.

Carmen

Carmen is single and in her sixties with no children. She is the youngest of four siblings, all of whom attended college before her. She does not consider herself a first-generation college student since her mother had some college. Carmen grew up in a small rural town in the Northeast.

During the time she was attending school, there was no kindergarten, but for all her 12 years in school, the same three Black people were in her classes, Carmen, a female friend and Carmen's male cousin. She recalls an incident that happened the summer before first grade when her mom finally allowed her to go to the playground "in this rural all White community."

Soon as I got to the playground, a little girl ran out and started shouting, "nigger baby, nigger baby," and chased me all over the playground. I was so hurt and

humiliated. I realized that my mother was trying to protect me, and I thought, wow, if this is the way the playground is, no wonder my mother didn't want me to go.

When Carmen attended her first-grade class, the same little girl from the playground was in her class. The girl apologized and explained that she behaved that way because that was all she knew.

A couple of years later, another girl who had just moved to the community, and ended up in my class, would call me Buckwheat and other names, never nigger though, when I would go pass her house on the way to the bus stop.

Again, according to Carmen, this was all the little girl knew. Interestingly, the same two girls would become lifelong friends of Carmen's. "I realized then that if you get to know people, you can change people." However, Carmen did admit that "every year there was some racial incident in school."

Carmen ran for president during her senior year of high school. Although she did not win, she did become vice-president of her class. "I was just surprised that they would vote for me, that I even became vice-president of the class." Carmen was also surprised when she was asked to play a "star role" in a skit for the high school senior play. She was involved in many organizations during high school, "but I just didn't think that anybody would even be thinking about me."

Even though she and one of her girlfriends graduated with honors and were members of the Honor Society, they were the only two whose names were not announced at honors day. When her father questioned this injustice, he was told that it had been a mistake. "We're the only two Black people involved, and they missed our names, they

forgot . . . to do this.” This mistake caused Carmen to receive her high school diploma late because she insisted on having the National Honor Society Seal on her diploma.

“My Black girlfriend and I marched with no diploma, there was nothing inside of our folders, and everybody else ... everybody else had something.”

Despite her high school guidance counselor’s discouragements, Carmen attended a private research university in the Northeast only to be confronted with an advisor who tried to talk her out of an engineering major and tried to persuade her to seek out a major in another department. “Of course, that set the tone for my being in that department. I decided that I was never going to meet with that advisor. So, I never went back to him.” Carmen became the first Black female chemical engineer to graduate from her institution, “a discipline I chose because the discipline I wanted, recruiters had told me the university offered, but this was untrue.” Upon graduation, “I flew all over the country, and I was very sought after. You know, I had tickets everywhere.” Carmen never liked chemical engineering, but she decided to accept a job in research at an oil company in her hometown, which was not enjoyable.

Carmen’s sister, who was pursuing a PhD, was dating a lawyer. So, Carmen thought it would be a good idea if she and her sister attended law school together. They took the LSAT together, and Carmen submitted applications for her sister and herself, and they both were granted admission. The first year both of their grades suffered because of personal hardships including a health scare issue for Carmen. After graduating from law school, Carmen took a job at another energy company. She experienced challenges working in the male dominated environment. She had problems with

just the men thinking that because you're a Black woman you're easy. You get people hugging me and all this kind of crap. They're always making all kinds of rude advances and stuff. It's just all the stuff of being like the first Black woman . . . that I went through.

Carmen's sister did not complete her Ph.D. on the first attempt; she did not finish writing her dissertation. During the second attempt at a Ph.D., Carmen wanted her sister to achieve this milestone, she decided to attend all the classes with her even though she was not actually admitted to the program. However, once again, her sister did not complete her dissertation. Carmen indicated that she really liked her sister's doctoral program and remembered her experience when she decided to return to school.

So, after technically being out of school for 33 years, Carmen returned to pursue her doctorate in education. However, Carmen would not have the company of her sister this time. Carmen is in her second year of the doctoral program at a large public research university in the Northeast. She is doing well in her classes, but finds the new approach to teaching a challenge because it seems to encourage students to not pull their weight. "They have all these group studies because I think they realize that a lot of these people are not doing what they should do." Fortunately, Carmen will soon complete her coursework and can work more independently.

Divine

Divine, who recently completed her doctorate degree, is a divorcee in her late fifties. She was in her late forties when she began the doctoral program, which took her eight years to complete. She has three biological children, two sons and a daughter. She also has a stepson. One of her sons was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome and requires

her assistance. Divine's son has a son who has been diagnosed with Autism, who is also cared for by Divine. Divine also cares for her grandson's mother, who also has been diagnosed with developmental delays.

Divine grew up in the Southeastern region of the United States. She is a first-generation college student, with both her parents' highest level of education being high school. She reported having a lot of siblings, but has five siblings from her mother, two brothers and three sisters, Divine being the third child. All the siblings have graduated from high school except one of her sisters. Another sister has a bachelor's degree.

Divine has the most education of her siblings. This may be because the woman who took her from her mother at 16 months and raised her instilled the importance of education. Divine was not allowed to bring home grades lower than an A. She remembers:

I was terrified about my grades, because a B was not gonna cut it. So, I got a lot of physical abuse behind school. She was going to make me go to college, whether I said I didn't want to go. That wasn't an option. So, my grades had to be perfect, so that nobody could say on a college application that I wasn't good enough.

Divine chronicled a legacy of abuse beginning when she was a small child. "Grown-ups in my life were allowing bad things to happen to me. By the time I was 11, I was on the run, I'd actually run away from home." Education became her way of proving that she was good enough.

Because Divine attended a private kindergarten, she was not allowed to enter public school without first repeating kindergarten. She described herself as smart, often

being removed from her classes as a child because the teachers were unable to teach to her level. She remembers being a straight-A student until around ninth grade when she experienced homelessness and “shifted from one place to the other. It was really rough. I was determined to finish school, in spite of all of it.” Her GPA dropped during her ninth grade through twelfth grade years. Several weeks before completing high school, Divine once again found herself homeless. Unfortunately, when it was time for graduation, Divine was three credits short of completing the requirements for high school graduation. “Because I didn't want to be high school dropout, I went to Job Corp, and I got a high school diploma there.”

Divine's educational pursuits came to a halt after graduating from high school. She got married and started having children. Her husband was not supportive of her desire to return to school. Divine recalls spending her entire marriage trying unsuccessfully to convince her husband to support the continuation of her education. Her marriage ended when Divine was in her late thirties. Two years later, she enrolled in a state university in the city which she lived. She completed a bachelor's degree in social sciences and immediately started pursuing a master's degree in the healthcare field. While working on her bachelor's degree, Divine read research that suggested that Blacks were the least likely to earn a PhD. “And so, after reading the article, it was like, hey, I'm not going to be a statistic. I'm going to figure this thing out. I'm going to go on and finish this thing.”

Hence, in 2009, Divine began a PhD program at a large for-profit university headquartered in the Midwest. Her doctoral program was offered online with four mandatory residencies. The residencies were offered in various cities across the United

States, allowing students to choose a location that was most convenient. Students were allowed to schedule their residencies when needed and residencies covered topics aimed at helping students successfully complete the program. Divine would spend the next eight years working toward this long-held goal of earning a PhD.

Felicia

Felicia is in her early fifties and has been married for 24 years. She has two children, an adult daughter not living at home and an adult son who still lives at home. She is a first-generation college student. She has six siblings, but only grew up with her sister. Her sister has a master's degree, and her other siblings completed high school.

Felicia was born in the Caribbean and attended kindergarten through second grade there. She moved to the northeastern region of the United States in third grade and lived there through middle school. "I hated being there at first, of course, because I wanted to stay" in the Caribbean. She was initially placed in bilingual classes until she became proficient in English and was placed in classes where only English was spoken. Before tenth grade, Felicia's mother remarried and the family moved to the Southeast. For one year, she attended a high school that was predominantly Black. "So, it was, I think for me, it was the first time that I started to notice the racial divides, I guess." She was to only spend a year at this school.

Then, her stepfather was transferred to Europe, where she completed eleventh and twelfth grades. She was tested to determine her academic level. She discovered that her math skills were not good. However, her English skills were high enough to place her in AP English classes. She credits this to her love of reading. "Because, I think, of everything else that was going on in my life, I started turning to books. So, all I would do

is read all the time. That's all I did. I found books to be my escape.” Felicia would make her first American friend in the AP English course. “She was all American, White girl with curly red hair.” Felicia ended up attending college in the Southwest because this is where her new friend was attending college.

I asked her what she was doing for college. And she said that she was going to go . . . where she grew up. And so, her family is there. And so, I was like, oh, okay. Then, I'll apply there too. So, that's how I ended up at college. That's the only place I applied. They accepted me conditionally, because my math grades were so bad. I was going to have to go into a developmental math classes.

School was difficult for Felicia because her mother did not understand why she had to leave to attend college, even though she believed Felicia needed to go to college. Her mother would call and share how difficult things were in Europe. Felicia had never visited this particular state in the Southwest. “Talk about experiencing discrimination. That's where I really first experienced it.” Her salvation was her friend’s “family sort of adopted me into their all-White family, so everywhere I went, I was the only person of color. In classes, in school, I was mainly the only person of color.”

Felicia pledged an all-White sorority. At that time, there were no Black sororities or fraternities on campus. She admits that they probably did not really want her to be a member, but at the time this did not register with her. She believes they only accepted her because the chapter was struggling with membership. She attended parties and was the only person of color in attendance.

It was awkward. I always thought it was strange. I don't know. You know, it's hard to ... I think if you're the only one, if you know you're different. So, people

are wanting to touch your hair or they're commenting on your skin or this or whatever. It's like what are you going to do? You're the only one.

She shared an experience of walking with her sorority sisters and having someone yell that they had a Black member. She believed the students were interested in her because they saw her as exotic. "I had no one else to bounce anything off of on this. It was really strange. It was strange. It was a strange experience." All her college professors were White. She remembered having one female professors, but she was also White. She described her White male advisor as "the coolest person." However, "I just thought that it's just hard to find people of color, hard to find Black people in college." In the classroom, she was usually one of a few Black students.

After graduating from college, Felicia knew that she wanted to earn a master's degree but decided to go eurailing with some friends because she thought it would be fun. During this trip, Felicia met a man who later became her husband. She earned her first master's degree, which was in international relations, from an American school that was located in Europe. After spending 10 years in Europe, she and her husband moved with their children to the Southwest.

In 2011, Felicia started working on her second master's degree in communication. She attended part-time as she was working full-time. She did this for a couple of years and then, decided to leave her job and attend school full-time. She started to think about attending a college within her state for her doctoral degree. However, when she considered the distance she would need to travel, she was hesitant. Then, she took a course during her final semester of the master's program which she really enjoyed. The professor asked her to consider pursuing a doctorate in the field of education.

So, in 2014 Felicia began a doctoral program in education at a large research university in the southwest. According to Felicia, the program has only been in existence for seven years, with Felicia starting the fourth year of the program's existence. She has completed her coursework and is working on her comprehensive exam. At the time of the interview, she hoped to complete her comprehensive exam by the end of the term.

Willie B.

Willie B. is in her sixties and has been married for 34 years. She has two sons, ages 29 and 27. One of her sons lives at home. She is the second child born of her parents' four children. She has an older brother and a younger sister and a younger brother. Willie B.'s mother passed away just as Willie B. entered her teenage years. So, she had her father to look to for guidance during the awkward teenage years.

