

DISSERTATION

DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS: THE NEGOTIATION OF THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF  
IDENTITIES AMONG ACADEMICALLY SUCCESSFUL BLACK WOMEN

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS: THE NEGOTIATION OF THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF IDENTITIES AMONG ACADEMICALLY SUCCESSFUL BLACK WOMEN

Due to educational and professional obstacles, as well as the psychological tolls associated with racism and sexism, Black women may feel pressured to present a self to the world that is viewed as acceptable to others. Through identity negotiation, a conscious process of shifting one's worldview and/or cultural behaviors (Jackson, 2004), Black women may adopt multiple identities that appease both the White and Black community. The need to investigate the collective identities among Black women using a non-White ideology, such as Black feminist model, is critically needed. The purpose of this investigation was to understand the effect of the negotiation of race, class, and gender identities on Black women's self-perception, specifically as it relates to their participation in the workforce, and personal and professional relationships. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and the sample consisted of ten academically successful Black women. To be eligible to participate in this study, co-researchers must have met the following criteria: 1) self-identify as a Black/African American woman, 2) recently obtained bachelor's degree in the past 5 years, 3) currently working in a predominantly White environment, and 4) living in a majority Black urban area. Data from the interviews were classified through identified themes, and interpretative phenomenological analysis. Themes constructed from the data include: a) the complexity of the intersectionalities of race, gender, and class identities, b) negotiation of identities in predominantly White social and work environments, c) negotiation of identities in a predominantly Black environments, d) triggers for the negotiations of race, class, and gender identities, and e) conflicted anxieties towards

negotiating identities. The results of this study may be utilized to develop intervention programs that promote positive self-worth, and the development of academic and personal success among Black women aspiring to enter the evolving workforce.

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## DEDICATION

To all Black women in the fight for justice

and

To my family and friends

Thank you for your love and guidance.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living. – Audre Lorde, 1984

It was December and I was coming to the end of my first semester in my doctoral program. At the end of class one day, a fellow graduate student overheard myself and a Black male student having a discussion about attending an event for Black/African American graduate students at our university. Shortly after he left, one of my peers asked what the event was about and I told to her that it was a meet and greet for Black graduate students. Then, another White female student seemed bothered and said to me, “why don’t we have a White graduate student meet and greet?” This is but one example of my daily experiences of microaggressions, feelings of isolation, and not relating to my peers to due cultural differences. In my classes, I felt like I had to be cautious about what I did and said because I felt as though I was a representative for the entire Black race, though this was not a task that I wanted to take on. At first, I remained silent during discussions where people made racial slurs and after a while, when I began to speak up, I was deemed “the mean Black girl.” In face of these experiences of discrimination, I searched for a support system and tried to find ways to navigate my way through a predominantly White institution, where I was the only phenotypically Black person in my department. In order to feel less powerless, ironically I became silent, and avoided mentioning Black cultural topics in conversations as I internally negotiated my racial, gender, and class identities. To this day, I still grapple with the idea of whether or not I should negotiate my identities in educational and professional settings within White dominant cultural contexts. It is

these experiences of discrimination and identity negotiation within academia that led me to research this particular topic.

### **Background Information**

Due to educational and professional obstacles, as well as the psychological tolls associated with racism and sexism, Black women may feel pressured to present a self to the world that is acceptable to others (Cocchiara, 2006). This pressure involves conforming to professional standards and dominant cultural values found in work organizations, while also managing expectations, values, and roles in relation to the Black community (Bell, 1990). The experiences of Black women in the workplace are different from their women of color counterparts, in part due to the unique history of Black people in America (Catalyst, 2004). Black women often report that their White counterparts question their credibility and authority. Black women also report that many negative stereotypes exist in the workplace about women of their same racial/ethnic makeup, and as a result they consistently encounter race/gender/class based stereotypes in the workplace (Catalyst, 2004). Previously, scholars aimed to negate the notion of a common female and common woman of color experiences, exemplifying how race, gender, and class differences play out in the workforce for women of color (e.g., Bell, 1990; Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008). Thus, it is important to explore the unique challenges facing Black women in the workforce, as there is an increase of women of color obtaining advanced degrees (Department of Education, 2013) and entering the workforce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Although the number of underrepresented individuals in the workplace is growing dramatically in the U.S., specifically with extraordinary increases in the number of women of color, there are still wage inequalities that exist within the population of women of color.

According to the U.S. Labor Department (2012), Black women are making the least significant gains in employment compared to other women of color. From 2007-2012, Black women had the highest percentage of unemployment with a rate of 12.8% in 2012, compared to Latinas (10.9%), Asian American (6.1%), and White women (7.0%) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Also, Black women still trail behind their White counterparts and Black male counterparts in employment status and income. In a recent national study, Black women perceive that there are more occupational and educational opportunities for them now than ever before; however, they are still concerned about discrimination related to both their race and gender (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2012). Most often, the voices and experiences of Black women are lumped together with those of Black males (Hill Collins, 2000), thus missing important components of gender. Therefore, their gender identity is overshadowed by their racial identity. Consistent with the purpose of the current study, scholarship in the area of gender and race may provide insights that could aid Black women professionals in creating various work environments where they feel supported, thereby increasing their success and well being.

Through centuries, in order to cope with racial and gender discrimination, Black women learned to change their language, behaviors, and appearance. Studies have reported that Black people regardless of gender struggle with identity negotiation which involve the dual tasks of forming a positive sense of self, while counteracting the negative portrayals of Blacks (e.g., media stereotypes). Identity shifting/negotiation (Jackson, 2010), a conscious and deliberate process of shifting one's worldview, language, and/or cultural behaviors, is a strategy that is learned at a young age to help in negotiating the task of forming a positive self-image despite the negative portrayal of Black people in mainstream media. Due to these negotiations, the need to investigate the collective identities among Black women using a non-White ideology, such as

Black feminist thought, is critically needed. Black feminist thought has been used to explore the marginalization of Black women and suggests that their collective identities are shaped by daily experiences (Collins, 2002). To explore the intersection of identities, the multiple self-referent model developed by Brown-Collins & Sussewell (1986) provides a paradigm for understanding the personal, social, and historical features of the intersection of racism and sexism that impacts the identity formation of the self among Black women. This model will be addressed more in depth later in the paper.

### **Statement of Purpose**

There is a significant problem in current literature on the psychology of “self,” in that it has been studied primarily as a Western European ideology. This framework does not take into account different cultural contexts in which identities are constructed, or the effect of these social contexts on views of the self (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Therefore, the basis for this current study is to provide a better understanding of how different oppressive identities intersect within a single individual, referred to as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), and to comprehend the phenomenon of identity negotiation among academically successful Black women who have recently graduated from college. Academically successful is being operationally defined as graduating with at least a bachelor’s degree. There is a substantial amount of research related to identity/self-concept and career aspirations among Black women who are already established in their careers (e.g., Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). However once in the workforce, few studies have explored how Black women’s identity/perceived self is negotiated and shaped by their experiences, including their experience of discrimination (e.g. unjust and prejudicial treatment) and microaggressions (e.g., subtle forms of racism). Focusing on this population of recent college graduates can add to the growing body of literature on

identity development and self-concept. This period of time among emerging adults (generally ages 18-25 post graduation) is characterized by exploring their life options and identity, which are important and challenging considerations for employers, higher education institutions, and emerging adults themselves (Arnett, 2000). Past research suggests that emerging adults view the time period after graduation as exciting and empowering, while others may become psychologically distressed as they leave college and begin to create and negotiate their identities within the world of work and social contexts and often, the search for a meaningful career (e.g., Kenny & Sirin, 2006; Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig, & Platt, 2010). It is possible that if recent graduates are in the phase of exploring their identity, they may be confronted with negotiating their identities more frequently than older adults whose identities may be more stable.

This study investigates the phenomenon of identity negotiation with enhanced understanding of Black women's self-perception, specifically as it relates to their participation in the workforce and personal and professional relationships. Phenomenological research is used specifically because of its unique ability examining intersectional identities. The results of this study will inform our understanding and may be utilized to develop intervention programs that promote positive self-worth, and the development of academic and personal success among Black women aspiring to enter the workforce.

### **Assumptions**

It is the author's belief that the participants openly shared their experiences relative to their career and identities and answered the interview questions honestly. Participants openly provided support information regarding their experiences as Black women in the labor force. The author is well positioned to do this research based off of her knowledge background of

identity negotiation, in addition to her direct experiences of identity negotiation in various contexts.

### **Definition of Terms**

1. Race refers to the social construction of groups based on a person's physical appearance, such as skin color, hair texture, and eye color, among other factors. Ethnicity describes the cultural factors of a group based on nationality, culture, ancestry, language, and beliefs.
2. African-American and Black (used interchangeably) refers to a person of a darker hue (due to the presence of melanin) born or living in the United States of America and having African ancestry.
3. Identity negotiation and identity shifting are terms that are used interchangeably. These terms refer to the alteration of one's behaviors, language, and appearance in order to accommodate others and to make others feel more comfortable (Jackson, 2004). The purpose of using these terms interchangeably is that the literature identifies this process as identity negotiation, while other scholars refer to it as identity shifting.
4. Discrimination refers to an exclusionary action taken based on one's preconceived judgments and feelings against an individual due to their membership to an underrepresented group (Eberhardt & Fiske, 1998).
5. Racism refers to the combination of racial prejudice (preconceived judgments, stereotypes, and feelings towards a group that are often based on limited information) and

power as evidenced by group privilege with the dominant group, which may lead to decreased access and opportunity (Eberhardt & Fiske, 1998).

6. Intersectionality is a critical theory to describe the ways in which oppressive institutions such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, and classism, are interconnected and cannot be examined separately from one another (Crenshaw, 1989).