Her parents were both high school graduates. Hence, Willie B. considered herself a first-generation college student, until she recently discovered that both her grandmother and great-grandmother graduated from college. Willie B.'s grandmother died when her mother was young and Willie B.'s mother died young, so, she was not given that information about her grandparents. Willie B. is the only one of her siblings to earn a college degree. Both brothers graduated from high school, and one attended community college. Her sister dropped out of high school. Willie B.'s husband and both of her sons have college degrees. They all attended HBCUs, with one son graduating from the same institution as his father and one son graduating from the same institution as Willie B.; they are a family of HBCU graduates. "We started training them young. We used to tell them, go wherever you want to go, but your money will be at an HBCU."

Willie B. grew up in a small rural town in the southeastern region of the United States where she began her elementary years attending an all-Black school. She found first grade easy and was interested in learning and loved to read. Her first-grade teacher lived in her neighborhood, and her second-grade teacher was a relative. She remembers being a leader and that other people perceived her as smart.

People would tell my mom she had an ugly baby. I was not an ugly baby. My mom said, “No, she is not an ugly baby.” But, because my hair was short, and I was dark skinned, that's what they said. I had to be smart.

Then, in eighth grade she attended a predominantly White school. It was there that Willie B. earned her first failing grade. After the failing grade in math, she was not interested in the subject. She was enamored with science, though, and thought that she would one day become a doctor.

I always thought I'd be a doctor or a researcher with animals and insects. That's what I liked to do as a kid. Every summer I would have some type of display of insects where they were mounted and labeled.

During high school, Willie B. was a very active student. She was one of three Black cheerleaders, she was the only Black on the newspaper staff, she was a member of the student council and she was co-ed of the month, “that's the girl they put on the calendar, and most of them were White. They always had two or three Black girls. I was one of them.” Willie B. remembers her high school as an interesting place. “I was always very outspoken. I've always questioned authority. I've always challenged authority, especially in that environment.” She recounts three attempts by the school to suspend her. She was accused of staging a student walk-out, “they tried to expel me my

sophomore year too because, again, I stood up to the principal.” Another attempt at expelling Willie B. was concerning wearing bandanas. Finally, during her senior year she was expelled for leaving campus without permission when she was caught returning to campus. Her challenges with the school would not end with graduation. She recounts a story about when she returned to the school after graduating from college.

I went back after graduating from college . . . I was a recruiter . . . and they we're having a college fair at the school. When I walked in the cafeteria the assistant principal looked up, and he saw me. He said, “You know you're trespassing, don't you?” I said, yes, but I'm also working. He didn't believe me. I showed him my business card and my recruitment materials. He responded, “No, you're going to the office.”

During an achievement test in eighth grade, Willie B read about an HBCU located in the southeast. From that moment, she decided that would be the university she would attend even though she had never visited the campus. Although she was recruited by other schools, Willie B. only applied to this one school. “By the time we had our college fair in October, I told them I had already been accepted . . . and received a scholarship.” Her family and church members tried to dissuade her from attending this school because it was so far away, “but I went, and I survived, and I thrived. I'm not going to say I thrived in the classroom because I had a good time . . . especially my freshman year because I had never had that much freedom.” The activism that started in high school continued during her undergraduate years. “Every time there was a march, I had my overalls on, and I was there. I was a political science major, so, I was politically active. It was just a great experience.”

After earning her bachelor's degree, Willie B. was offered a job by the man with whom she had interned for a summer. However, because she saw herself as "a country girl," Willie B. declined the position and moved back to her hometown without any job prospects except for the mill where most of the people in her town worked. She secured a job with a nonprofit organization. She worked there a couple of years and then, took a job with another nonprofit organization. Then, Willie B. took a job as a recruiter for an HBCU near her hometown. "When I went on that campus, there was such a spirit in that place . . . I loved it." She would later work as the placement director for 11 years. She earned her master's degree at another HBCU while working at this institution. Then, she took a job at a predominantly White institution as grant coordinator and advisor, later being promoted to an associate director position.

Twenty-four years after earning her master's degree, Willie B. is back at the same HBCU where she earned her master's degree, but this time she is pursuing a doctorate degree. She describes her doctoral experience as good, with support from her family, her cohort and her colleagues. "I love being in the classroom. I don't care if I'm the teacher or the student." She also indicated that she is allowed to be Willie B. in the classroom instead of Mrs. B., honey or mommy.

Emergent Themes

Analysis of the experiences of these nine middle-aged, Black, female doctoral students gleaned from their interviews resulted in the emergence of six themes. The first theme focused on how participants perceived time. The second theme addressed the participants' need for support during their doctoral studies. The impact of race on the participants' experience is the crux of the third theme. How these women saw

themselves and how they were changed are the focus of the fourth theme. Emphasis of the fifth theme centers on how participants experienced age during their doctoral studies. Lastly, the sixth theme concentrates on what participants hoped to gain from earning a doctoral degree. These six themes and subthemes are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Emergent Themes

I. Time is of the Essence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best Time • Family Time • Social/Leisure Time 	III. Race Matters <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having to Prove Myself • Nuances • Divergence 	V. Is Age Just a Number? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urgency to Finish • Attempted Sooner • Health/Physical Issues • Maturation
II. I Cannot Do This Alone <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Support • Institutional Support • Mentorship • Divine Guidance 	IV. The Woman in the Mirror <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credibility • Confidence • Changed 	VI. It Will Be Worth It <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge Gained • Future Opportunities • Example for Others

Time Is of The Essence

Completing doctoral studies is a big commitment of yourself as a person, your finances as well as your time. Participants in this study not only talked about the time sacrifice needed for doctoral study but also pursuing this endeavor at the right time. The issue of time was a contributing factor in decisions made by participants during their doctoral journey.

Best time. One of the motivating factors in participants pursuing doctoral studies at this time was that it was, given their life trajectories, the best time for them to start this endeavor. Wendy indicated that

I was in a very dry, dark place spiritually. I needed more for me . . . it was now time for me to get fed. I was depleted so that was kind of like my motivating factor. I knew that I was where I was supposed to be. I knew that I was at the school, the timing was right. No, I was confident of that.

It was not only a good time for Wendy, but she also believed that it was good for her church also. “I was so drained and at this dark place when I went, and hungry for my own personal development and growth, and to be poured into. I thought it was a good time, also for our ministry.”

Kimberly found pursuing her doctorate at this time to be the right time because she was at a crossroads professionally, and her personal life was now more open. So, it was the perfect time for her to do something for herself.

I had been working at the same high school for 15 years. It was a private, secular high school, and . . . it had gotten to the point where I felt like . . . I couldn't contribute to that place anymore. I just didn't want to be there anymore.

So, Kimberly left her job of 15 years and began teaching as an adjunct, but that was not stable.

Then my youngest child graduated from high school, and I just thought I've always wanted to go back and get my doctorate degree, and this was just the perfect time to do it. Everybody was out of the house, and it felt like it was my time.

During her follow-up interview, Kimberly reiterated how now was the best time for her to be in school, made even more possible with the release from some of her home responsibilities.

There's really nobody . . . that I have to take care of. My husband's here, but he's a grown man. He can take care of himself. It's just that release of responsibility in other areas and being able to just focus on something that I want, something that is solely mine and going towards achieving that goal.

For Gathel, the right time was not just about having fewer responsibilities at her home or in her professional life, but also about her age.

I think the thing that really was more of a decision maker was me looking at the time, looking at my biological clock and saying, okay, it's now or never. It's now or never. And recognizing that this is probably the best conditions in the sense that I don't have toddlers at home, I have children who are self-sufficient.

Although Divine had many responsibilities at home, she also believed that there were benefits of pursuing her doctorate at this time. "I didn't have to worry about a husband, I didn't have to worry about how I was going to get my bills paid." There was a freedom that she experienced as an unmarried woman in school that allowed her to do what was needed concerning school. She shared during her interview:

I was able to get done without a whole lot of hindrance, being married to someone who was overbearing and stuff like that. I was divorced before I started, so, the difference of being with a family, a husband, and all of that versus being single and not having to jump through people's hoops and stuff to get what I needed, if I had to be studying all night in the library . . .

When asked about her motivation for pursuing doctoral studies, Vanessa indicated that she had just returned from working overseas, she was divorced, not in a relationship

and would be able to relocate once she was admitted to a program. “I wasn't in a relationship. So, I didn't have that to deal with. I didn't have to worry about kids.”

Family time. Even though participants believed that they were pursuing their doctorates at the right time, they found that there were also time sacrifices that they found challenging. Willie B. admits that adding school to her schedule caused some relationship strain.

Well, my husband . . . he was like, “You're going out of here like three or four nights a week now. I never see you. You're never home.” There has been some stress on our relationship. I was gone a lot. There's so many dimensions to me. I have these other responsibilities I have to prioritize, but I have to see how this is affecting my home life, how it's affecting my relationship with some of my friends because they don't understand. They don't like it because I don't have time for them sometimes.

Although, Willie B. said that not being around all the time gave her husband the opportunity to do the things he needed to do, “I sense that he still wanted me here.” Because of her limited time, Willie B. started scheduling her interactions with the people in her life.

Barbie's mother was supportive of her decision to return but was concerned about Barbie's ability to be available for her.

While she was excited about me going, there was a subtle message that she did not want me to go because it would take [me] away from [her], and it did because I had to figure out what was going on. And so, I didn't have boundaries in place. I was trying to still keep up my lifestyle and do [school] too at the same time. So, I

didn't understand the magnitude of what I was getting into, and I'm glad I didn't because I think I would have talked myself out of it.

Barbie's life had gotten so rigid because she did not have a lot of time. She said when she did things spontaneously, it went "against everything that internally I would probably have done." She admits that school became all consuming, "I also lost myself in it. I lost two years." Her grandson was not doing well in school because she was not as involved in his education as she was previously, "I made up my mind toward the second year of my program [that] I was not to be consumed with education."

During her follow-up interview, Barbie acknowledged that her greatest challenge has been "my time, because I don't have a lot of it. But I have been able to redefine it, and focus more on quality versus quantity." Establishing boundaries has made balancing the doctoral program with her personal life better. She conceded that if she could change one thing about her experience, "I probably would have erected some boundaries in there ahead of time. But I didn't. Once I put the boundaries in place, I'm better."

Gathel believes that time "trumps" finances concerning the sacrifices she has made during her doctoral studies. The amount of focused time required has affected her family relations as well as relationships with friends.

What trumps finances is time and even thinking about how I'm going to get my life back when I finish this. I get teary eyed because I feel like I've had to put so much on hold just to attend to this and zoom in and go inside of this tunnel to finish this thing. Sometimes, I actually do feel like I'm living in a tunnel, and that it has taken that much focus to get it done. I've had to say, okay, can't attend to that, I can't be here, I can't be there, denying others access to me and me having

access to them because I've got to get this done. So, certainly number one is time for me in my book, that I haven't been able...hey, in some ways, I'm not even being a good wife sometimes or a good mother sometimes or a good friend at times because I couldn't be there, I just could not be there.

Gathel has decided that she has to be intentional about the things in which she gets involved. She had to spend what limited time she has outside of school with her family and work.

My emotional capacity to engage in everything and everybody is just limited. I can't do it. I've had to learn how to say no, I'm sorry, I can't do it and physically. I can't do it because there's been times I've felt, ooh, I'm right here on the line. God help me, the pressure is there and really feeling it.

Wendy also talked about time away from her children and her marriage. "I sacrificed time away, those times when I was in the library and at residency. I sacrificed time away from my family, from my marriage." One of the casualties of Wendy's time in the doctoral program was her 30-year marriage. She talked about the end of marriage in her critical incident reflection.