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

“We forget that we need support because there’s this ideal that we try to fit all the time with being strong and all of that and I think one of the pieces of advice is to don’t forget that there are support systems that are available and don’t be afraid to reach out to them at any time, but especially at points of intensity.” - Angie

The purpose of this investigation is to explore Black women’s interpretations of their race, gender, and class identities, and the negotiation of these identities in the workplace, familial, and social environments. This chapter provides a review of the literature relevant to the study to explain why and how Black women negotiate their identities within various situations, such as the workplace, familial, and social settings. The review of literature first offers statistics of Black women in the workforce to understand the factors that help construct self-concept among academically successful Black women in diverse contexts (e.g., workplace, familial, and social). The following sections outline the theoretical framework for understanding the development of self-concept for Black women and discusses how Black women negotiate multiple identities.

### **Educational and Job Attainment among Black Women**

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2002, women of color made up 13.4% of the U.S. labor force and increased to 15% of the labor force in 2010 (Fullerton & Toosi, 2001 as cited in Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2012). Specifically, Black women are significantly represented in receiving advanced degrees counter to underrepresented females of color. According to the Department of Education (2013), over 50 percent of Black women ages 18-24 were enrolled in college, compared to all other groups, no matter the race or gender. Moreover, as stated by the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), in 2011 Black women’s enrollment in colleges hit a record high with nearly 1 in 10 Black females enrolling in a college and/or university, which is higher than other underrepresented groups. Though Black women have more education than their Black male

counterparts, they participate in the workforce at lower rates and their earnings are lower than the income of Black men (Cocchiara, Bell, & Berry, 2006).

Although there have been significant gains in education and employment among Black women, they still face many barriers that influence their professional and career development (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2012). Because of discrimination and economic disparities, progression in education, such as the obtainment of advanced degrees, is becoming a socialization message for Black women (Higginbotham, 2001; Terhune, 2008). Thus they learn to adapt to various academic and professional environments, as a result of attaining advanced degrees. Many Black women are raised to be aware of racial discrimination and stereotypes as potential barriers for them in the workforce (Cocchiara et al., 2006) and thus are more likely to speak out against prejudices when encountered with them (Bell, Meyerson, & Nkomo, 2001). There is a certain level of pressure placed on Black women to excel academically, because often Blacks are told that they have to work harder than their White counterparts in order to be successful (Cocchiara, 2006).

Accordingly, Black women perceive their careers as a vital part of their lives and their professional identity as a gratifying part of their core identity (Bell, 1990). Societal expectations that Black women would work have endured since slavery, Black women expect to work more outside of their home during their adult lives (Cocchiara et al., 2006, p. 274). Historically, Black women have been overrepresented in service, clerical, and sale jobs, and underrepresented as officials, managers, professionals, technicians, and laborers (Cocchiara et al., 2006). Although Black women are overly represented in service positions, among women of color, Black women are trailblazers in professional and management positions, making up 5.2% of all management, professional, and related occupations in the United States (BLS, 2006). Thus, Black women

may be the first of their gender and race to hold middle or upper level management positions (Bell, 1990), although historically Black women have been prevented from working in elite professions (Epstein, 1970). Black women then are forced to navigate through unknown environments to fulfill their career goals. Due to the double marginalization of experiencing racial and gender discrimination in the work environment, Black women are faced with the dual challenge of disputing stereotypical images of Black women and creating new professional roles (Bell, 1990).

### **Effect of Stereotypes on the Professional Lives of Black Women**

Prevailing stereotypes about Black women negatively influence their work lives (Cocchiara et al., 2006). Due to the history of Blacks in the U.S., racist and gendered stereotypes shape the unique experiences that Black women face in the workplace (Catalyst, 2004). Historical stereotypical images, such as the faithful Mammy, the loud-talking aggressive Sapphire, and the promiscuous Jezebel, in addition to emerging image of the constant overachieving Strong Black Woman, may affect Black women's professional goals, work relationships and interactions (Reynolds-Doss et al., 2008, p. 130). The perceived stereotypical images of Black women can influence people's perceptions of them, which can lead to insincere social and professional interactions, and workplace marginalization (e.g., Reynolds-Doss et al., 2008).

Because of the stereotypes and underrepresentation of Black women in managerial positions, it may be difficult for them to find mentors in their chosen fields and they often feel isolated from other people who could provide professional development opportunities (Bell, 1990). A study conducted by Catalyst (2004) supports Bell's (1990) findings suggesting that women of color experience barriers within the workplace, such as the lack of networking

opportunities and lack of visible ethnic role models and mentors. Moreover, a study conducted by Catalyst (2004) interviewed Black women who held entry level and mid-entry level positions and participants reported that their colleagues often questioned the credibility and authority of Black women. In addition to feeling undervalued, Black women tend to earn less income than their Black male, White male, and Caucasian female counterparts. Although Black women tend to earn less than their male and White female counterparts, Black women are more likely to be employed than White women of the same age and education level, because White women are able to opt out of the labor force if their husbands earn more income (Potamites, 2007). This dynamic of economic inequalities shapes Black women's experiences in the workplace and the types of careers that Black women establish.

### **Black Women in the Academy**

Another reason for the continued underrepresentation among Black women in the labor market is the unique pressures they face within the educational academy. For instance, women of color may feel pressure to change their research, service interests, and agendas to fit departmental norms because they experience lower expectations by colleagues, and due to the pressure to fit the perceived cultural standards of their academic environments (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). While there are increasing rates of Black female students in higher education, Black female faculty continue to be significantly underrepresented at predominantly White institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). This underrepresentation correlates with particular difficulties in career development. As an example, Alfred (2001) examined the career development of Black female faculty at a predominantly White institution. Participants described their professional success in a White institutionalized culture as requiring adaptations: creating positive images of self-definition and rejection of negative stereotypes

associated with Black women; finding a safe space; conforming to the academic culture and its roles and expectations; becoming visible within their discipline; and maintaining the ability to navigate through different cultures. While this study focused on Black female faculty, the results can be applied to the focus of the current dissertation on Black women who are recent college graduates working in a predominantly White environment. It is possible that recent-graduate Black women working in predominantly White environments may feel pressure to make similar adaptations as their academic counterparts, such as rejecting negative stereotypes and finding a safe space, in order to succeed on the job, while simultaneously exploring and navigating their identities.

### **Effect of Personal Relationships on Career Achievements**

With the changing career roles among Black women within the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is important to assess personal relationships when examining job/career obtainment among women. While there are several benefits (e.g., monetary, comfort, and support) with combining family and career, studies have shown that the relationship between marital status and career development is weakening as more women pursue careers regardless of marital status (Metz & Tharenou, 2001). Previous research suggests that there are racial and ethnic differences in women's career and relationship expectations. For example, a study conducted by Murrell (1991) examined career aspirations and marital expectations among a sample of White and Black college-aged women. The results found that Black women had a stronger work ethic, were expected to work continuously as adults, and learned they could not rely on marriage for a secure life, and these attitudes were more prevalent than their White female counterparts. In addition, Black women perceived fewer difficulties in combining career and family than White women. Moreover, in a qualitative study, Hoffnung (2004) examined career and family aspirations

among a sample of White college women and women of color (African Americans, Latinas, Asian Americans, and Native Americans) in their senior year of college. This study suggests that fewer women of color than White women predicted that when they entered the workforce they expected to get married, however all women expected to have children. According to Cocchiara and colleagues (2006), attributable to historical and cultural expectations, higher rates of workforce participation among Black women may be due to lower likelihood of being married compared to other women. Also, when Black women are married to Black men, the earnings of Black men tend to be lower compared to the earnings of White men, thus requiring Black women to work alongside their Black male partners. The significance of these studies adds to our understanding of the necessity of Black women to simultaneously maintain a career and family. While this may be a specific gender pressure to maintain both a career and family, it is unique to each individual due to the intersectionality of identities (e.g., race, class, and sexual orientation). Due to the expectations among Black women to maintain both a family and career, it adds to the value of being successful in both arenas; thus sustaining a family and career simultaneously adds to the pressure of Black women to negotiate their identities has significant implications for the current study.

### **Black Female Identity and Self-Concept**

Given the influence of familial and workplace contexts and the double marginalization of being Black and a woman, it is valuable to understand the unique challenges associated with identity development and self-perceptions related to workplace and familial identity negotiation. Past studies propose that there is a unique relationship between the self and identity. The self provides a sense of meaning regarding one's various social groups, while identity can be described as an inclusive concept that focuses on aspects of intrapersonal experience that reflects

social and cultural influences (Bluestein & Noumair, 1996). Furthermore, Cantor and Zirkel (1990) define self-concept as collective identities that make up one's total self; it provides meaning to various experiences (i.e. thoughts, feelings, and actions) and motivates actions by providing strategies for certain behaviors. Self-concepts are multifaceted in that they are derived from a collection of images, schemas, prototypes, goals, and tasks (Markus & Wurf, 1987). In addition, self-concepts originate from one's own personal standpoint and the standpoint of another person (Higgins, 1987). Combined, these standpoints can help an individual derive their own perceptions of self. More specifically, research on the self has been explored through examining the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and social class and by assessing personal and professional relationships (Constantine, 2002; Thoits & Virshup, 1997). Exploring self-concept among academically successful Black women is essential due to the increasing rates of Black women whom obtain advanced degrees and subsequently enter the workforce.

In the examination of identity/self, according to social identity theory (SIT), individuals try to distinguish themselves from other out-group members by constructing positive characteristics of members of their in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Previous research suggests that Blacks strive to reject previously negative in-group evaluations in order to develop a positive ethnic group identity (Tominson, 1970 as cited in Tajfel et al., 1979). One way that individuals can more strongly identify with their social groups is through self-categorization processes (Hogg & Reid, 2006). The aim of self-categorization is to maintain similarity with in-group members by behaving according to the perceived behavioral norms of their group (Hogg & Abrams, 2003; Verkooijen, de Vries, & Nielsen, 2007) while reconstructing representations of other in-group members that confirm prototypical ideas of the group. Individuals use accessible social categories, such as race, gender, and class (Mackie & Smith, 1998) in order to determine how

well categorization explains similarities and differences among other people (Hogg & Reid, 2006). As a result, examining how race, gender, and class identities intersect with one another is significant in understanding the collective and individual experiences of Black women in the United States.

Due to the long history of slavery, dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, young Black women have a unique racialized gender identity in that some are raised to have both feminine and masculine characteristics as a navigation skill through various life experiences. For instance, some Black women have been taught to have both traditionally male (e.g., financial provider, worker) and female (e.g. caretaker, supporter) gender roles (Binion, 1990), which may be due to the double biases of racism and sexism. This double marginalization is one factor that can lead to blurred gender lines. Other relevant research describes the stereotypes of Black women, which differ from those of White women and Black men. As an example, Black women are often portrayed as more masculine and assertive, and less “feminine” than White women. Black males are stereotyped as being violent and suspicious (Hunter & Davis, 1992) and in the workforce are seen as lazy (Gibbs & Hines, 1989). Alternatively, Black women are often stereotyped as nurturing, patient, the “mammy” figures, sexually promiscuous, and aggressive (Brown-Collins, 1993). Past studies suggest that while Black women are stereotyped as being lazy and dishonest, middle-class White women are seen to have reverse characteristics as being hard working, and thus this dichotomous analysis continues to privilege the dominant group and disadvantages the underrepresented group (e.g., Alfred, 2001; Cox, 1993). As a result, Black women are portrayed



as “un-prototypical” because their traits are not in accordance with the typical traits of White women and Black men.

To understand the experiences of Black women, it is essential to understand that the voices of Black women are often unheard and they are often invisible. Invisibility can be defined as the absence of oppressed groups or individuals and the lack of individuation between group members (e.g., Fryberg & Townsend, 2008; Sesko & Biernat, 2009). A study conducted by Sesko & Biernat (2009) examined the perceptions of Black women and their invisible experiences observed by White male and female, and Black male participants. Two studies examined memory for Black women’s faces and speech contributions to determine whether Black women’s voices go unheard and whether their faces go unnoticed. The results showed that White participants were least likely to recognize Black women in relation to Black men and White women, and Black women’s contributions to conversations were misattributed to others by the White participants. Thus, this study supports other evidence presented by Black feminist scholars who argue that Black women have been historically left out (e.g., within civil rights and feminist movements) and deemed invisible (e.g., Bell, 1992; Hill Collins, 2001, hooks, 1990). The experiences of invisibility among Black women can be applied to other contexts such as the workplace, and suggests that their feelings of isolation in the workplace can influence their professional interactions and career advancement, if they are overlooked for career opportunities.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

The primary theoretical framework utilized throughout this research is Black feminist thought. Black feminist thought has been used to explore intersectionality and the marginalization of Black women within the United States and the African Diaspora. Within this framework, multiple identities of race, gender, and class are all understood to be intersecting

components that make up a Black woman's identity (Hill Collins, 2000) and should not be examined separately. This framework posits that a Black woman's identity is shaped by her experiences, and that she simultaneously aspires to make sense of her race, class, and gender identities. I argue that the dominant European culture has historically shaped and continues to shape the identity of Black women, dating back to their treatment during slavery. Therefore, intertwined in Black women's identity is the harsh reality of bondage and sexual exploitation (Bell, 1990).

Hill Collins (1986) argues that there are three key themes at the foundation of Black feminist thought. The first theme is the importance of Black women's self-definition and self-valuation. Self-definition consists of challenging political thoughts and practices (such as media images) that have stereotyped Black women, and replacing these images with authentic images of Black women (Hill Collins, 1990). These stereotypic images often portray Black women as being sexual promiscuous, having masculine identities, as single mothers, and as mammy figures (e.g., Hill Collins, 1990). Thus, Black feminist thought proposes that with increased self definition, Black women are better able to validate their power and reclaim their womanhood. The second theme of Black feminist thought is the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppressions (Hill Collins, 1986). These identities are interlocking in the sense that if Black women minimize only one form of oppression, it may still leave them oppressed through their other identities. Thus it is important to examine how race, gender, and class intersect. Through this theme, Black feminism focuses on understanding the links across these systems of oppression. The third theme of Black feminist thought is the importance of Black women's culture. Understanding Black women's culture may provide an ideological framework for understanding the daily lives of Black women within institutions such as the family and church, (Hill Collins, 2002). These

three themes within Black feminist thought propose a framework for understanding both the shared and unique experiences of Black women in America. This theoretical framework assists me in exploring the various individual and collective identities among Black women and how they navigate life situations that shape their definitions of self.

One of the major components of Black feminist thought, which serves as a basis for the present study, is "self-definition." According to Hill Collins (1986), self-definition involves challenging the political knowledge-validation process that results in externally defined, stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood (p. S16). The persistence of Black female self-definitions contests the stereotypical images of Black women in mainstream media and stresses the power of dialogue about the process of defining one's self (Hill Collins, 1986). Research has found that school, family, and the Black community all contribute to building a positive definition of self among Black women (Alfred, 2000). Some of these positive self-definitions include messages suggesting that Black women are just as good as Whites, and that Black women should not see themselves as inferior (Alfred, 2000). In a study conducted by Alfred (2001) that explored perceptions of the self among Black females, a common theme among the participants is that their schoolteachers, professors, and parents/family members showed and/or gave them positive messages about being Black in a predominantly White society. When Black women are presented with positive messages about what it means to be Black in a majority White society, it allows them to see themselves in a more positive light, as opposed to how Black women are negatively treated and portrayed in the media. These positive

images assist in shaping the self-concept among young Black women by providing conceptions of Black womanhood for them to look up to.

Stemming from a Black feminist approach, "standpoint theory" (Hill Collins, 2000) informs the experiences of Black women. "Standpoint theory" aims to understand the world from the point of view of marginalized groups, in particular women of color. Hill Collins (2000) suggests that Black women are the most marginalized group in society due to the recognized experiences of oppression. For instance, the double marginalization due to race and gender exemplifies the unique characteristics of Black women and other women of color. Though the general categories of race and gender may be similar for all Black women each woman comes from a unique background with uniquely complex experiences. Factors such as professional background, religion, sexuality, sexual orientation, and age, each provide layers of individuality. This illustrates that there are multiple complex layers that are informing these individual experiences. Being informed by Black women about their experiences and how other people's experiences influence their perceived self-identity is necessary to make visible the truth about their experiences. Accordingly, using one's standpoint to engage in conversations about one's experience can ultimately empower the individual and by extension, a community (Hill Collins, 2004). Overall, the Black feminist thought used in this study necessitates that the voices of Black women are heard to comprehend the complexity of their identities and experiences in work, social, and familial environments.

### **Intersectionality**

The experiences of Black women can be described as an intersection of various collective identities. Black women have multiple identities related to their personal and professional lives; however for the purposes of this study, the three main identities that are discussed are race,

gender, and class identities. The critical theory of intersectionality is used to understand the intertwining oppressions of race, class, and gender (Crenshaw, 1993). Research indicates that the intersection of being Black and female are visible identities that impose limitations of other people's perceptions of Black women and perceptions of the self among Black women (Epstein, 1973). Initially, W.E. B. Dubois (1903) argued that Blacks experience double consciousness of their African identity and American identity that allows the navigation of survival between two cultures: White and Black. In other words, Blacks must retain their Black culture and identity while living in a dominant White society that pressures them to assimilate. This pressure to assimilate has an impact on Black women's understanding of their race, class, and gender identities, all of which they navigate in the process of assimilation or resistance. Unfortunately, the double consciousness of Black people living in a predominantly White society produces a difficult set of social roles and standards to follow which results in adaptations and negotiations by Black people to societal norms (King, 1988). Black feminists suggest that trio and systematic discriminations of racism, classism, and sexism remain prevalent within our society (e.g., King, 1988; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). The framework of double consciousness still exists today due to the inequalities in systems such as healthcare, education, economy, and political structures.

Furthermore, "double jeopardy" describes the frustration of both racism and sexism faced by Black women. Double jeopardy was first introduced in the early 1970's by Beale to characterize the dual discrimination of racism and sexism (Beale, 1970). Initially, Black women in the U.S. were supporters and followers of the civil rights movement and then soon realized that the oppression of sexism existed both within the broader society and within the Black community (Reid, 1984). It is evident through the work of Settles (2006) that Black women place equal importance on their race and gender identities, however the Black-woman identity

was rated more important than either of the single identities. Though Black women have other important identities (e.g., class, age, and sexual orientation), Settles (2006) argues that the distinctive experiences of Black women in the United States may lead them to be more conscious of their racial and gender identities, in relation to their other identities. This study illustrates that Black women prefer to include the unification of both identities when creating a sense of self. While these concepts have been used to explore the experiences of Black women, society and academic studies assume the relationship between these identities is independent (e.g., Freeman, 2007). However, Black feminist thought argues that race, gender, and class all coalesce within the identity of Black women.

Crenshaw (1993) argues that there are three distinct ways in which race, gender, and class intersect for women of color: structurally, representatively, and politically. Structurally, women of color experience discrimination for their race, class, and gender identities, among other identities, due to the disparities in access to employment, housing, healthcare, and wealth. Next, representatively Black women are often portrayed in media that plays on the negative stereotypes of the overly sexualized jezebel, the mammy figure who is the faithful servant, and the sapphire who is domineering (Hill Collins, 2004). Thomas and colleagues (2004) explored the influence of stereotypes of Black women (e.g., mammy, jezebel, sapphire, and superwoman) and their self-esteem. The results show that Black women who endorse these stereotypical roles have lower self-esteem, than those who don't. Black women who internalize mammy stereotypes may have an exaggerated need to serve and care for others, often setting aside their own needs. Women who internalize the sapphire stereotypes may fear being perceived as overly aggressive and have difficulty expressing their anger. However the results showed that there was no relationship between superwoman stereotypes and self-esteem, where Black women who internalize this

stereotype hold that Black women are strong, resourceful and can handle multiple tasks and roles, which has been conceptualized as a coping mechanism (Mitchell & Herring, 1998; Thomas et al., 2004). Lastly, Crenshaw (1993) suggests that Black women are positioned within two subordinate groups (race and gender) and both groups pursue conflicting political agendas without confronting the dimensions of racism and sexism. Because Black women experience sexism differently than White women and racism different than Black men, this adds to the importance of the current study to examine the dynamics of how their race, gender, class identities play out in their professional and personal relationships.