The problems I was having in my marriage came to a head, and my husband and I separated. My 30 [plus]-year marriage came to a screeching halt. I tried to continue to devote my time to my studies. However, I felt as though my life was literally going in circles—nothing made sense. It was a very lonely place, and it seemed as if everyone around me was continuing on with life, including my husband and the church, while I was in a dark tunnel. I felt overwhelmed, afraid, sad, confused, distrusting and hurt. It felt as if my world had been turned upside

down and then totally stopped. I know that my experience was a great learning curve for me. It greatly impacted my life because I have never lived on my own. When my husband and I separated, it was the first time that I had ever been on my own. It was the first time that I had to make major decisions. It was the first time that I had to take care of household and car repairs. It was an extremely scary place for me.

It was during this dark time that Wendy was unable to continue writing her dissertation. She took time away from working on her dissertation. “After about six months, I was determined to climb my way out. I returned to researching and writing, but it was still a great feat. It felt as if I had to relearn the mechanics of researching and writing.”

Felicia commutes over an hour to her school depending on traffic. So, she has additional time away from her family.

I think the biggest sacrifice they're making is, we don't spend time together. We'd always do something. It got really bad where we wouldn't spend, my husband and I wouldn't spend any time together. So finally, we're like, okay, every Friday night we're going to go out. So, we still, we managed to do that, not always, but we try to do that, because it had gotten to the point where I was only doing school.

Before Vanessa started her doctoral program, she attempted to prepare her family for the limited time she would have to spend with them. She remembers informing her mother:

I had to tell, like my mom, I was like okay, so there's going to be stretches where the only thing you're going to get from me is a text message saying good morning.

And I might call you. It' might be a couple of days. Because she was used to me calling her every day. And I'm like, okay, but there's going to be times at certain points where you're not going to hear from me for a couple of days other than a text message. And . . . I don't want you to panic, but this is what's going on.

Soon after Vanessa started her doctoral studies, her mother was diagnosed with cancer. Hence, during her first year of the doctoral program Vanessa was traveling between three different states because Vanessa lived in one state, her mother lived in another state and her doctoral program was located in another state.

I had to explain to my mother in advance, this is what's going to happen. So, that way when it happens ... if it's an emergency then let me, you know what to do, let me know it's an emergency.

Social and leisure time. If participants struggled to spend time with their families, it stands to reason that they would struggle to find social and leisure time in their already crowded schedules. Carmen's already troubled relationship with her significant other ended soon after she started the doctoral program. "I had a significant relationship with someone until, let's say, two months after I started this and we were splitting up anyways and that was just the end of it. When this happened, this was the end of it." She experienced something similar when her fiancée did not understand why she was pursuing a law degree. She has learned that:

If people can't understand what I want to do, then the relationship is probably not worth it. Because I want somebody who is going to be supportive of what I'm doing. If you can't be supportive of me, then you're not the right person for me.

Felicia has found sacrificing social time with friends to be one of the challenges of pursuing her doctorate. She admits that not being able to socialize like she once did does not make her that happy.

And it used to be I could go out with her friend and meet her to get drinks or whatever. And I can't do that. In the beginning, I kept saying, no, no, no. And after a while, you don't even get the calls anymore. I don't get calls anymore. No one invites me anymore, anywhere, because they know that I'm going to be studying, that I can't. There's going to be something due. There's going to be something I need to research or something. It's terrible. I think that was really difficult, giving up the social side. And knowing that people work all week and they have their Friday. And they're so happy Friday night is there. And for me, every single day is the same. It could be Monday. It could be Sunday, Friday or Thursday. It's all the same. It's all about reading, researching, studying, writing. Willie B.'s has not had time to spend with her girlfriends. And even when she tried to spend some time with them, she ended up bringing work with her.

But my girlfriends, I haven't had time to hang out with them. We normally go out for drinks and dinner or to a movie or shopping or something. I have not really had time for girl trips. Have not had time. I did do one, but I was studying while I was there. So, I didn't feel like taking part in all the activities and stuff.

During Gathel's interview, she discussed feeling like time was running out. The demands on her time did not allow her to do some of the things she enjoyed.

I feel like I'm running out of time. I'm running out of time. And that's because I sometimes have a lot of demands, a lot of things on my calendar. And some

things I just have to scratch, just, oh, I can't deal with that right now, sometimes. I recognize I've had to put a lot of social friendships on hold.

I Cannot Do This Alone

Participants depended on a support network to help mitigate their struggles and with finding the needed balance in their crowded lives. Barbie insisted that “I know I wouldn’t have done this alone. I could not have done this alone, it’s just no way.” When asked what advice would she give a contemporary pursuing a similar path, Barbie answered, “Create a strong support system. I think a support system is very important in this journey.” Willie B. made a statement about support during her interview that supported Barbie’s view. Willie B. said, “I think that was the one thing that helped me is that I didn't have to do it by myself. That really makes a difference.” Willie B. responded to being asked to advise a contemporary with “get your support group together. It's going to take so many different pieces of you to do this. The most important thing is to have your support group together.”

Family support. Gathel said her daughter became more proactive when requesting her mother’s time. “She’s gotten really good about letting me know weeks in advance as to what she has going on, so I can get it all there and give respect to that.”

Her family has sacrificed her attention in order support her doctoral journey.

I think the most thing that my family probably has sacrificed is like everybody else, I sacrifice my attention. Because sometimes, honestly, they’re doing their homework behind computers, and we’re sitting there at the table together, and I really feel bad about it sometimes, but I feel myself looking at the screen too. So,

although I may be present physically, sometimes emotionally I realize I'm not there.

Although Gathel and her family try to take breaks and go on getaways, she is still worried about the impact of not always being present is having on her teenage children. "It does concern me to think about how much of their teenage years I am missing."

Felicia stressed the notion that it is imperative to have the support of family during the doctoral journey and to also know you will have that support even before beginning this endeavor. She talked about the need for her family to understand when she needed to study.

I think that you cannot do it without the support of your family. If you have to go home and explain every time that you need to study or that this is important, then it's going to be too much of a hassle. It's going to be too much of a struggle. So, you have to have that support from the very beginning. So, I don't need to explain. I'm like, okay, I'm going upstairs . . . that's where I study. So, everybody knows.

Her husband has taken over some of the household duties. "He had to start cooking and making sure the house wasn't too much of a mess." This support meant Felicia could spend more time doing school work.

Vanessa was surprised to find that her family was not a source of support during the beginning of her journey. They found it difficult to understand why Vanessa would need to earn another degree, instead they thought she should be living her life since she was free of some of her responsibilities as a parent, and she was now single.

I got a lot of flak from my family. It was like, you have a master's, what do you need a doctorate for? You're single, your kids are grown and out of the house.

You need to live life. And you can't live life if you are working on a doctorate.

The lack of understanding concerning what Vanessa was doing is evident in the story she shared about how her grandmother introduced her at a wedding. “My grandmother was introducing me to some of her church members. ‘This is my baby, little girl down the road. She's going to school to be a doctor, not the real kind, but she's going to be a doctor.’”

As suggested in her biography, Carmen and her sister seem to have a close relationship. So, it was not surprising that Carmen noted that her sister is her greatest source of encouragement.

Well when she tells me that she is so proud of me. She tells me how proud ... there's 10 years between my sister and I. She's like a second mother. When she says she feels proud about something I'm doing, that's really inspiring for me.

Kimberly's family is also supportive of her pursuit of a doctoral degree. She said her husband brags to their friends about her educational pursuits. “My husband is very supportive. I'm always in the office working when I'm at home, so he is really giving me the space to do this and not feel guilty about it. So, that's great.” Her children do not quite understand why she wants to pursue additional education. “And then my kids are, well, my two biological kids are like, ‘Mom, why in the world would you go to school if you didn't have to?’ But they're proud.”

Institutional support. Even with familial support, having support from your institution is also important. Not all participants have experienced support from their

institutions, especially in regards to the dissertation process. While the women in this study are well acquainted with taking classes, the dissertation is a new experience for them. When asked how prepared she feels about writing her dissertation, Vanessa said, “At this point right now, I can't tell you that I don't have any feelings other than panic about my dissertation.” Unfortunately, Vanessa does not feel her institution is supporting her during this important process. “Am I supported? Not at all. Not at all. Not at all. I'm hopeful that I will be supported. Primarily because I view it from the standpoint of it's in their best interest that they support me.”

Barbie is finding it difficult to experience institutional support partly because her program is online. She has found that information sharing has not been as clear as she had expected.

I think there can be some more definitive communication, a little bit more clear and user friendly versus turning this into an elitist hazing activity. I don't think that's necessary. I think that it should be challenging and rigorous, but not at the point where it becomes a game. Trying to fact find while I'm trying to understand where I am or what's expected of me, that's what I have found more daunting in this program at this level than anything.

Felicia has not been looking forward to the dissertation phase of her program. Spending a lot of time thinking about the process with a sense of foreboding can be stressful.

To be honest, since the day I started this program, I've been dreading this part of it. Now that I'm here, I couldn't help that I've been building up all this dread, and so I was still dreading it. I still didn't feel I was ready, but I wanted to be ready.

Because of Felicia's feelings toward the dissertation process, she needed her institution to support her through the process.

I didn't feel any help. I think letting them know that there's just a lot about the actual research process and what it will take to complete a dissertation that we should be told from day one in the program.

Wendy shared a similar sentiment as Felicia. She indicated that the proposal was the most difficult aspect of the dissertation process. She admitted, "I didn't feel like I had enough guidance from the school or from my professors on how to write a dissertation. I felt like I was learning as I went."

Gathel and Carmen are having a different experience in terms of dissertation support. Both believe that their institutions are supportive of their journey to the dissertation. Gathel stated that her institution was intentional about discussing the dissertation early in the program, which is what Felicia was looking for her program to supply.

So, in light of the dissertation process, one thing that I will give [my institution], they were very good with just preparation to move me and other cohorts through this process. It was something that was talked about regularly almost every semester. Even in some ways, allowed some of the coursework to help you to be better prepared for the process, so that you would not be . . . blind or be caught off guard, so to speak.

Carmen also, believes she has received support for the dissertation. "I feel good about my dissertation. I feel good about the process and . . . my committee's meeting already. I've been extremely prepared and supported." Carmen's cohort members do not seem to

be having a similar experience. “People in my class have been in awe of what's been transpiring with my situation.” Carmen attributes the experience she is having to her advisor. “My advisor ... we've never met for less than three hours. We just talk, talk, talk, talk, talk about everything.”

Mentorship. Carmen considers her advisor as her mentor. “I have an advisor who is very well-established. She's been around the university for like . . . 40 or 50 years; she's 83 years old. She's just an excellent mentor. She just puts me on the right path.” Carmen is so impressed with her advisor that she has

referred her for another friend of mine. He had been almost two or three years with his advisor trying to figure out what to do. Within an hour and a half, she helped him figure out what was going on with his dissertation.

Kimberly has been pleased with her experience with mentorship. She talked about two mentors at her school in her critical incident reflection.

There are two doctors, African American females, in [my] department who have been really great mentors for me, one who is the one who recruited me into the program. And she was an excellent mentor for me, even before I entered into the program. She's just an amazing person. She's a personal, as well as a professional mentor.

Kimberly attended an event in honor of her mentors' retirement. After hearing what people said about the two retirees, she came to the realization that:

if in fact I do choose to use this degree to go into academia . . . that is the kind of professor that I want to be. This is who I want to be when I grow up. I want to be

like her. This person has really had an effect on my personal development and being.

When asked how her experience would have been different without mentors, Kimberly said, “It would have just been a program that I entered and went to class, did the work, did what I needed to do for my adequate yearly progress and exited the program.” She also said of her mentors, “I feel like they helped me to open up more to receiving not just what was written in the textbook and the information that the professors were giving me.” Kimberly also indicated that it was important that she had African American mentors.

Wendy had a mentor within her program along with a mentoring relationship she developed outside of her institution. She noted about her program mentor, “My professor was an excellent mentor/coach/teacher, all of the above. He was always accessible. Not only to just talk about our project and our work . . . but he was very concerned with our personal lives as well.” In addition to her professor, Wendy had a friend, who graduated a year before her, as one of her mentors and an older woman whom she sought out that had earned a Master of Divinity (MDiv) and a PhD. “I had a lot of support in that regard, mentors and coaches and listening ears. Yeah, that was good.”

Kimberly, Carmen and Wendy were the only participants who talked about mentors within their institution. Other participants had mentors, but they were not affiliated with their institutions. Barbie’s mentor is one of her friends who has completed her doctorate.

My mentoring actually came outside of the doctoral experience and more into my inner circle. It's really been through her tutelage that I've even gotten this far. I don't think I could have done it without her. I don't think anybody should go

through this process without one. I've had some wonderful, wonderful experiences in terms of mentors through my old support system. The school didn't provide it. I can tell you that.

Vanessa did not have a mentoring experience during her doctoral studies. She indicated that it would have been nice, especially in the beginning when she was not quite sure what to expect during the program. "There was no mentoring. I think I would have had a much richer experience if I had a mentor." Vanessa also noted that she would have preferred to have a professor as a mentor, but she did not have a preference of race or gender.

I think that if I had a mentor that, I think that would have been less of a problem because I would have sat with the professor and been like, okay, this is what this professor said and I'm not telling you to contradict that professor but I need you to show me what I could've done differently or done better so that I don't repeat the same mistake. I think if I had a mentor they could say, Okay, this is what you need to do differently. This is what you need to do differently."

When asked about her mentoring experience during the doctoral program, Felicia said,

I haven't really felt like I have a mentor in the program. In a lot of ways, I felt that my experience was lacking in that sense. I really don't have one person who's guiding me through it all, and who I can go to . . . about any questions or anything.

Felicia agreed with Vanessa's sentiment that having a professor as a mentor would be preferred. "I think it would be good to have . . . professor mentors, one of the professors as mentors." Felicia thought it would be especially helpful to be mentored through the

research process. “There were a lot of moments when you just feel totally lost, and I don't know that I can do this, and just someone just even say ... I didn't think I could make it, but I did.”

Although some participants were not assigned mentors and did not believe they were mentored during their doctoral studies, they decided that it would be important to become peer mentors to other doctoral students. Vanessa said about her peer mentoring experience:

There were a couple of women, one older, one younger in . . . the cohort behind me. The older woman sought me out. I was able to share with her okay be on the lookout for this, pay attention to this, watch out for this, you know those kinds of things. I didn't get that from [cohort one], nor did I get that from the professor.

Financial Support. Pursuing doctoral studies requires a financial commitment. Only two of the participants in the study worked full-time during her doctoral experience. More than one participant talked about the financial sacrifices they have made. Vanessa noted that the amount of money sacrificed is one of the things that keeps her moving, “Oh, my God, I think what will help me make it through is not wanting to have spent so much money . . . on this and then not finish.”

Wendy discussed not only the money used to pay for her education but also the money she was not making because she did not work during her doctoral experience.

In the doctoral program, I sacrificed income because I could have been working and making money, bringing money into the household. That was a sacrifice. Not only did I sacrifice the income that could have been brought in if I had been working, I sacrificed the money that it took to go to school. Not only didn't it

allow us to add more to the pot, it took away from the pot. So yeah. And there's always the opportunity cost of what you give up for the choices that you made. Whenever you make a choice, you give up something. So I did; I gave up income.

Although Divine did not work full-time for much of her doctoral experience, she did not voluntarily give up full-time employment. "I lost my job because of the program. I worked full-time initially, found myself unemployed when they found out that I was working on the PhD. I've only been able to find part-time work." As Divine was accustomed to working and taking care of herself, it was difficult to rely on financial aid to pay for school and her other expenses.

I haven't had financial support of my own to get myself . . . stuff I needed, and having to depend on financial aid just to make it through. It was a mental drain. I had to go through counseling. I was dealing with all this pressure, all this family pressure, and it was just a lot.

Several of the participants received scholarships that helped to alleviate some of the financial burden of doctoral studies, but it was limited. Barbie expressed gratitude for the additional financial support, "I had never had an academic scholarship in my life and I started getting academic scholarships to go along and help supplement my education." This support was important in helping participants continue in their programs.

Divine support. Despite the sacrifice of time, money and the energy that it takes to pursue a doctorate, participants are able to persist because they believe that they are there by God's divine order and believe that He will help them to make it through the challenges associated with this endeavor. Barbie was confident that working on her

doctorate was what God wanted for her. “I know that God navigates our lives, particularly as African American women.” She rests in the knowledge that “I also live off . . . the fact that I know God called me. Everything I need, He gives it to me.”

When Vanessa struggles with the challenges of doctoral studies, she reminds herself that there is purpose in her experience. She is not pursuing a doctorate just for the credential. “I remind myself, you're here for a reason. You're here for a purpose. And you've got to get through this to get to wherever you need to go to get to that purpose. So, I pray a lot.” She has confidence in her academic abilities. “I don't suffer from imposter syndrome only because my logic was Lord, if you got me here, there was a reason.”

Gathel's artifact was an anchor which represented not only her belief that her pursuit of the doctorate was God ordained but also that God was her anchor during the experience.

God . . . has been the initiator of this undertaking. Although I had a desire for quite some time, but I even think about the desire in the sense that this is not something that I conjured up myself, that my desire even came from God. It was the voice of God that I've called you to do this during this season that has kept me anchored and helped me in it, when so many times, I wanted to get out of it. When asked what influences her persistence, Gathel responded, “I realize that this is something God has ordained for me to do.” She is not concerned about not completing what she has started. “God authored it, and He will finish it.”

Race Matters

When discussing how race impacted their doctoral experience, participants had different experiences and at least one participant gave a mixed message. Three of the participants attended Christian institutions. Wendy was the only Black and only female in her cohort of 18. However, 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.” Barbie said it this way,

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.

Having to prove myself. Other participants did not have the loving racial experience that Barbie and Wendy experienced. Vanessa did not believe that her thoughts were accepted like her White counterparts.

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.” When talking about the fellowship she received, she believed “that this fellowship that I have shouldn't have gone to someone else who's, you know, younger and white and male, who traditionally are the ones who have these kinds of opportunities.”

Gathel initially indicated that she did not let race affect her doctoral experience. She stated,

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.

During the follow-up interview several weeks later, Gathel conceded that although she did not experience racial discrimination from others during her experience, she said that race governed her interactions with her professors. 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 I's are dotted and T's 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 undertones of interactions with Whites professors as well as students.

Kimberly said,

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 her 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 who was trying to get ... 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, "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 had different academic and social expectations of them. Vanessa believed that “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 shared that the difference in expectations based on race is also evident in academic work.

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 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 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.

The Woman in the Mirror

Is it possible to go through doctoral studies without being changed? For the nine participants of this study, change was a result of the experience. Some of the participants began their journey struggling with doubt about their academic abilities, concerns about their career trajectory and questions about their ability to persist through the doctoral

pressures. As participants walked the doctoral road, they experienced an increase in confidence and believed the experience would enable them to work with more credibility.

Confidence. All the experiences that the participants encountered during their doctoral journey changed these women. Wendy said during her critical incident reflection that her doctoral walk enabled her to endure the challenges of her failed marriage.

I know without a shadow of a doubt that my journey in the doctoral program prepared me and gave me strength to go through one of the greatest tests in life that I have encountered. The program itself gave me life, hope and strength. As I reflect on it now, I wouldn't change a thing. It has helped me to learn, grow and trust my voice in ways that I would have never known.

Felicia gained confidence from being able to get through her program. Answering what was the best thing about her experience, Felicia said,

Just being able to do it, and to show myself that I can do it, that has been the biggest I guess reward that, hey, I can do this. I can get this done. It's been tough, and it's been a lot of sacrificing, just being able to do it, I think.

She also said that as she continues to progress in her program, her confidence continues to improve.

I'm slowly going to the part where, belonging here maybe. I don't know. I'm not sure, I still am like, Oh, God. You know, that sense of . . . imposter syndrome? Yeah. That I'm like, oh, I don't know if I should be here. If I open my mouth people might realize that I don't belong here. Maybe I shouldn't speak up. But that's a little less, I think each semester. Yeah. Each semester probably it's a little

less. I'm a little more confident. So, I'm hoping by the time I actually get my degree, I'll be a lot more confident, but we'll see.

According to Willie B., it is important that Black women mute the negative voices of other people and develop their own narrative.

African American females, we're growing, and we're breaking barriers all the time. We've always been capable. I think I've always been capable, regardless of what people try to tell you, or name you, or claim you to be. Sometimes you can't listen to that. We have to create our own story. We have to tell our own stories.

We have to really step up. We become the creators of what's on this plate.

Willie B.'s artifact, represents having the courage to reject the negative narratives and embracing her own truth. "The Gye Nyame symbol from the Adinkra tribe in Ghana . . . means accept God, or God is omnipresent, or deep faith in the Supreme Being. But, to me it says fear nothing but God.

Kimberly is gaining some of that fearlessness as a result of her doctoral experience. She said that she is now more likely to address issues. This new confidence has given her the ability to appropriately respond to perceived wrongs. "Whereas before, I would have known that something was wrong and I may, depending on how I was feeling that day, have said something, but it may not have been the most effective thing to say."

Credibility. The doctoral experience has had its challenges for the participants. However, at the end of the journey, they will have a credential that as Willie B. stated "the PhD just gives me credibility." Vanessa shared a similar sentiment, "I anticipate that people will pay more attention to my thought leadership because I have a DBA

behind my name. I've got more alphabets from the alphabet soup behind my name.”

Gathel believes that the doctorate helps some people to believe in your abilities. She thinks “some people just feel a lot more comfortable with the status,” allowing them to hear what she may have to share.

Devine indicated that she frequently “had people telling me, ‘You can't do this and you can't do that.’” However, for her, the doctoral journey “was the pinnacle of success.” She would come to the realization that “I didn't know what I know now, that I was enough. I was enough without the college education. I was enough on each level of education that I got.” Vanessa, who has been challenged by the academic scrutiny of her professors said, “I'm the oldest Black female in my cohort, and trying not to let my cohorts or my professors define me. And try not to fall into the trap.” Vanessa also believes that these types of challenges will lessen once she has her doctorate. She expects to have more influence once she has earned her doctorate because the credential will make the difference in how she is perceived.

Changed. Although some of the changes participants experienced happened within, they were also visible to those on the outside, even when the participant was not aware of the change. Gathel talked about the change her friends noted that seemed in contradiction to how she was feeling.

I've had many girlfriends who have stated along the way that they just knew I would be at this place, so have never doubted me in that sense. So, they see the strength that's there that sometimes that I'm like, I don't see necessarily because certainly I'm pushing through a lot of self-doubts and insecurities and inadequacies and all of those things, pushing through that personally.

When asked what changes she has noted in herself during the doctoral experience, Carmen said, “I think that I've become more content with my life.” Divine indicated that her daughter has noticed a difference in her behavior. “My daughter has gone like, “Mom, you've just become more engaged with everything.” However, she does not believe that many of those around her are aware of any changes about her. “I don't think anybody else is paying any attention.”

Willie B. noted some changes as a result of her doctoral experience. Her overall communication skills, verbal and written, have improved.

Well, my writing has improved tremendously. I've always thought I was a good writer, but I'm learning to do a different type of writing. I think my communication skills have improved a lot. I think I'm more intentional about what I say most of the time, and I'm willing to share the knowledge.