Additionally, Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) suggest that individuals may experience “intersectional invisibility” which refers to the notion that underrepresented groups are subject to both advantages and disadvantages due to the intersection of their identities. For example, an advantage Black women have is that because they are deemed “invisible” as compared to other people of color, they are less likely to be targets of discrimination, when in the context with other people of color. In a context with Black men, however, a disadvantage Black woman's experience is that as women, their experiences remain comparatively unseen and thus marginal. Inequality in various institutional structures force Black women professionals to develop strategies to manage these experiences of oppression (Alfred, 2000). When exploring the experiences of racism, sexism, and classism among Black women, it is important to understand how these identities intersect.

To explore the intersection of social identities/self-concepts, the multiple self-referent model developed by Brown-Collins & Sussewell (1986) provides an understanding of the personal, social, and historical features that influence the development of self-concept among Black women. This model focuses on the influence of racism, sexism, and classism on

establishing one's self-identity, particularly among Black women. Brown-Collins and Sussewell (1986) define Black women's self-concept as the development of multiple self-referents due to their unique experiences in the U.S. The model explains how Black women describe themselves as women, as African American/Black, and how Black women see themselves living in White America while managing to navigate both their Western individualistic perspective and African collectivistic perspective (Brown et al., 1986). All of these self-referents influence how Black women define themselves and then how they might develop and maintain their personal and professional relationships.

It is argued that Black feminist thought and literature on intersectionality complement and inform each other. Black feminist thought is a form of intersectionality, making adjustments of Black female identities that have been distorted and rendered invisible within various institutions such as academia and corporate America (Bell 1990; Department of Labor, 2013, Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). Overall, the intersection of race, class and gender affects the lived experience of women of color, particular by Black women, in many contexts.

### **Self-Discrepancy**

The bicultural experiences of being a Black woman living in a Western individualistic culture can lead to an identity conflict (e.g., Bell, 1990). Identity conflict, as described by Baumeister (1986), is a strong personal and emotional commitment to various incompatible aspects of one's life. The conflict occurs when there are incompatible beliefs about what others believe a person should or ought to be, and a person's own belief about one's self (Higgins, 1987). More specifically, identity conflict occurs when one betrays a component of one's identity in order to fit a specific norm (Bell, 1990). For instance, a conflict that may arise for Black women and other underrepresented ethnic groups is the retention of their cultural values



and behaviors while behaving in accordance with the dominant culture's workplace cultures (Bell, 1990). Consequently, when an individual holds multiple conflicting self-concepts, this is known as self-discrepancy theory. Self-discrepancy theory proposes that there are two cognitive dimensions for describing the various self-concepts: domains of the self and perceptions of the self (Higgins, 1987). The domains of the self consist of the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self. The actual self refers to the representations that individuals have of themselves based on the attributes that someone believes one actually possesses. Ideal self is the representation of attributes that someone would like one to ideally possess, which are self and culturally generated. Ought-self refers to the representation of the attributes that someone believes one should or ought to possess. If there are any identity/self-concept discrepancies among Black women, then this can lead to anxiety and confusion, further affecting mental health (e.g., Higgins, 1987). Due to the identity conflict that may occur among Black women, there is a need to explore the effects and struggles of balancing these contrasting identities.

### **Identity Development of Black Women**

The importance of identification with race, gender, and class identities among Black women has implications for their perceptions of self. Black feminist thought assumes that race, gender, and class are mutually dependent upon one another (Hill Collins, 1994). Black women's experiences are unique in nature and they are subject to multiple forms of oppression of racism, sexism, and classism, among other factors (Hill Collins, 1994). As a result, racism and sexism can lead to various forms of discrimination in the day-to-day lives of Black women, which may affect their identity development (Pyant & Yanico, 1991). The following sections discuss

theoretical models used to investigate the development of racial, gender, and class identities among Black women.

### **Black Racial Identity Development**

Due to the history of race-based oppression, race has played an important role in the lives of Blacks in the U.S. (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Often times, the search for personal identity begins in adolescence, and the identities developed during this time can affect one's behaviors, career plans, religious beliefs, and values (Tatum, 1997). Cross (1971) constructed one of the most well known racial identity development models that breaks down positive racial identity development into five stages. In the first pre-encounter stage, a person has a European American worldview and one's "Blackness" is undervalued. In the second stage of encounter, an important situation challenges the person's worldview and causes them to search for a new identity. During the third immersion-emersion stage, an individual is engrossed in Black experiences and culture. Additionally, one's assimilation to European culture is minimized and being Black is idealized. During the fourth stage of internalization, a person incorporates a positive sense of being Black within their self-concept. In this stage, a person has a strong sense of self and what it means to be Black. In the last stage of internalization-commitment, an individual becomes involved in efforts to bring about social change to solve racial inequality.

Another way in which racial identity has been explored is by the multidimensional model. Sellers and colleagues (1998) constructed the multidimensional model of racial identity, which proposes four dimensions of African American racial identity: salience, centrality, regard, and ideology. Racial salience is described as the degree to which one's race/ethnicity is a relevant aspect of one's self-concept depending on the situation. As an example, if a Black

person is the only Black person in the room, consequently their racial identity is salient. Next, racial centrality assumes stability across situations and refers to the extent to which a person defines their self in reference to their race, which is inconsistent with Settles (2006) findings on intersectionality of race and gender. For instance, Black women may describe themselves more in terms of both their race and gender. The third concept of racial regard is defined as the extent to which an individual ascribes positivity and/or negativity towards one's racial group. To illustrate, racial regard is the extent to which Black women associate with positive and/or negative traits of what it means to be a Black woman. Lastly, racial ideology refers to an individual's beliefs, opinions, and attitudes of how a member of a specific race should act, such as the belief that Blacks should "code switch" their language in order to fit a particular environment. Overall, this model suggests that racial identity for Black America is a complex but important component of their self-concept (Sellers et al., 1998).

### **Racialized Gender Identity Development**

In addition to examining racial identity, racialized gender identity plays an important role in how Black women define themselves. Past studies investigated the intersection of racial identity development and attitudes toward feminism among Black women. As a case in point, Martin and Hall's (1992) study suggests that Black women who identified as being in Cross' stage of immersion-emersion of racial identity development were absorbed in Black culture and held traditional views of women's roles. Additionally, Black women in the study who were engrossed in Black culture and who had a positive sense of being Black believed that the feminist movement was important. Furthermore, in a study on the relationship between Black women's attitudes and their support for the Black feminist movement, Hemmons (1980) found that sixty percent of those who had high levels of racial liberalism (e.g., belief in equal

opportunity and that “race” is socially constructed) had high levels of female liberalism (e.g., women’s ability to show and maintain their equality through their own actions). Hemmons (1980) concluded that Black women who embrace a racial social movement would also support the women’s liberation movement. These findings support the notion, in alignment with Black feminist thought, that race and gender are both interconnecting and important components of the self among Black women.

To assess gender identity development, the womanist identity model, proposed by Fujino and King (1994), examines factors that lead women of color to identify with a racial group and identify as feminist. However, it is important to note that theorists vary in terms of whether they perceive that Black women view race or gender as a primary identity (Ogbu, 2004; Sellers et al., 1998; Settles, 2006). Myaskovsky and Wittig (1997) found that Black women and other women of color were less likely to identify as feminists and instead, Black feminists first used the term womanist to describe their distinct interpretation of feminism (Walker, 1963). Fujino and King’s (1994) model proposes that some Black women may start to focus predominantly on their racial identity, which is the most salient identity, by exploring the meaning of their race/ethnicity and may develop a strong identification with their ethnic group (Fujino & King, 1994).

Consequently, when a racially identified woman becomes aware of her experiences as a woman, then she begins to focus on both her racial and feminine identities (Fujino et al., 1994).

Past empirical studies have examined how women identify with feminist ideologies in relation to their self-concept. Critical feminist theorists have found that Black women and other women of color have worked to create an racial awareness of the ways in which White privileged men/women may participate in politics of domination, as perpetrators as well and perceived as victims (hooks, 1990). Past studies suggest that women who identify as being feminist are more

independent (McClain, 1978), have higher self-esteem (Brattesani & Silverstone, 1978), and that feminist women tend to be more autonomous and self-accepting, as compared to women who identified as non-feminists (Cherniss, 1972). More specifically, Renzetti (1987) conducted a study to examine how college women identify with and embrace feminist thoughts. The results of the study suggest that respondents were not supportive of traditional gender roles, were aware of gender inequalities, and were supportive of the women's liberation movement. Additionally, Cowan and colleagues (1992) found several factors that predicted whether a woman would self-identify as feminist, including positive thoughts about feminist movements, disagreement with traditional gender roles, and belief in having a collective perspective. These studies conclude that being aware of gender inequalities that exist and having an independent mind frame in addition to a collective identity, characterizes identification with feminist thought.

### **Class Identity Development**

Another identity that is important to understand among Black women is identification with a particular social class. In professional and academic contexts, there is an elitism and corporate culture that favors masculinist, middle-class cultural norms (Wilson, 1978). If a Black woman obtains a college degree, the privilege of education can confound the already complicated intersections of race class and gender that Black women experience. Further, Black feminist ideology argues for the importance of examining the historical transformation of Black women's labor, which is tied to structural changes in the state and economy, and raced/gendered divisions of labor (Brewer, 1999).

Within psychology, social class is defined as a construct that represents an individual's and/or group's position within a power hierarchy due to objective measures, such as income, wealth, education level, and occupational prestige (Diemer & Ali, 2009). More specifically,

subjective social status (SSS) is a measurement by one's perception of his or her social class (e.g., lower, middle, or upper class), using qualitative and subjective approaches (Liu, Ali, Soleck, Hopps, & Pickett, 2004). It is suggested that social class intersects with other social categories such as race/ethnicity, and gender (Diemer et al., 2009). Past research argues that it is important to examine social class in relation to other social identities (e.g., race) because there are demographic disparities that exist in which Blacks and Latinos are less likely to be employed, hold less prestigious jobs, and earn less income than their White and Asian counterparts (Diemer et al, 2009; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). In general, little research has explored identification with a social class in relation to career achievements, particularly among Black women, which adds to the importance of the current study exploring the intersectionality of race, class, and gender identities among Black women in the workforce.

### **Influence of Racial and Gender Discrimination on Identity/Self-Concept**

Prior research proposes that when Black women are judged based on Whites' perceptions this judgment can have a negative influence of perceptions of their self (Jackson, 2001). Jackson (2001) argues that experiences with discrimination or being rejected due to one's identities can threaten one's sense of self-efficacy. In particular, racism involves the lack of power and the exclusion or discrimination against an individual due to their membership in an underrepresented racial group. Among Blacks, the experience of racism can greatly affect one's sense of self.

Academia and the workforce are two common sites of discrimination towards Black women. In both contexts, White patriarchs determine definitions of professionalism and academic/professional identity; thus creating cultures of professionalism and communication. Studies show that universities have had a key role in the production and shaping of various forms of professionalism (e.g., Reid, 2001). Thus, when Black women enter academia, they are often

confronted with racism, sexism, classism, marginalization, and feelings of isolation.

Marginalization can be described as any issue or situation that places unrepresented groups, such as Black women, outside of the realm of power within a given situation, such as their work or school environment (Patitu et al., 2003). Most often, Black women try to hide the effects of racism by pretending it does not affect them (Hassouneh-Phillips & Beckett, 2003), thus internalizing oppression. In a work environment, a study by Cunningham and colleagues (2012) concluded that Black women were more likely to report race/ethnic and gender discrimination while at their job compared to other women of color. Also, research on discrimination has explored stereotype vulnerability (Spencer & Steele, 1992), which is classified as the need to consistently reject group-based negative feedback. For instance, academic success may not seem attainable because people of color may be told that they are not good enough compared to Whites and this can cause a reduction in self-efficacy (e.g., one's confidence in skills and abilities), rather than self-esteem (e.g., evaluation of one's sense of worth). As a result, experiencing racism can influence the formation of identity among Blacks.

Past studies argue that underrepresented racial/ethnic groups exhibit conflicting self-evaluation in response to prejudice. In one study in particular, Ruggiero and Major (1998) examined whether the tendency to attribute negative performance feedback to discrimination was more or less prevalent among low status or high status group members. Among the Black and White participants, the results indicate that the underrepresented groups (women and Blacks) were least likely to attribute their poor performance to discrimination and rather blamed their failure on the type of test, where the high status group (men and Whites) were more likely to blame their failure on discrimination. Alternatively, it can be argued that when experiencing discrimination or being presented with stereotypes of one's group, one may experience stereotype threat.

During the process of stereotype threat, a person's social identity is salient and has significance in various situations, known as identity contingencies (Steele, 1997). Identity contingencies are environments in which a person is treated differently because of membership in a particular social identity. Stereotype threat assumes that when an aspect of one's social identity is described with a particular negative stereotype, that a person will underperform in a manner that is consistent with the stereotype, thus being at risk of confirming a negative stereotype (Steele, 1997). If there is awareness among Black women of stereotypes associated with their race and gender, then they may focus on not confirming those stereotypes in various professional and social contexts. One explanation that describes different responses to racial discrimination is determined by the importance and saliency of an identity.

### **Coping Strategies for Dealing with Discrimination**

Black women have always exhibited resilience and strength to overcome the many trials confronting them. Their ability to negotiate various roles and cope with discrimination suggests that they have developed significant coping mechanisms (Robinson, 1983). Despite these coping mechanisms, Black women still suffer adverse effects of discrimination. One theoretical framework that can explain these effects is stress theory, which posits that social structures such as discrimination may be related to sources of stress, which in turn can lead to stress outcomes (Pearlin, 1989). For instance, the extent to which systems of social stratification (i.e., class, race, ethnicity, gender and age) causes unequal distribution of resources and opportunities can be a source of a stressful life condition (Pearlin, 1989).

Out of these stressful life conditions, Black women have developed many strategies in order to cope with feelings of discrimination. Scholars have used the term "homespace" to identify the place where Black children develop a cultural identity and learn to negotiate that



identity within the larger society (Paul, 2003). The extent to which a Black child can cope with race relations and discrimination is determined by how they are brought up and what they are taught regarding their identity from their parental guardians. Specifically, parental guardians contribute to a child's "racial socialization," depending on the extent to which they discuss racism and race with the children (Ward, 2000). Research suggests that racial socialization has accounted for buffering the effects of racism and positive self-concept (Higginbotham, 2001). How Black children are taught about race relations and develop tools for dealing with racism and other forms of discrimination can have an influence on their future experiences of racism. Racial socialization teaches Black children what it means to be Black in America, what to expect due to their race, and how to guard against racist messages (e.g., Mutisya & Ross, 2005). Similarly, Black women have been socialized based on their gender and often choose paths that are considered to be non-traditional gender roles, such as gaining educational advancement, and being independent and head female figures in the household (Moses, 1982).

Due to the lack of same race-gender mentors in many professions, Black women are often forced to navigate through unknown territories in order to seek ways to accomplish their career goals (Bell, 1990). If an individual is the first one in her family to attend college or work in corporate America, and/or the only Black female at her job, it can be difficult to determine how to excel and move up within her career. Most often, Black women are faced with the challenges of changing stereotypical images of Black women developed by the dominant culture and with creating new professional roles for Black women (Bell, 1990). All workplaces challenge successful Black women to seek community/support outside of the workplace in order

to cope with the stress. Regardless of the prestige of a job, Black women face many of the same racist/gendered dynamics.

### **Community Support**

One of the most prominent coping strategies for Black women is finding or creating a supportive network among the Black community. The Black community has historically served as a buffer against oppression of the dominant group (Terhune, 2008). Studies have shown that family and close family relationships have been successful in safeguarding against feelings of psychological isolation or discrimination (e.g., Tatum, 1987). Most often, Black women may be the “token” or only Black and/or female in their prospective environments (e.g., class, work). When Black women are the “token,” Tatum (1987) suggests that there are two contradictory strategies for self-protection among Black women and men. One strategy consists of an increase in out-group comparison and a decrease in the ability to do in-group comparison because the dominant group is the only basis for comparison. The second strategy is a constant reminder of the advantaged position of the dominant group. As a result, the standard to judge and measure Black women’s behaviors and thoughts becomes consistent with the White dominant culture, making it difficult to decipher between what is racist and what is normal behavior of the dominant culture (e.g., Tatum, 1987). Thus, this may set the stage for racist behavior to fly under the radar. One example of this phenomenon can be described as racial microaggressions, a form of modern racism that consists of subtle forms of racism (verbal or non-verbal) that are directed toward people of color, at times automatically or unconsciously (Solorzano et al., 2002). Due to the subtleness of racial microaggressions, it can cause psychological harm and mental distress to the individual experiencing this form of racism. One way to reduce these self-protective strategies is having a small cohort of people of color, specifically women of color, in

order to provide support (Terhune, 2008). Thus, this study aims to focus on Black women who are residing in a Black urban area to see how having a Black community support can buffer against experiences of discrimination.

### **Religious and Spiritual Beliefs**

Another way in which many Black women cope with feelings of discrimination is through their faith in God. Patitu and Hinton (2003) conducted a qualitative study interviewing Black women faculty in higher education. Most of the women interviewed stated that having a strong faith in God and preserving their sense of purpose was one of their main coping mechanisms. In addition, it has been argued that religion and the Black church are a source of strength for the survival of Black women at predominantly White institutions (Tatum, 1987). One's religion/spirituality and a holy place (e.g., Black church) are situations to see and worship with other Black people in the face of trials and tribulations.

### **Identity Negotiation**

Due to negative experiences of discrimination, Black women develop coping mechanisms that allow them to negotiate their identities and avoid or skirt the emotional effects of racism and discrimination. These coping mechanisms are particularly important in many workplace, academic, and social environments where Black women are often confronted with expectations, values, and norms that are dissimilar to Black ethnic experiences (Bell, 1990; Swann, 2004). For instance, Black women may be told that their Black vernacular language is not appropriate for the work/academic environment and they may feel compelled to talk 'White.' At a young age, Black children have been socialized to shift their identities. Past research suggests that as children gather information and evidence about perceptions of the self, they begin to work to confirm these conceptions (Swann, 1987). Youth have been taught to "try on"

various identities to convey different self-conceptions, and as a result, they receive moderating feedback on their conceptions of the self (Oyserman, 1995).

Broadly, Black women may feel pressured to present a self to the world that is acceptable to others, though it may be completely at odds with their true self (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004). As a result, Black women often adopt dual identities, one of which appeases the White community, and the other, the Black community (McDowell, 2008). This process is known as identity negotiation, which refers to vast scope of mechanisms Black women learn to cope with and respond to racial and gender discrimination. Identity negotiation is defined as a conscious and deliberate process of shifting one's worldview and/or cultural behaviors (Jackson, 2010). This process involves changing not only how one speaks, but also one's morals, behaviors, and other factors that make up the essence of an individual. At times identity negotiation is a conscious act in that the person is fully aware of her reactions, but other times, negotiation is done unconsciously, in an automatic manner by changing one's thoughts and ways of thinking to fit in with a dominant social group (Jones et al., 2004).

It is apparent that people of all racial/ethnic groups across genders have to adapt their behaviors and ways of thinking in response to various environments. For instance, in certain work environments there is a dress code that is enforced and one may have to modify attire to adjust to the cultural norm on the job. However, previous studies argue that due to the double marginalization of racism and sexism and the unique experiences and historical events of Blacks in America, Black women may have to shift more often and more consistently than any other racial/gender group in America (Jones et al., 2004). Due to the long history of racist/gendered stereotyping of Black women and the unique intersectional challenges they face, such as being portrayed as an aggressive sapphire, it suggests that Black women are confronted daily with

oppressive stereotypes associated with their race and gender; thus they are forced to oppose and negotiate their identities in workplace and social settings.