Is Age Just A Number?

Pursuing doctoral studies can be an overwhelming and daunting experience at any age. Participants in this study are all middle-aged doctoral students, with the youngest in her late forties and the oldest in her early sixties. When asked about being a midlife student, Barbie said, “Working at this level, age is what's relative. It's always relative . . . it served to my advantage.” Despite Barbie's claim, participants discussed experiences that were impacted by their midlife status.

Urgency to finish. Given the sacrifice that participants have made concerning spending time with family and friends and time for social and leisure, it is not surprising that they want to complete their doctoral studies as soon as possible. When asked what

had been the best thing about pursuing your doctorate, Vanessa indicated that it was the speed with which she has been able to get through her program.

I guess it would just be the fact that I was able to see it through and to get it done in a shorter amount of time. If I was younger I would have taken the full ... whatever amount of time they would have given me, I would have taken all of it all the way through. I have more sense of urgency now as a middle-aged Black woman than I did when I was younger. I have to get this done. I've got to get it done sooner than later in the shortest amount of time possible. I went into the program saying, how long is this program? What's the least amount of time that I can do to get through this program successfully? And that was my target. That would not have happened if I was younger. Not at all.

Barbie would like to be finished with her doctorate by a certain age. She is feeling an urgency to get it accomplished. "I feel like I'm working against time. I don't want to be [this age] and in school. I don't want to be [this age]. I want to finish next year." Barbie is finding it challenging to deal with wanting to complete the program in a hurry.

I have to fight sometimes the urgency to finish. Sometimes it comes up in my thinking, you know, you need to hurry, you need to finish, you need to get this through. Time. I feel like sometimes I'm running against the clock, because I'm [this age] and I started it at [this age]. I'm wondering if I will get to finish out my dream that I have with using this doctorate. Will I finish?

As Barbie previously stated about her experience, Willie B.'s concern about completing her program also has to do with her age.

I don't have the time. I don't have the luxury of slowing down and taking my time.

I have to do it now. I have more time behind me than I do in front of me, so I have to be very intentional about what I do with it, and how I do things with it.

Although Willie B. said that the journey is not a race and setting your own pace is important, she still finds it a challenge to heed those words. Instead, “I feel like I'm running a race because I just want to be through because I waited so late to start.”

Attempted Sooner. As participants reflected on their doctoral journey, many indicated that they wished they had completed their doctorates earlier. Vanessa is struggling to see an end of the journey. “I can't tell you at any point in time, even now, that I see the light at the end of the tunnel. In this regard, I think the middle-aged thing has factored into it.” As she reflected on this revelation she said, “And when that hit me, I was somewhat depressed. It was overwhelming for me to realize that, and it made me think ... I didn't second guess doing it other than I should've done it sooner.”

When asked what they would change about their doctoral experiences, participants had a variety of answers. Felicia and Gathel echoed Vanessa's desire about attempting a doctorate earlier in their lives. Felicia said, “If I could change anything, it would be to go back and do it as soon as I finished my first master's degree. That would have been great.” Gathel also wished she would have pursued her doctorate earlier.

If I could alter this experience, I do wish I would have done it sooner. That would be the one thing. I wish that I would have done it sooner, basically. I think I probably would not have struggled as much with anxiety. I wouldn't feel as guilty as I sometimes do about when my kids see me, certainly I'm with them, but they

see me sometimes not just with them, but also with a computer. Mama with her face in a computer.

As a person in her sixties, Willie B. expressed that she knows she has less time during this leg of her life than before. Hence, she doesn't have as much time to make use of her degree as she wished. "I could have done this a long time ago. I wish I had done it earlier, but I was afraid." Barbie, who is also in her sixties, never thought she would be pursuing her doctorate at this stage of her life.

I . . . remember when I would go to graduations, and I would see people get a doctorate, and they would be like, 60. Why do they go to school that old? I looked up, and it was me. I thought, oh my God. Oh, my God, I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it . . . I just couldn't believe it.

Health/Physical Issues. One of the benefits of pursuing the doctorate early for the participants is not having to experience the health and physical issues that are typically a part of the aging process. Therefore, participants are not only dealing with their own health and physical changes, but some are also assisting aging parents with their health problems. Barbie has persevered through her own health crises, but assists her mother with Barbie's father, who suffers from dementia. The stress of balancing her life with school took a toll on Barbie's health.

I ended up with an inflammation of the esophagus and stomach lining in the hospital, but I still went to [my residency]. I . . . went to the hospital, got a cocktail, some medicine and got on that plane sick and kept going. And it's been like that ever since. I went for counseling after I lost my hair, after I went through that traumatic experience.

Wendy also shared how the stress of the doctoral program necessitate a visit to the doctor, causing her to consider forgoing her residency during her final year of doctoral studies.

I had some physical problems because I was going through, I don't know what. One year I almost didn't go [to my residency], my last year, actually, I almost didn't go. My doctor, actually, didn't want me to go. At that time, I did not know that it was the depression because I had a fever and they were testing me for acute leukemia and all of that. She said, "[Wendy] I really don't want you to go." I called my professor, and I said if I don't go, can I Skype in and he said "no, you have to be here. If you don't come, you forfeit the program." I got on the plane. Divine has health issues that have been exacerbated by the stress of doctoral studies. "I have diabetes. That was aggravated by all the stress. So, I spent a lot of time at the doctor's, every three months having a check-up, trying to keep my blood sugar straight" Kimberly and Felicia have had the same physical issue during their doctoral program, also brought on or intensified by the stress of being a student.

When I started the program . . . I guess stress would make it worse, my hot flashes and stuff. So, I had all these hot flashes and things. Oh, my god. And I would just be embarrassed, because I was already stressing out. So, I know in all of my classes, I'm always pulling out the fan. I always have the fan. And I'll . . . have a jacket that I put on and take off.

Felicia laughed as she shared what she deemed an embarrassing moment during class.

And so, I had a question for my professor. And we were working, I guess, on some problem or something. And he came to sit next to me to answer the

question. And all of the sudden, you know, you can feel it coming on. I felt it coming on, and I couldn't do anything, and I was sweating. I was so embarrassed because I just knew that he thought that I was sweating because he came to talk to me, like I was so nervous that I was sweating.

Kimberly is also suffering with hot flashes, but has a certain way of dealing with them during class.

I'm sitting in class with my little fan and my hot flashes . . . I have a little fan with a little motor, and I have to take it out, and everybody turns around and looks at me. So, yeah, that's a problem.

Maturation. Although age brings its own unique challenges when pursuing doctoral studies, Carmen contends “To me, it's almost an advantage to be old.” She believes that having lived through some of the history being discussed in her courses, gives her an advantage over her younger cohort members. “My lifelong experiences. My worldly knowledge. These people . . . they only have knowledge if somebody told them or they read it in a book and most of them don't like reading.” Willie B. echoed this viewpoint when she said, “I talk about what I know, and not what I read.”

Additionally, Carmen believes her perception and approach to education is different from her younger cohort members. Although initially concerned about competing with the younger students, she realized that she could compete and in many instances surpassed them academically.

All they want is to get this degree behind their name and move on. They don't have any kind of thirst for knowledge, any of them. I think that older students shouldn't continue to act like, oh, these young kids can run circles around me on

this, that, and the other. Some can, but the vast majority can't. I was skeptical about that too. I'm old, I don't know whether I can compete with all these young kids. And blah, blah, blah . . .

For Vanessa, age has brought about a sense of security in herself as a person. She no longer concerns herself with trying to earn the approval of others.

I don't feel like I need to prove anything anymore. In the past, I needed to prove that I was just as smart, just as competent, just as capable. And I would do it, but I'd be quiet about it and let you brag on me about it. You would acknowledge it. At midlife, I don't care what you think. I don't. And I don't have time to try to wow and impress you.

It Will All Be Worth It

During the doctoral journey, participants sacrificed time with family and friends. They sacrificed the loss of income but also the loss of household money used to pay for the cost of pursuing a doctorate. As participants previously stated, they also paid a price in their physical, mental and emotional well-being. If the sacrifice of pursuing a doctorate is so great, why would these women endure such a journey? They believed that what they would gain would be worth the price paid.

Knowledge gained. Kimberly, who is completing her first year of doctoral studies, said she has gained so much knowledge from her courses. "I did not have the in-depth knowledge that I have now." She said this new knowledge has enabled her to talk more comfortably to her brother-in-law.

I could talk about theoretical-type things but not specifics, and I feel like now we have conversations. I'll call my brother-in-law, and we'll talk about things, and

I'm like, yeah, I know about that case, yeah, I know. We'll just talk, and that's very exciting. That's exciting for me. That's something I've noticed in myself that changed.

Even though Barbie is a minister, it was not until she completed her two years of doctoral coursework that she has been able to explain what she believes. She is now “able to explain the theological basis and premise in which I believe, to me, has been the greatest gain of anything.” Prior to her doctoral studies, she was only repeating what she had been told.

I've never been able to put all these pieces together. I've always seen it, heard it, but I just lived it blindly. Now I have language which is even more empowering to me, to make decisions for myself instead of allowing somebody else to make them for me.

Gathel gained a greater understanding of herself as a result of her doctoral journey. “Really becoming more aware about my strengths as well as my weaknesses has been something that has been very positive.” On the other hand, through her doctoral studies, Felicia has come to the realization for the need of more women of color in higher education.

I think it's the first time that I really stopped to reflect on my position as a female of color in higher education, and how important I think it is to be there and to get more women of color involved.

Future opportunities. Participants are hoping the knowledge gained during their doctoral studies will have an impact on future career and personal opportunities. Divine, who has lived her adult life caring for others, wanted something for herself. “[I have]

always taken care of other people. I wanted to have the opportunity to create a way . . . to take care of me . . . for me to be all right. When my life is over, I'll go, I did it my way. A long-held goal of Felicia's was to teach on the college level. Hence, she is hoping that her doctoral experience will open doors in that area.

I just always had in the back of my head that I wanted to go back to school because I wanted to teach. I wanted to teach at the university level. When I get this degree, when I am a PhD, I will be teaching and researching at a research university . . . four-year research university.

Willie B., who currently works in higher education is hoping "to have my own nonprofit one day." According to her,

I think what the PhD will do is provide my credentials. It will heighten my credentials. Like my former supervisor said, "We know you can do the work. We know you have the knowledge, but you just don't have the credentials to support it." That's all I'm doing. I'm just getting my credentials.

Kimberly is also hoping to work in higher education as a professor. However, she expressed concerns about her age being an obstacle.

I'm almost fifty. So, what am I going to do with this? Do I have a career path that I can take to some, are people going to hire me at this age? But in academia professors are usually older, so it's not that as big of a thing. But that's kind of the midlife thing.

Example for others. In addition to the acquired knowledge and the future opportunities that make the doctoral journey worth it for participants, they also want to be a positive example for others. Wendy said of her doctoral journey,

I think it was an example for my kids and other women that have desires to go back to school and felt it's too late or after I have children that I can't do this at this time in my life. I think it has not only been for myself, but it's also been, I pray, an example and a help to my kids and to other women my age.

Divine hopes that her experience provides hope for her children and grandchildren. “My grandchildren and children were watching, and they give me hope that they see how their lives can change, and it definitely changed mine.” By observing her persistence toward her goal despite many challenges, Divine hopes they will learn how to persevere during tough times.

As I look back on this journey, I want to believe that it has positively affected my children, to see me go from just being their mother, to someone who put a lot of time and energy into a goal and dream and stuck with that to achieve it, to get where I need to be, where I am today.

Gathel and Barbie, who communicated that their doctoral journey was God inspired, wanted to be an example for those who are in their intimate circles. Gathel said she wants her doctoral journey to serve as a point of reference for her descendants of what they are capable of accomplishing.

I’ve always wanted it to speak to my children as possibilities, giving them a point of reference that you can do this, you know, if you choose to and give my grandchildren, and hopefully one day I’ll have some, not rushing it, but whenever it comes that they can have a point of reference.

In accordance with her spiritual stance, Barbie wants to be an example of what God can do through those who listen to Him.

. . . I want to live another 20-30 years, but if it doesn't happen, I'm living a full life right now. And so, that's what means a lot to me is to know where I am, to make a difference, to be an example, a living epistle of what it means to have Christ in your life and to follow everything he tells you.

Summary

This chapter chronicled the experiences of nine midlife, Black, female doctoral students. A brief educational biography of each participant was presented. These biographies recounted participants' previous education experiences, and shared demographical information about each participant. The six themes that emerged from the analysis of the participants' experiences were presented. The first theme addressed how time was experienced and perceived by participants. Participants perceived that they were pursuing doctoral study at the best time for them. Also, given the amount of time required for doctoral studies, participants expressed not having enough time for family and leisure activities. The second theme focused on support received by participants during their doctoral journeys. Participants agreed that support from others was needed to successfully navigate their doctoral programs. The third theme addressed the issue of race. Participants shared experiences of having to prove their legitimacy as doctoral students and having to navigate different treatment as students. The focal point of the fourth theme was how the experience changed these women. As a result of the doctoral experience, participants experienced increased confidence and more credibility. The fifth theme concentrated on how age impacted the participants' experiences. Participants experienced age-related physical and health issues. Although participants wished they had attempted their doctoral studies earlier in their lives, there were also benefits to

pursuing their studies at their current age. The final theme focused on the benefits of the doctoral experience. Although, participants encountered challenges during their doctoral studies, they believed that what they would gain would make the experience worth the struggles.

V. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of midlife, Black, female doctoral students. As a result of this examination, it was hoped that a greater appreciation for and understanding of the experiences of this population would be gained. Answers to the research questions below were sought. What meanings did midlife, Black, females attach to their doctoral experiences?

- a. What motivated study participants to pursue doctoral study at this stage in their lives?
- b. What challenges and barriers did participants experience as Black, female, midlife doctoral students?
- c. What factors did study participant perceive as facilitating their persistence?
- d. What did study participants perceive as the value of their experiences?

This chapter will discuss study findings considering the research questions and related literature. It will also highlight conclusions that can be drawn from the study and make recommendations for practice and future research based on the study findings. Finally, I will provide my reflections as the researcher for the study as well as my reflections on my own doctoral journey.

Discussion of Key Findings

This section will focus on the key findings as they relate to the research questions, literature review and conceptual framework. Interviews for this study focused on understanding how participants perceived their doctoral experiences by asking questions related to their motivations for doctoral studies, various challenges faced during the

doctoral experience, influences on persistence and the value of the experience. In order to discuss the findings in an organized manner, each research question will be reviewed relative to key findings and corresponding literature.

The overarching question for this study was *How did midlife, Black female doctoral students make meaning of their doctoral experience?* Participants found that their doctoral journey challenged their time with family and friends and challenged their emotional, psychological and physical well-being. Ross-Gordon (2005) suggested that commonly experienced challenges for adult learners can be more striking for Black learners. Similarly, Thurston (2002) in her study of 10 Black female reentry women noted that participants in her study were able to complete their doctorates by developing a way to survive, by looking to family for needed support and by depending on their spiritual faith. On the other hand, family members of participants, although supportive in one sense, did not fully understand the struggles of the doctoral journey. Thus, participants needed additional support from those familiar with their journey. For instance, Thurston (2000) suggested that older adults need a welcoming environment in order to complete their studies, thus, allowing them to occupy positions that can be beneficial to society. This enables older adults to continue contributing to society by supporting themselves instead of being a drain on resources. Despite these challenges, attaining a doctorate meant the completion of a long-held goal for some participants. For others, the doctorate symbolized the pinnacle of success. Still, for other participants, the doctorate would lend legitimacy to their professional endeavors. And for many of the participants, the doctorate would be held up as a symbol of what can be accomplished with determination and perseverance. The value of education was instilled in most

participants by their parents and members of the Black communities where they lived as children. Below, I discuss key findings related to each subsidiary question making connections to the theories encompassed in the conceptual framework and to literature reviewed for the study.

Participants' Motivations to Pursue Doctoral Studies at This Stage in Their Lives

Subsidiary question one centered on study participants' motivations for doctoral studies. The two primary themes that relate to this question are *time is of the essence* and *it will be worth it*. Most of the participants indicated that one of the reasons for pursuing doctoral studies at this time in their lives was that "it was a good time" or it was time to do something "just for me." Essentially, this suggests that participants had not found it to be the right time for doctoral studies earlier in their lives. For example, one participant was at a crossroads in her professional career. This participant also indicated that because her children no longer needed her in the same way, it was time for her to do something for herself. It was easier for participants to devote time to their studies at this point in their lives because the obligations to their children were not as demanding on their time. Literature reviewed for the study supports this finding regarding participants' motivations for pursuing doctoral study. Ryff and Seltzer (1996) suggested that midlife can be a time for pursuing new areas of interest, and it is also considered a period of transition (Brooks-Gunn & Kirsh, 1984; Brown, et al., 2005; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). Another participant was clear that no longer having a husband with whom she had to contend made pursuing her doctorate feasible. Similarly, Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) indicated that the women in their study may have chosen to return to school when their children were more independent and their obligations at home were less demanding.

Moreover, Brooks-Gunn and Kirsh (1984) suggested that if women were, for a major part of their lives, only defined by others, such as their children and husbands, a change in these roles ends the “plot line” for these women. However, because women operate in multiple roles such as work, a different “plot line” can be chronicled that has as a central focus, creativity and accomplishment. The old “plot line” of moving from the father’s home to the husband’s home, having and rearing children and then leaving the remainder of the plot unfinished, does not have to stop when children reach independency. Although the women in this study grew up during the time when the stated “plot line” may have been the norm for the dominant culture, they opted to write stories that offered a different “plot line.”

Another motivation for pursuing doctoral studies related to the theme *it will all be worth it*. Participants saw the doctorate as a means to gain more access to professional opportunities. In support of this notion, Heilbrun (1984) posits that achievement, not relationship, is the primary theme for women during middle-age. During midlife, she encourages women to expand their work sphere. Some participants believed that the degree would give them more credibility or legitimacy in a society that places value on credentials. One participant envisioned that her doctorate would allow her to find more stable employment and allow her to help Black people. Likewise, Black feminist thought suggests that female scholars, including those not in academic settings, contribute to advancing the understanding that the struggle of Black females is a part of a more expansive struggle for self-respect, empowerment and social justice (Collins, 2000). Hence what motivated some participants to pursue doctoral study is consistent with one of Black feminist thought’s distinguishing features.

Challenges and Barriers Faced by Participants as Black, Female, Midlife Doctoral Students

The second subsidiary question examined the challenges participants faced during their doctoral experience. Themes that related to this question included *time is of the essence, I cannot do this alone, race matters* and *is age just a number*. Participants chronicled challenges that revolved around the limited time they had for other aspects of their lives. Although these older students may not have the same responsibilities toward their now more independent children, sometimes this was replaced with caring for aging parents. For instance, Lachman (2001) noted that midlife conjures up a variety of images to include aging parents. Similarly, Brooks-Gunn and Kirsh (1984) indicated that there is an assumption that midlife women will continue in their roles as caretakers to the family, as caring for aging parents replaces the responsibility of caring for children. Due to the varying perceptions of midlife, it can also be a time of turmoil and crisis. Moreover, when the responsibilities of caring for minor children ends, spouses can expect to have more time for each other, which was interrupted in the case of study participants. Therefore, study participants sought doctoral programs that offered flexibility without extending time to degree.

A Thomas (2001) study of re-entry women suggested that Black women's return to college had a negative effect on their relationships with significant others. This was illustrated when the women in the current study indicated that they had limited time with their family and friends, which at times caused some strain on the relationship. One participant's marital problems were exacerbated during her time in the doctoral program, ultimately resulting in the end of her marriage. Another participant's husband lamented

her limited time at home. She was spending an increasing amount of time away from home with work, school and travel to and from school, causing some marital strain.

Another challenge experienced by study participants related to the theme *I cannot do this alone*. Many of the women in the study indicated that they did not have much guidance from their programs or advisors during their doctoral studies, especially in relation to the dissertation process. A Padula and Miller (1999) study found that participants had a different educational experience than they were expecting, with some being disappointed at the hoops through which they had to jump. Similarly, in the current study, participants also expressed disappointment with going through what they called hazing. Ellis (2001) found that more than other groups, Black women experienced poor relationships with their advisors. Although participants in the Padula and Miller (1999) study wanted mentors, they did not believe they were mentored. Many of the women in the current study, likewise, believed that a mentor would have improved their experience. Unfortunately, most of the participants traversed the journey without this support. The majority of the women in the current study who had mentors, secured this support on their own and outside of their institutions. Women in Thurston's (2002) study depended heavily on the support and encouragement of their family which helped them during times of difficulty. Only a few participants in the current study experienced mentoring from a person within the university. Correspondingly, an important finding in Thurston (2002) was the scarcity of mentors for African American women. One possible reason for the lack of mentorship during the participants' doctoral experiences is that there is a lack of Black female mentors for Black females in institutions of higher education (Grant & Simmons (2008). From the Grant and Simmons (2008) study it was

determined that it is important to have the support of faculty and mentors who are Black. These authors go as far as to advise Black women to avoid enrolling in programs that do not have the Black faculty representation or the support of a mentor.

Race matters is another theme that pertained to the challenges participants faced during their doctoral journeys. 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 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. Instead, Collins (1986) posits that Black women will define themselves with more authentic images. Their experiences give them an outlook of what it means to be a Black woman that is not accessible by other groups. Moreover, 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, one participant 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 also presented in a study by Harrison (2000) where participants reported expressions of surprise from Whites when they displayed intellectual abilities different from what was expected.

Harris et al. (2015) suggested that the questioning of Black students' intelligence was the most commonly 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 inequity of treatment may have led one participant to make sure that she presented herself in the best light when she interacted with her professors. According to Hankivsky (2014), one of the tenets of intersectionality suggests that relationships and power are connected to the various social locations (ageism, ableism, racism, sexism). Additionally, people can simultaneously experience privilege and oppression depending on the context and situation. Another participant 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 conform to hegemonic standards in order to be successful within the academe. Collins (2000) suggests that it is difficult to break free from the accepted images of beauty that are 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. 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 in order 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. Shield (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. One participant 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).

Lastly, the theme *is age just a number* related to the subsidiary question concerning challenges experienced during doctoral study. Consistent with what Johnson-Bailey (2001) found in her study of reentry women, study participants’ health and mental well-being became collateral damage to their doctoral studies. Two participants reported breaking out in hives due to the stress of their studies. More than one participant sought counseling to address stress and physical challenges experienced during the journey. Lachman (2001) indicated that midlife is a time characterized by physical and psychological changes. It is not conclusive whether all health challenges participants experienced were due to age or a result of the stress experienced as a result of their doctoral journey. Perhaps, it was a combination of both because one participant indicated that her health issues were exacerbated by the stress of the doctoral program, and perhaps stress was exacerbated by participants’ intersectional locations as Black, midlife, female doctoral students. The Black woman’s experience with double marginalization already makes her experience different from that of the White woman (Morales, 2014). However, as the Black woman encounters midlife, she will now face a triple marginalization as the intersection of her race, gender and age now affect how several social identities intersect at the closest level of a person’s experience, as a manifestation

of the linking systems of oppression and privilege at the societal level Bowleg, (2012), a component that was absent in the previously reviewed literature. This triple marginalization can be observed for instance, in the experience of one participant, who reported struggling with expectations from her mother that she help care for her father, who was diagnosed with dementia.