Literature on identity negotiation suggests that identities are relational and can be negotiated in everyday interactions (Hecht et al., 1993; Jackson, 2010). More recently, Jackson (2004) suggests that Black women have multiple identities that are socially constructed and negotiated. According to Kibria (2000), because of features such as skin color, people of color are seen as inferior by the European majority culture and mistreated according to the racial hierarchy. Thus in the U.S., the dominant White group remains in power, even in the context of interpersonal interactions, because Black people's identities are negotiated and coordinated when cultural differences are present in response to both social and interpersonal racial hierarchies (Harris, 2007; Jackson, 2002).

Black women's identities are negotiated when cultural differences are present causing individuals to consciously shift their worldviews/cultural behaviors. A theory that has been used to explain identity negotiation is known as the cultural contracts paradigm (Jackson, 2002), which involves an individual choosing between three contract typologies: ready to sign contract (assimilation), quasi-completed contract (adaptation), and co-created contract (mutual valuation) (Jackson, 2004). Ready to sign contract is pre-negotiated involving the notion that in certain situations, people of color, specifically Black women, are forced to act or assimilate in accordance with the dominant White culture. In essence, the power hierarchy predates the social interaction and so there is no chance to maintain a non-dominant identity in the social interaction. Next, quasi-completed contract is a situation in which Black women may not be ready to completely assimilate to the European American culture. In return, Black women may "straddle the fence" between the Black and European American culture, in terms of commitment

to thinking and behaving in accordance with mainstream European American cultural values. Last, co-created cultural contract involves an understanding of Black culture in which Black women are not forced to change their cultural values, and Black women believe that their Black cultural values are accepted by the dominant culture (Jackson, 2010). With identity negotiation, it is important to understand how Black women view this phenomenon and if this phenomenon impacts how Black women view and feel about themselves.

Synonymous with identity negotiation, Black women may experience identity shifting, which suggests that Black women may feel obligated to compromise their true selves by altering their identity to fit certain expectations within a given environment (Jones et al., 2004). According to Jones and colleagues (2004), identity shifting suggests that Black women may feel obligated to compromise their true selves by altering their identity to fit certain expectations within a given environment (i.e., shifting their identity to fit the norms of their work environment). As a case in point, Black women may change the way they think or behave in a given context, such as appearing happy in order to internalize the pain of discrimination. The shifting of Black women's identity can occur both in situations with majority Black people or other people of color, and with majority White people. As an example, a study conducted by Jones et al. (2004) explored identity shifting among Black women, and the results showed that 58% of the respondents reported that at times they changed the way they acted to fit in or be accepted by White people, while 40% of the respondents downplayed their strengths around Black men. This example illustrates the complexities of the intersectionality of race and gender identities and the unique experiences relative to identity negotiation among Black women to fit in to the dominant culture, which in this case is Black men. Respondents noted that the most common reason for shifting around White colleagues was to make them feel more comfortable

around Blacks, whereas shifting around other Blacks mainly consisted of altering language to avoid “sounding White.”

After slavery, Black Americans began to develop a collective identity and community. Due to the collective experience of expression and exploitation, it caused Black people to develop a sense of Black community. Because of slavery, Black people were forced by the dominant culture to give up their African culture, religion, and languages (Ogbu, 2004). Despite this, Black Americans developed a new culture and dialect that was in opposition or at least different from the White cultural way of behaving and speaking (Green, 1981). As an example, music was used, in opposition of White domination, as a source of entertainment, enlightenment in face of sufferings, and as a basis of communication to transmit messages they did not want White people to comprehend (Ogbu, 2004). Also, Black vernacular dialect was created as a means of expressing differences. According to Ogbu (2004) “Black American English dialect differs from White American Standard English in phonology, morphology and syntax” (p. 9). These are but a few examples of the ways in which Black collective identity is different from that of the dominant White/European culture. These cultural dynamics help shape the lived experiences and daily interactions of Black women within predominantly Black communities (e.g., social and home environments) and their interactions with Whites in predominantly White communities (e.g., work and social environments).

Other research has historicized these modes of social interaction; for example, Ogbu (2004) argues that after Emancipation, Black people tried to emulate White people in behavior because of the belief that their chances of success in education and employment would be accepted by Whites if they abandoned Black culture and frames of reference. This process is referred to as cultural and linguistic assimilation. Another strategy used is accommodation

without assimilation (e.g., juggling different cultural worlds), where Black women and men learned to live in two worlds: Black and White. Within the Black community, they behaved and talked according to a Black frame of reference and in the White world, Black people learned to behave and talk like the dominant White culture (Ogbu, 2004). Within the Black community, there is pressure to prove to other Black people that one has not “sold-out,” which creates the need to identify first and foremost with their Black identity and not with the White community they may be exposed to in academic and workplace contexts (Jones et al., 2004). In some cases, Black people resisted or opposed adopting White culture and languages because they feared that it would mean giving up their Black culture; in other cases, they were “encapsulated” in Black culture and did not assimilate to White culture because they did not know how to (rather than being opposed to doing so) (Ogbu, 2004).

In general, previous literature supports the notion that identity negotiation among Black women is multidimensional and has significance because it occurs in the daily lives of Black women (e.g., Jackson, 2004; Jones et al., 2003). Because of the daily engagement in identity negotiation, it can become psychologically exhausting and stressful. In particular, having to negotiate multiple oppressed identities such as one’s race and gender, depending on which identity/s is salient in a given context, suggests the complexity of identity negotiation among Black women that needs to be examined further.

### **Identity Negotiation as Survival or as a Deficit**

While identity negotiation has been seen as a source of strength for Black women (Jackson, 2004), the primary researcher offers a more nuanced portrayal of processes of identity negotiation. Exploring the concept of identity negotiation, prior research indicates that there can be both advantages and disadvantages to identity negotiation/shifting. For long-term survival,



Black women have shifted their identities to broaden their opportunities for advancement socially and professionally, ultimately to change the image of Black women held by other people (Jones et al., 2004). As previously discussed, Black women have learned to change their language and the way they talk in order to obtain a job or to sound more “professional.” Therefore, shifting/negotiation of one’s identity can be seen as adaptive, allowing Black women to explore different aspects of their self-concept, and to interact with people from different backgrounds—in this sense, identity negotiation can be understood as a source of strength (Jones et al., 2004). A dissertation conducted by McDowell (2008) examined identity negotiation among Black women who were athletic directors. One participant indicated that she was usually very forthright and direct, but that she softened her approach to accommodate others. Overall, this participant believed that it was a matter of managing the dimensions of her identity differently depending on whom she was interacting with. Another participant in this same study described her experiences with identity negotiation as adjusting her language to fit in at a predominantly White workplace in order to protect herself from harsh discriminations (McDowell, 2008). Here, too, identity negotiation initially serves as a source of strength; allowing Black women to succeed in the workplace and helping them cope with the emotional trauma of discrimination.

Alternatively, identity negotiation can be seen as not being true to one’s self. Having to shift identities can produce an internal conflict by distorting perceptions of self. In McDowell’s (2008) dissertation on identity negotiation among Black women who are athletic directors, one participant indicated that people need to be true to themselves and she believed that changing identity and having different behavioral patterns is not truthful. This example demonstrates that among Black women, identity negotiation in the workplace may come in conflict with personal

values and the negotiation of identities has a negative connotation of not being true to one's self. Moreover, in Bell and Nkomo's (2001) study on identity negotiation, Black women expressed that they did not want to conceal or deny their racial identity. One instance that influences whether one will negotiate identities is self-certainty. According to Swann and Ely (1984), people who are highly certain of self are less likely to submit to pressures to act in a certain way.

Past research has focused on Black women who are older and already established in their careers, however few studies have examined the concept of identity negotiation among Black women who are recent college graduates and beginning jobs/careers. Younger Black women are negatively affected by the dynamics of identity negotiation and more research is needed to explore how Black women, who are recent college graduates and engage in identity negotiation, view this behavior/way of thinking and how it might have an affect on how they perceive their self-concept.

### **Summary and Purpose of the Current Study**

Although substantial research in communication studies has addressed structural racism faced by Black women, few studies have explored the psychological effects of this structural racism on Black women's identity negotiation among recent college graduates. Recent college graduates are at the developmental period of figuring out the essence of their self while seeking or starting jobs/careers. The current dissertation explores identity negotiation of academically successful Black women who are recent college graduates living in a majority Black city, to have a better understanding of the influence of culture on the influence of identity formation.

The purpose of the present study is to understand the lived experiences toward the development of identity negotiation of Black women who are recent college graduates, having obtained at least a bachelor's degree. This study is unique and allows Black women to be

included in an open dialogue of self, identities, and how they navigate various life experiences. Through the exploration of Black women's self and identities, identity negotiation, challenges faced, and skills obtained, a better understanding of the lived experiences of Black women has been gained which could affect our understanding of their interpersonal relationships by investigating workplace, familial, and social identities.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Please stay focused and know your worth. Also stay true to yourself, your values, and your family. Go for what you know and network. Also, keep an open mind and don't be your own enemy. –Levi

This chapter provides an overview of the study's research design, including a description of the research design and rationale, co-researchers,<sup>1</sup> data site, data collection, data analysis, credibility and reliability.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The use of phenomenological research allows the researcher to develop a deep connection with co-researchers in an open and unobtrusive manner, enabling a deeper understanding of their experiences (Creswell, 2007). Combining a narrative and phenomenological approach towards understanding self and identity among Black women allows Black women to have a voice and tell their own stories. Within this qualitative framework, Black feminist and phenomenological approaches are used to understand and analyze how Black women negotiate their identities in predominantly Black communities (e.g., social, school, and home environments) and White social communities and workspaces. Racism and discrimination often appear in covert forms like microaggression, racism is an uncomfortable, unhealthy experience nonetheless; for example, research indicates that the stress of racism negatively impacts cardiovascular health (Wyatt, Williams, Calvin, Henderson, et al., 2008). Thus, this study is important to understand the experiences and navigation skills among Black women in

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<sup>1</sup> Moving forward, the term co-researcher will be used in lieu of participants. The utilization of the term co-researcher acknowledges that because this study uses a phenomenological approach, it gives narrative agency of those who chose to participate in the study (Smith, 1994).

the workforce, which can assist organizations with the recruitment and retention of Black women in the workforce and educational institutions.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Approach**

In addition to the use of narratives to understand how Black women negotiate their identities, an interpretative phenomenology analysis was used. Transcendental phenomenology, as defined by Husserl (1999), is concerned with the world and how it presents itself to humans. In general, phenomenology focuses on the phenomena of one's thoughts as individuals engage with the world. The phenomenological method consists of gaining understanding of a phenomenon through three distinct processes: epoche, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation (Willig, 2008). Epoche represents suspension of assumptions and interpretations to allow individuals to become fully aware of what is experienced, while phenomenological reduction is how one becomes aware of what makes the experience by describing physical characteristics, such as texture and size, or by experiential features, such as thoughts and feelings. Through imaginative variation one is concerned with how this experience is made possible, and to identify structural conditions associated with the phenomenon (Willig, 2008).