Consequently, because of the age of the participants and perhaps the mental, physical and emotional strain of doctoral studies, there was an urgency to complete their programs as quickly as possible. One participant noted that the ability to finish in a timely manner was an important program feature when deciding on which program she would pursue. Another participant was extremely aware that she had less time in front of her than behind. Hence, it was vital not to spend too much time pursuing the doctorate.

Factors Perceived as Facilitating Their Persistence

Although their doctoral journeys were punctuated with challenges and barriers, each woman was successfully persisting toward the end of her program, with two participants having successfully completed their programs. In a (2001) study Thomas found that most of the women in the doctoral program were determined to complete their goal despite the many obstacles and challenges they faced during their journeys. Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002), pointed out that older students can compete academically, even though they may experience different stressors and challenges than their younger counterparts. For example, one participant shared that she was initially concerned about her knowledge of technology, but described being as informed or more informed about technology than her younger cohort members.

Factors facilitating participants' persistence also related to the theme *I cannot do this alone*, discussed above in relation to the subsidiary research question about challenges and barriers. The women in the study stressed the importance of having a support system during their doctoral studies. Several participants indicated that their dependence on God was helping them to endure all that doctoral studies involved. One participant believed that even her desire to pursue doctoral study came from God. So, of course, He would assist her in this endeavor. Likewise, Thurston (2002) indicated that the women in her study had spirituality as the foundation of their lives, which was an important part of their well-being. Tatum in her 1987 book supports this notion when she suggested that Black women get from their religion and church the strength for survival in environments dominated by Whites. As she asserts, the Black church is where Black women can interact with other Blacks who face adversities and sufferings.

According to Wolf (2009), to successfully navigate their experiences during midlife, older women need to have connections. Consistent with Wolf's assertion, participants indicated that they would not have survived the doctoral journey without a support group. The participant who attended an HBCU said that her experience with supportive faculty and cohort members was key to her success; she was not alone in the struggle. In their study using a Black feminist thought framework, Borum and Walker (2012) suggested that women who attended HBCUs found their caring faculty and encouraging school environment to be positive features of their experience. Students not attending an HBCU indicated that even when their institutions were not supportive, they found the needed support outside of the school. This support came from family and friend and church members. Loque (1999) notes that the principal elements affecting the

success of her participants was family and community involvement. Participants found it necessary to be able to share their struggles with someone caring and understanding. For most participants in the current study this support came from a family member or a mentorship relationship. The investment of these support groups became a motivating factor when the doctoral journey became difficult. These supportive relationships were key to participants' persistence.

Although Golde (2005) and Lovitts (2001) suggested that the national doctoral attrition rate is 50 percent or higher, current study participants can be counted in the remaining percentage representing doctoral student who are successfully completing their programs. And this feat was accomplished without much institutional support and under overwhelming stress and pressure, especially the dissertation phase as indicated by many of the participants. In a like manner, Lovitts described the dissertation phase as one in which students have limited prior experience making the experience one that can be long and daunting. So, what enabled these women to persist despite these odds? Perhaps insight can be found not only in the resiliency of these women developed from a legacy of struggle, but also the investment and sacrifices made by family, friends and communities. Moreover, there may have been a sense of obligation to those who have set the stage for this educational opportunity and those who will navigate these waters in the future. Participants in a Harrison (2000) study also indicated that attainment of a degree was theirs alone, but the degree was also for Black women from the present, past and future. Finally, most of the women in this study indicated that they learned the value education at an early age from their parents and community members.

Participants' Perceived Value of Their Experiences

Participants sacrificed much in order to pursue their doctoral studies, from marriages to friendships to job opportunities and finances. However, each participant believed that she would make gains because of the journey. The themes that relate to this final research question about the value of the experience are *the woman in the mirror* and *it will all be worth it*. The outcome of their experience in the doctoral program changed the women's inner person as well as providing possible future career opportunities.

Each participant in the study reported receiving current benefits from the doctoral journey as well as anticipating future benefits. Blacks can often view advanced education as a means to assist their communities and a needed credential for entrance into professional careers (Bonous-Hammarth, 2010). Participants in Thurston's (2002) study of Black re-entry women echoed sentiments about serving and giving back to their communities. One participant in her study saw her professional position as a way to be of service to others. This notion was also reported by several participants in the current study.

A significant proportion of study participants recognized that they were changed as a result of their doctoral studies. Although some of the participants started their doctoral journey with feelings of insecurity and doubt, many participants noted that their self-confidence increased because of their success in their doctoral programs. The ability to successfully persist in the doctoral programs encouraged participants that they could compete. This outcome is consistent with Carney-Crompton and Tan's (2002) study, which found that while older students experienced more stressors and challenges than their younger counterparts, they performed better academically. One participant

indicated that completing her doctorate enabled her to believe that she could do anything to which she set her mind. Other participants communicated that they acquired new knowledge and skills. The new knowledge, new skills and increased confidence gained as a result of their doctoral studies, changed these women for the better. Brown et al. (2005) suggested that after attaining midlife status, Black women have already successfully navigated numerous hardships in their lives. Hence, the women in their study who noted an increase in their security and identity were those who had experienced more stress and financial need.

With the knowledge gained, participants hoped to be able to help their communities. One participant's reason for pursuing doctoral study was to help the Black children in the penal system. Another participant hoped to be a resource for her church community. The majority of the women believed that their experiences in the doctoral program would be an encouragement to their children and family members. In addition, participants hoped their success in the program would encourage others to believe that you are never too old to pursue your dreams.

Summary and Conclusions

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of midlife, Black female doctoral students in order to understand the meaning they applied to their experiences by looking at their motivations for doctoral studies, the challenges they encountered during their journeys, what facilitated their persistence and their perception of the value of their experiences. Experiences of nine midlife, Black female doctoral students were explored using several data collection methods, including two separate

semi-structured interviews designed to address the research questions, artifacts and critical incident reflections.

Findings gleaned from this study allowed for a better understanding of the doctoral experiences of older, Black, female doctoral students. Analysis of the data from the nine participants used in the study was guided by Colaizzi's phenomenology data analysis method. Six themes emerged from this analysis a) time is of the essence, b) I cannot do this alone, c) race matters, d) the woman in the mirror, e) is age just a number and f) it will all be worth it. A conceptual framework using Black feminist thought, intersectionality and midlife development was also used in order to analyze the phenomenon.

Consistent with previous research, participants in this study had a variety of motivations for pursuing advanced education at this stage in their lives, to include career advancement or change. Findings also support the notion of never being too old to learn or pursue long-held dreams. While some may think that midlife is a time to prepare for retirement, study findings support the research that contends that midlife is a time for renewal and exploration. The findings from this study point to the resilience and determination of midlife, Black, women in doctoral programs. These women experienced similar institutional barriers as other Black women, and they also had to address challenges and barriers that were age related. Similar to other studies, women in this study found that having support helped mitigate the challenges experienced during their doctoral studies. Unfortunately, findings support previous research that contends that there is a lack of mentors for Black females. Moreover, occupying educational spaces allowed these women to interrupt negative images and perceptions of Blacks in

general and older, Black women specifically. Their presence in this academic space served as a way to change the narrative pertaining to Black women's experiences to one orchestrated by Black women living these experiences. Additionally, women in this study experienced similar age-related challenges as noted in prior research. However, study participants also benefitted from the experience that comes with age. Sadly, consistent with previously stated research, participants, in some cases, put at risk their overall well-being in order to pursue doctoral studies.

Results from this study can assist institutions in helping older Black female students in doctoral programs. Moreover, results can help to inform programs and program advisors of the challenges and needs of this population. In addition, this study allowed participants to voice their experiences and to reflect on their journeys, which participants indicated was an unexpected benefit of participating in the study.

Tensions and Challenges

Although this study has shed some light on the doctoral experiences of these middle-age, Black, female doctoral students in the study, there were some challenges to the study that bear discussing. Three primary challenges were interruptions and distractions during interviews, sample characteristics impacting transferability and struggles with bracketing. Additionally, there were some surprises during member checking.

One issue that emerged during the data collection process was the multiple distractions that sometimes occurred during the interview process. Several participants requested to be interviewed in their homes. While I wanted the interview to be convenient for participants, the interruptions of the telephone and interruptions from

family members tended to break the continuity and flow of the interviews. While it was important for participants to be as relaxed as possible while discussing sometimes very personal issues, I wondered how the information gleaned from the interviews may have differed had the interviews been free of distractions.

Although maximum variation was used as a deliberate sampling strategy to increase the diversity of participant contexts and experiences, because this study was a qualitative study relying on the perspectives of nine participants, findings are obviously not generalizable to all midlife, Black, female doctoral students. It is hoped that the level of “thick description” provided will assist readers in making judgements about potential transferability of findings. Nonetheless, it seems of value to note some ways in which those who volunteered to participate for the study may differ from Black females who typically choose to pursue doctoral studies during midlife. Notably, only one attended an HBCU. Certainly, it would be unwise to assume that her experience is consistent with most similar students attending a comparable institution. Additionally, only one participant had never been married and had no children, which may have impacted her experience in a different way than those who were or had been married and who had children. Somewhat surprisingly, there was not much participant representation from public institutions. Most of the participants attended private institutions. Finally, a large proportion of the participants attended programs that used formats different from the traditional face-to-face environment, including online, hybrid and limited residency formats. The more limited face-to-face engagement likely in such programs, may have affected their experiences and interactions across racial boundaries and other social locations. Hence, despite efforts to include participants from a range of settings, when

making judgements about transferability, readers should consider the doctoral program contexts of such study participants relative to their own contexts.

I agree with Hammersley (2000) that it is not possible for the researcher to remain completely distanced from the research being conducted. However, I believe it was especially challenging for me to bracket my own experiences and potential biases, primarily, because I was researching an experience I was living during the time of the study. During the data collection phase, I was intentional in my efforts to limit the insertion of my experience into the interview process. Yet, during the data analysis phase of the study, I continually questioned my decisions. I often wondered whether I selected some statements as significant because they resonated with my own experience, and if I overlooked other statements that were not consistent with my personal journey. It was important that my voice be muted in order to clearly hear participants' voices. Thus, I was always conscious that my own doctoral journey did not unduly influence the study, which became a constant tension throughout the study.

Another concern related to trustworthiness and the use of member checking measures. This study utilized member checks to increase the credibility of the data. During member checking, it was surprising when a couple of participants requested changes in some details in their brief educational biographies when these were shared with them. Aside from any concerns about confidentiality, these changes may have been a response to concerns about image, and perhaps stemmed from a desire to be perceived in the best light.

Recommendations

As previously indicated, current research focused on Black women in higher education is limited and the amount of that research that is dedicated to examining midlife, Black female doctoral students is even more scarce. This study is significant in that it helped address the deficit in research focused on this group and adds to the knowledge of understanding for Black women in general. The women in this study shared several challenges they experienced and ways in which they coped with the myriad sacrifices of pursuing doctoral studies. Recommendations are framed in terms of those particular to institutions, those particular to students (which are largely derived from recommendations made by participants), and recommendations for future research.

Institutions

The majority of the participants did not believe they were well prepared for the dissertation phase of their doctoral journey. This stage in the journey was marked by panic and anxiety for some participants. Institutions can make the dissertation process more accessible by laying out early in the doctoral program what is required for a dissertation. For instance, programs can be more intentional with incrementally assigning course assignments that are related to skills or content that will be useful in the dissertation, therefore, helping to prepare students for the dissertation process. Most of the participants believed they were stumbling and fumbling their way through the process without much guidance. To the contrary, as one participant shared, the dissertation process was discussed every term during her program. Moreover, some of the course work was used to help prepare students for the dissertation phase. It was important for the students not to go into the process blind. Dissertation advisors can also assist students

with the dissertation phase by helping students understand the process and giving clear guidance. I contend that it would be beneficial to have a doctoral advisor whose sole job is to guide students through their doctoral studies, similar to the professional advisor in undergraduate studies.

Additionally, participants stressed the importance of having a mentor during the doctoral journey. However, the majority of participants who had a mentoring experience, secured their mentors from outside their institutions. Thus, institutions could consider implementing a faculty mentoring program or revising formal mentoring programs to meet the needs of a diverse student population. To ensure that faculty understand the processes valuable in mentoring and advising students, institutions could offer professional development opportunities for faculty.

The study also showed that participants needed flexibility in course scheduling not only in time offered but in platform. It would be helpful for institutions to consider offering more online courses and programs as well as courses offered on the weekend. Several of the participants selected their doctoral programs because of the flexibility inherent to their programs. In order to attract, retain and support older doctoral students, institution must consider adjusting to the needs of this older population.

Students

Before starting this journey, students should consider the costs—the financial costs, the emotional costs and the physical costs—realizing that the student will not be the only one paying these costs. Midlife, Black, female doctoral students must be prepared to pay dearly and often during their doctoral journeys. With this in mind, study participants were asked what advice they would give to a contemporary pursuing a

similar path. Therefore, recommendations presented in this section are based primarily on recommendations shared by study participants.

Because this journey is not easy and can sometimes be overwhelming, it is important that students know that this is something they really want. Also, for those who decide to pursue doctoral study, it is important to understand who you are as a Black woman, especially given the challenges that must be endured related to your gender and race. It is also important that students be prepared to be flexible because there will be some twists and turns along this doctoral road that are not foreseen.

It is imperative for students to understand that they are never too old to complete doctoral studies if this is what they are determined to do. There may be others who do not understand your journey, but as long as you persevere, even if slowing down is necessary, this goal can be accomplished, even when life happens. Embrace the journey as you will begin to learn more about yourself with each phase. Students must not allow others to discourage them on this journey.

A support system during doctoral study is a must. Students should find quality people on which to lean, those who can be an anchor of support when needed. The journey will be incredibly difficult, if not impossible to do, without the help of others. Although some institutions do not provide the needed support, students are encouraged to seek out the help, even if it is outside of their institutions. Early guidance, whether from an institutional mentor or one secured outside the institution, will make the doctoral journey less challenging.

Students should set a pace that is comfortable for them. This is not a race or competition; understand that each student's pace is unique. Students must be sure that

this endeavor is about them and for them, or they may be wasting their time. This can be an arduous journey, and if students are not invested in the experience, it can be a very challenging and a long haul. Finally, students who are vacillating on this decision can spend three or four years thinking about pursuing a doctorate or they can just get started. Maintain humility during the journey; this transcends age.

Future Research

As noted previously, research devoted to Black women is sparse with even less focused on older Black women in higher education. By highlighting the lived experiences of the nine midlife, Black, female doctoral students, this study added to the dearth of literature related to this topic. However, this study alone is not enough to supply the needed information and understanding of Black students in general and older Black female students in a doctoral program. Thus, I propose additional research in examining the lives of Blacks in higher education.

- The majority of the participants in this study attended predominantly white institutions. Future studies may examine the experiences of midlife, Black females pursuing doctoral degrees at historically Black colleges and universities.
- This study examined only midlife females in doctoral programs. Future studies could focus on midlife, Black males in doctoral programs.
- This study included mostly currently enrolled students. Additional research may examine only the experiences of those who have earned their doctorates.
- This study primarily explored the experiences of students who were successfully completing their programs. Future studies might examine the experiences of

Black doctoral students who did not complete their doctoral programs, those who dropped out before or after candidacy.

- In this study, the intersection of age, race and gender were examined, future studies could focus on the intersection of race and gender with other locations such as disability.

Epilogue

As my doctoral journey approaches sunset, I can reflect on the past three years as a midlife, Black, female doctoral student. I must acknowledge that I am happy that this experience is coming to a close. I questioned my decision to start this endeavor many times during the journey. I even sought an exit strategy during my first year. And I wonder what my life would have been these past three years had I been able to find that exit.

When I began this endeavor, I believed it was a good time to start. I had attempted to situate my finances so that I could endure the financial sacrifice. I thought I was mentally prepared to start the journey. Although, I had been working in higher education for many years, it had been over 17 years since I had been enrolled as a student. This experience as a student has been different from my previous experiences in many ways. However, it was eerily similar in the lack of institutional support, the lack of understanding of my journey from those closest to me and the isolation and loneliness that permeated the experience.

As I listened to the stories of my study participants, I could relate to many of the things they shared. Like my participants, I also wish I had started the journey toward the doctorate earlier in my life. I believe that this endeavor would not have been easy but

easier had I attempted it when I was younger. As the participants indicated, I also had to contend with age-related health and physical issues, which made the experience even more challenging. I found it frustrating to deal with these issues along with the stresses of doctoral studies. Because most of my cohort members were significantly younger, they were not able to relate to my struggles associated with being a midlife female.

I felt connected to my participants in a way that I was unable to connect with my program cohort members. We shared similar experiences even though we all attended different institutions. I found the experience affirming. Lingering doubts I may have had about what I was experiencing as a doctoral student were dispelled with each conversation I had with my participants. The ability to see my experience in relation to their experiences was encouraging. Oh, how I would have loved to have had this circle of sisters as a part of my program. What a difference it would have made.

Although conducting the study was affirming and encouraging to me as a midlife, Black female doctoral student, as I reviewed the journaling I did during the study, I noted several moments of frustration. Many of these moments concerned the logistics of time. As the participants indicated throughout the study, there was an underlying sense of pressure to complete the doctoral program quickly. Time was also an important and guiding force for me during my doctoral journey. I found it frustrating that I was not as in control of my timeline toward completion as I had expected. I had to relinquish some of this control to my participants and their needs. My journal also notated my struggle with eliciting information from some participants. The nature of doctoral study made some participants reluctant to share information that may have been seen as more provocative.

Despite my frustrations and my questioning of my ability as a researcher, I was able to glean good information from the participants' experiences. I am confident that if I found the experiences shared by my participants encouraging and enlightening, others who read about their journeys will not only be encouraged and enlightened but also be empowered and strengthened by the accomplishments of these nine, midlife, Black females.

Black feminist thought encourages Black women not to be silent and to disrupt the negative images by which they are often depicted. These nine authentic voices depict images of Black women that have been lived and created by Black women. I was blessed to have these women paint a portrait of Black women that represented not only vulnerability, but courage, perseverance and strength. Perhaps the legacy of struggle that Collins (2000) depicted as part of Black women's existence prepared these nine Black women as well as myself to successfully endure the arduous journey of doctoral studies. Midlife, Black women, we are awesome!

APPENDIX SECTION

- A. Demographic Survey
- B. Interview Guide
- C. Critical Incident Reflection Prompt

Appendix A

Demographic Survey

What is your current age?

What was your age when you started this doctoral degree?

Which of the following gender categories describes you?

Female

Male

Transgender

Self-identified _____

Which of the following racial/ethnic categories describes you? (Mark all that apply)

African American or Black

American Indian or Alaskan Native

Asian or Asian American

Latina/Hispanic

Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

White

Other _____

I was born in the United States?

What is your marital status?

Single

Married

Separated

Divorced

Widowed

Partnered

What is your current employment status?

Full time

Part time—number of hours _____

Doctoral Assistantship

Number of dependent children living with you _____ Ages _____

Number of dependent adults living with you or for whom you are responsible _____

Ages _____

Did you complete your primary and secondary education in the United States?

Name of your undergraduate institution(s) _____ Major(s)

Name of your master's institution(s) _____ Major(s) _____

Were you a first-generation college student?

What is the highest level of education attained by your parents or guardian?
_____ Mother _____ Father _____ Guardian

Are you a first-generation doctoral student?

What type of degree are you currently pursuing?

D.A

D.M

D.M.A

D.Sc.

Ed.D.

PhD

Other _____

What is your current department/program?

Does your program require completion of a dissertation?

What is the number of years between last degree and current degree?

What is your official enrollment status?

Full-time

Part-time

What is your current year of study?

1st

2nd

3rd

4th

5th

6th

7th

8th

9th

10th or above

What is your current status?

Doctoral Student

Doctoral Candidate

Doctoral Graduate

Did you relocate to pursue your current degree?

Please confirm your willingness to participate in a face-to-face interview by sharing your preferred contact information.

Email: _____

Phone: _____

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Initial Interview

What motivated the midlife and beyond Black female student to pursue doctoral study at this stage in their lives?

1. Describe your educational experiences prior to pursuing doctoral study.
2. Tell me a little about your life prior to your decision to return to school.
3. What were your motivation(s) for enrollment in college and your decision-making process not only to return to school, but in choosing your particular institution and program?
4. If you previously started a doctoral program what stands out in your mind in thinking about why you did not complete your degree at that time? What helped you decide that completing your doctoral studies would be a good use of your time and other resources?
5. How would you say your decision to pursue a doctorate has affected those with whom you have significant relationship?

What challenges and barriers do these women experience?

1. Please describe your experience as a midlife student?
 - How do you believe race and gender have influenced that experience?
2. Please talk about some of your challenges in completing college as an older Black female student.
 - Describe how you managed these challenges.
3. What sacrifices have you and/or your loved ones made during this journey?

What factors do they perceive as influencing their persistence?

1. Please talk about factors you see as favorably influencing your persistence as a doctoral student.
2. Would you tell me about a time when you questioned your decision to pursue doctoral study?
 - What was going on then?

3. Tell me about a time you perceived as a turning point.
4. Describe a time during your doctoral program when you felt the most encouraged or successful.
5. Talk about who or what has been your greatest source of encouragement. Why?

What do they perceive as the value of their experience?

1. Reflecting on your experience how would you describe the effects that pursuing this degree have had on your life and the lives of those closest to you?
2. What changes have you observed in yourself or received feedback about during the course of your doctoral program?
3. Describe how you anticipate this experience impacting your future hopes, dreams and plans.
4. How do you anticipate that earning this degree will affect your life and that of your loved ones?
5. How would you describe the next chapter in your life?

Wrap up questions

1. What advice would you share with a contemporary who is considering pursuing a similar path?
2. Before closing the interview, I invite you to share any additional details about your experience as a midlife, Black female doctoral student that we have not already discussed.

Follow Up Interview

1. How many siblings do you have and what are their educational levels?
2. Talk to me about how your specific program works or worked (i.e. how often you had to complete residency)
3. Describe your mentoring experience during your doctoral program.
4. Describe your experience with the dissertation process.
5. What has been the best thing about this experience of pursuing or earning your doctorate specifically as a midlife, Black female?
6. What has been the most challenging aspect of pursuing or earning your doctorate specifically as a midlife, Black female?
7. Tell me about the biggest surprise of this experience.
8. If you could change anything about the experience, what would it be?

Appendix C

Critical Incident Reflection

Please take some time to reflect on an experience that has been the most impactful to you during your doctoral study. As you describe the experience, please be as detailed as possible and include the following:

- a. When the experience occurred
- b. Setting of the experience
- c. People involved
- d. Details of the experience

Now that you have reflected and described in detail your experience, describe:

- 1. What feelings and emotions did you associate with the experience?
- 2. What meaning did you attach to the experience?
- 3. What made the experience impactful?

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