Although transcendental phenomenology originated as a philosophical ideology, its methodological processes have been of interest to the social sciences, such as psychology (Willig, 2008). Initially, psychologists, such as Van Kaam (1959) used phenomenological methods to investigate phenomena such as feeling understood, aggression, happiness, and other human experiences. However there are some differences between transcendental phenomenology and phenomenological approaches as they are applied within the field of psychology. According to Spinelli (2003), phenomenological psychology is interested in the

variability of human experience, rather than with the identification of phenomena, as noted by Husserl. In phenomenon psychology, there is an attempt to bracket the phenomenon, which allows the researcher to engage in a critical exploration of one's own experiences and knowledge regarding the phenomenon, also known as reflexivity. Reflexivity allows researchers to become aware of their contribution to meaning through the research process and urges researchers to explore the ways in which personal involvement with the study influences and informs the research (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999; Willig, 2008). In general, phenomenology psychology is essential to the present study to understand the negotiation of identities among Black women.

More specifically, the interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) is used to explore the phenomenon of identity negotiation among Black women. The interpretative phenomenological approach uses systematic procedures to explore the meanings of everyday lived experiences. The systematic nature of this analytic method and inclusion of detailed descriptions of the analytic process exemplifies that this method has become an attractive method for psychologists (Willig, 2008). Though this approach aims to explore the participants' experience from their own perspective, it recognizes that researchers must explore their own view of the world, their understanding and experiences relative to the phenomenon being studied, as well as the essence of the interaction between researcher and participant (Willig, 2008). In psychology, this method addresses human experience and how situations are meaningfully lived (Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson, Anderson, & McSpadden, 2011). IPA explores how participants make sense of their personal and social world, allowing the researcher to play an active role in understanding the participants' experiences (Smith & Osborn,

2003). Thus, phenomenological analysis consists of a researcher's own interpretation of the participants' experience.

IPA aims to use a fairly homogeneous sample by finding a similar and closely operationally defined group for whom the research question is significant (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This process consists of collecting data with individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon by conducting interviews with 5 to 25 participants (Creswell, 1998). In the recent past, researchers have recommended that researchers consult at least five or six participants because IPA researchers want to find a considerably homogeneous sample (Smith & Osborn, 2003). More specifically, empirical phenomenology (EP) assumes that scientific explanation is grounded in meaning of the phenomenon. Another assumption is that the world is socially constructed and this approach acknowledges the central role of theory in research (Aspers, 2009), which necessitates the need to consult with multiple co-researchers to get a sense of the varying experiences of the socially constructed world. Thus, IPA will be used to get at the methodological problems with EP that potentially characterizes Black women in those problematic ways that I am working against, such as characterizing all Black women as a homogenous sample according to the stereotypes associated with Black women (e.g., mammy figure, sapphire, jezebel). Thus my study extends Smith & Osborn (2003)'s use of IPA by using a Black feminist theoretical approach to assess how academically successful Black women negotiate their self and identity in the workplace and social environments.

While it is possible to conduct IPA analysis using different sources, such as journals (Smith & Osborn 2003), most researchers suggest that the best way to collect data for an IPA study is by conducting semi-structured interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This interviewing technique allows the researcher and co-researchers to engage in a dialogue whereby initial

questions are modified depending on the participants' responses. At times, the investigator may provide the participant with a set of possible answers to choose from; and other times the respondent is allowed a free response, which is then categorized. Advantages of using semi-structured interviews for IPA are: control over what takes place in the interview and reliability through the use of the same format with each participant (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

However, there are some limitations associated with adopting an IPA methodology. While IPA has a theoretical commitment to the participant, IPA recognizes that people struggle to express what they are actually thinking or feeling about a particular phenomenon. As a result, the researcher has to interpret the person's mental and emotional state from what he or she says (Lyons and Coyle, 2007). Though these limitations may exist, the lack of literature in the area of Black female identity negotiation in the workplace and prior reviews discuss the importance of exploring the intersectionality of identities and the experiences of identity negotiation, using semi-structured interviews among Black women in the workforce. These limitations and considerations influenced the particular actions of the primary researcher.

### **Narratives and the Use of the Black Feminist Approach**

In the current study, the use of narratives was drawn upon to demonstrate a Black feminist epistemology. The use of narratives is based on the notion that people construct stories to make sense of their lives and these narratives have psychological meaning. These stories can be analyzed for themes and attributes that also speak to an individual's psychological, social, and cultural meanings (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Narrative technique emphasizes the stories that people tell and the language used to tell these stories (Merriam, 2009). Narratives have been used substantially within the field of psychology to understand thoughts and behaviors. In particular, social psychologists have used narratives to explore how the self is



constructed and presented in particular situations and contexts (McLean et al. 2007), and this method is used to explore how identities are negotiated. Similarly, cultural psychologists describe how individuals appropriate and negotiate narratives in the construction of self-based on cultural influences (e.g., Hammack, 2008).

Through a narrative approach, Pasupathi and Rice (2006) suggest that the stories that we tell about ourselves have the capability of representing different aspects of our self-concept by describing how we behave in different situations. More specifically, within the narrative approach, researchers explore situated, or personal, stories created within specific situations (McLean et al., 2007). Situated stories are a main component of the current analysis of academically successful Black women. Research argues that situated stories are linked to the development of the self in childhood and adolescence, and the change and stability of personality across adulthood (McLean et al., 2007). Discussing stories of various situations related to one's self-concept provides a method of empowerment and self-recognition. Previous research suggests that telling stories of positive and negative events can aid in developing a better understanding of self-concept (McLean et al., 2007). Using a narrative approach to analyze stories is essential for the current study in understanding how academically successful Black women view and define themselves in the workforce, familial, and social contexts.

Due to misinterpretations about Black women within the literature (Collins, 1994), a Black feminist approach provides a guiding theoretical framework for investigating Black women and more specifically, it is an integration and validation of the lived reality by listening to the experiences of Black women told by Black women. Because Black women are negatively portrayed in the media as aggressive and sexually promiscuous (e.g., Brown-Collins, 1993), these concepts give a false illusion of perceptions of Black women in the existing literature. As

an example, when studying Black women, researchers often characterize Black women as sexually experienced and/or seeking high-risk behaviors (Hill Collins, 2000). To address this misinterpretation, Few et al. (2003) suggest that the use of interviews or narrative documents are instrumental in informing researchers of the intersectionality of sexuality, race, and gender. Bell-Scott (1990), a Black feminist qualitative researcher, describes the importance of nontraditional information sources when conducting qualitative research, such as the use of personal journals, a form of narratives, to better understand the human experience. Sharing these data sources, along with other narrative sources, in a safe space can be empowering/useful for both Black women themselves and researchers.

### **Researcher's Background, Experiences, and Biases**

Because a researcher's background facilitates the understanding of the subject at hand and the understanding of another's experiences, the researcher should acknowledge biases and personal identities in relation to the analytic process (Gadamer, 1987). Accordingly, information about the researcher's background, experiences, and biases is discussed below. Critical self-reflexivity was used throughout the entire research process. This method measures researcher's subjectivity related to experiences with people and events, and extends how one's position and interests as a researcher effects all stages of the research process (Primeau, 2003).

I grew up in a very diverse southern city in Georgia. Having attended a historically Black college for women (HBC), I was empowered to be a Black woman. The college incorporated Black studies into its curriculum and it was a very supportive environment. I felt comfortable in the classroom and community, and never had to worry that what I said in class would be misinterpreted. It wasn't until I was accepted to graduate school that I begin to truly recognize and experience racial, gender, and class inequalities. I attended graduate school in a

predominantly White institution and town, which has about a 1.2% Black population (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2014). Also, I was the only phenotypically Black person in the psychology department, including graduate students faculty, and staff. Within this context, I had to deal with the racial prejudice on a weekly and some times daily basis. I had faculty and students tell me things such as “why don’t we have a White graduate student group,” or “Why don’t you hang out with your homeys.” I experienced people snickering or laughing at me because I looked different and or spoke differently than they did.

In order to psychologically and physically survive in this type of environment, I had to develop navigation skills that worked best for me. All that I have learned previously regarding what it meant to be a Black woman, was changed by my experience as a Ph.D. student. These experiences forced me to navigate through the institutional system as a modified self. I changed my language and articulated myself more clearly in order to avoid confirming the negative stereotypes of Black women, such that Black women are aggressive. For instance, I removed a lot of my culture to assimilate to the dominant White culture. It wasn’t until the latter part of my graduate studies that I began to feel comfortable incorporating my culture and cultural values in an environment where I was the one of few Black women. I still grapple with the idea of whether or not I should negotiate or shift my identity. It is these experiences of discrimination and identity negotiation within academia that led me to research this particular topic.

My approach to this particular study is through a Black feminist model. I became a Black feminist after I arrived in Colorado for graduate school. As I began to share some of my experiences of discrimination with my Black male/female colleagues, I realized that they were not having the same experiences that I was, and unfortunately some could not understand what I was going through. It was this and other similar incidents that led to me becoming a Black

feminist, and this resulted in me giving voice to the inequalities that exist and to focus on the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, particularly among Black women.

## **Procedures**

### **Sampling and Recruitment**

During October, November, and December of 2013, participants were recruited using purposeful sampling and snowball technique. Purposive sampling is useful when the investigator wants to discover and gain insight into a new phenomenon, and thus must select a particular sample based on the investigator's interest in a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The specific phenomenon of identity negotiation was examined in the current study.

Co-researchers were recruited through emails to professional and personal networks and contacts, posts on social media websites (e.g., Facebook), and through the snowball technique, in which an identified respondent who is eligible to participate in the study was asked to identify and recommend another eligible co-researcher. The utilization of the term co-researcher acknowledges that a phenomenological approach is grounded in the perspectives, experiences, and voices of those who chose to participate in the study (Smith, 1994). As shown in Appendix A, the emails/flyers provided information about co-researcher eligibility, study purpose and requirements, researcher's contact information, and a \$10 gift-card for participation in the study. Those who expressed interest in the study were emailed written information about the purpose, potential benefits, and risks to their participation in the study (e.g., discussing experiences of discrimination). This study may have posed emotional risks due to the uncomfortable nature with discussing experiences of racism and discrimination. The interviews were then scheduled.

Co-researchers were chosen based on certain criteria without any attempt to randomize the population. Randomization would not be appropriate for the present study because within

IPA, researchers aim to find a homogeneous sample to study a particular phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2003). To be eligible to participate in this study, co-researchers must have met the following criteria: 1) self-identify as a Black/African American woman, 2) Recently obtained bachelor's degree in the past 1- 5 years, 3) in the past year or currently working in a predominantly White environment, and 4) living in a majority Black urban area (e.g., Atlanta, GA). Academic success is operationalized as having at least completed a bachelor's degree within the past five years. All co-researchers were treated in accordance with APA guidelines and ethics and the Institutional Review Board through the university approved the study (see Table 1 for the co-researchers' information).

This research is about the experiences of academically successful Black women who reside in Black neighborhoods, but work in predominantly White environments because they could reflect upon their experiences being in both social and work environments to explore interpersonal interactions associated with identity negotiation with Blacks and Whites. This is not to suggest that only academically successful Black women experience identity negotiation in both/either predominantly Black and predominantly White environments. However, a Black woman who has not obtained a college degree may have different experiences from a college educated Black woman simply because of the class privilege that is associated with attending a university or college and having obtained a college degree. Having a college degree can afford an individual certain career opportunities then they may not receive otherwise. This research study focuses on Black women's' identity at a potentially trajectory altering time point in their life. As most individuals are aiming to understand their identity after graduating from college, it should be emphasized that self-reflection is critical during this time period (Primeau, 2003). Within the stated criteria, an effort was made to include a diverse group of Black women,

according to age, occupation, location, years out of school, and type of undergraduate education such as a predominantly White institution (PWI) or a historically Black college or university (HBCU) in order to gather a range of perspectives and experiences.

### **Co-Researchers**

The sample for this study consisted of 10 academically successful Black women who reside in or near predominantly Black urban areas from six different states in the United States. All of the co-researchers self-identified as Black/African American women, and had an average age of 25.2 years, ranging from 22 to 28 years of age. All participants had attained at least a bachelors degree in the past five years, worked in a predominantly White environment, and lived in a majority Black urban area. Co-researchers resided in cities where the percentage of Black population ranged from 29%-53%, which an average of 40%. Six out of ten of the co-researchers had a masters/doctoral degree. All co-researchers were assigned pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. Presented below in Table 1 is a summary of the demographic characteristics.

Table 1: Summary of Demographic Characteristics of Co-Researchers

Name	Age	Marital Status	Level of Education	Professional Status
Jasmine	28	Single	Bachelors	Student Affairs
Levi	27	Single	Masters	Case Management
Kara	26	Single	Masters	Student Affairs
Jessica	26	Married	Masters	Student Affairs
Angie	26	Single	Masters	Family Services
Nicole	26	Single	Masters	Program Associate

Claire	26	Single	Doctoral	Physical Therapist
Brittany	24	Single	Bachelors	Educator
Nicki	22	Single	Bachelors	Health Care Researcher
Harriett	23	Single	Bachelors	Educator

### **Data Collection Method**

Within an interpretive phenomenological approach, the most common method of collecting data is in-depth, audio-recorded semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2009). Prior to the data collection process, I conducted pilot interviews to determine if the questions were appropriate and effective in eliciting responses from the co-researchers. A pilot interview was conducted with one Black woman, who is a recent college graduate, lives in the Atlanta metro area, and works in predominantly White environment. The purpose of the pilot interview was to determine which questions needed restructuring or omission. A few questions were restructured to better enhance the interview questions. See Appendix A for original interview questions.

For the current study, data were collected using semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is guided by a set of questions that are administered to all co-researchers, however the flow of the interview may vary, depending on how the co-researcher responds to the questions. In this study, research questions were identified. Based off of the interviews with the co-researchers, some of the interview questions were altered or expanded as needed (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The interview questions used in this study focused on importance of identities, what it means to be a Black woman in the United States, and experiences negotiating race, class, and gender identities in predominantly White and Black spaces. Co-researchers were encouraged to

speaking about their perspectives on the following: how they describe their identities, their interpersonal and institutional relationships with Blacks and Whites, their self-concepts; and their identity negotiation in work and social environments. In addition, a script was provided containing broad interview questions that allowed the co-researchers to lead the interview. This process is known as informal interviews, which allow the interviewer to go where the data and respondent leads (Patton, 2009). The interview questions were informed by previous research (e.g., McDowell, 2008) (see Appendix C) and each of the questions was developed to gain insight into the various identities and experiences of identity negotiation/shifting among Black women. Each co-researcher was asked the questions and given the opportunity to discuss their career development and the level of importance of their racial, gender, and class identities. The interviewer was able to modify and adapt the sequence and wording of the questions to specific respondents in the context of the actual interview in order to establish a more naturalistic, conversational atmosphere.

Although semi-structured interviews were used, it is important to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this type of data collection. One strength of a semi-structured interview is that this method allows the research to establish a rapport with the respondent. Also, the interviewer has the freedom to probe questions that may arise by following the respondent's interests and concerns, which produces richer data (Smith & Osborn, 2003). For instance, the interviewer may decide that it is best to ask a question earlier or later than it appears on the schedule, which is appropriate (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). Alternatively, through the use of semi-structured interviews it may also allow for ambiguity in the respondent's position (Osborn & Smith, 2007). For instance, semi-structured interviews may allow for respondents to change their responses or



respond differently according to each interview question after verbally stating their answers, depending on the reaction of the interviewer. All of these considerations were taken into account when conducting this study.

All but one interview was conducted via video chat (e.g., Skype, Google chat, and FaceTime). Because the sample consisted of Black women who reside in a Black urban area (outside of Fort Collins, Colorado), video chat was an innovative technology that fits the population for the current study. Sullivan (2013) suggests that with the rise in technology over the last 50 years, using a communication program such as Skype to conduct interviews is useful in mirroring face to face interactions for those that are geographically dispersed. Each co-researcher was interviewed one time, and interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes. Some co-researchers were asked to participate in a follow up interview, in the event that there was a need for a co-researcher to clarify responses. At the completion of the interview, co-researchers were emailed a debriefing form about the purpose of the study and were asked to complete a brief demographic form, allowing co-researchers to create their own pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality (Appendix B). After each interview, I wrote memos and reflected on the conversation with each co-researcher.

Each interview (see Appendix C) was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analyses. To maintain anonymity all identifying information was removed from each transcript. In accordance with APA ethical guidelines, all identifying information, such as transcripts and demographic surveys, was kept in confidentiality. After each interview was transcribed, a copy of the transcription was sent to each co-researcher for her to review with the option of adding anything new or clarifying information in her particular transcript. This enabled an ongoing co-construction of the data with the co-researchers. This process is important to provide a second

step in constructing a complete and accurate transcript when conducting phenomenological research.

### **Data Analysis**

Throughout the data collection process, all efforts were made in order to ensure validity and reliability. Data were transcribed and coded in order to ensure in-depth analysis of the data. Interview data were analyzed using several steps. Specifically, Black feminist thought supports the use of a qualitative approach, which addresses exploration, discovery, and inductive reasoning. The use of interviews or narrative documents is instrumental in deepening psychological understanding of the intersectionality of sexuality, race, and gender (Few, Stephens, Rouse-Arnett, 2003). In the present study, the following stages of data analysis, derived from Langdrige (2007), were completed using Microsoft word.

**Step 1.** First, the researcher read all of the transcripts to get a general sense of the information that was being presented, and made note of associations and interpretations. Next, the researcher read and re-read one transcript, adding comments in the left hand margin regarding the meaning of the particular sections of the transcript relative to the language and similarities, differences, amplifications, and any contradictions in what the co-researcher described. Initial notes were grouped into emerging themes; this process continued through the entire transcript. The entire process was repeated several times to ensure that the researcher captured the meaning of the text.

**Step 2.** The notes were then transformed into emerging themes on the right hand side of the margin, providing broader levels of meaning for each section of the transcript texts.

**Stage 3.** The themes were listed separately in another Microsoft Word document. Next, the researcher identified common links between the themes and grouped similar themes.

Alternatively some themes were broken up further into more than one theme. After a list of ten themes was created, a color-coding scheme was used for each theme and the researcher went back to the transcript to check the emerging themes with specific quotes from the text. This step was repeated until the themes were distinct and completely representative of the text by checking the themes against the text with three transcripts.

**Stage 4.** The researcher then produced a set of themes in a coherent order, with a color-scheme that was placed in the header and footer of the Microsoft Word document. Themes were appropriately named and each theme was linked to the original text by changing the color of the text with the appropriate theme/color. On the right hand side, notes were made where the researcher made further interpretations of the highlighted theme text. This process helped to identify conceptual themes that were common and uncommon within the data (Creswell (2009).

**Step 5.** The researcher then triangulated the transcribed interview with a graduate student, who identifies as a Black woman, for final coding to make sure that the coding categories were reliable. The second coder first blindly coded two transcripts with the generated themes. Then, the researcher and the second coder talked through their coded transcripts in order to reconcile any differences in coding. Next, the second coder went over the primary researcher's eight coded transcripts and made notes and comments where discrepancies arose between the researcher and the second coder's coding choices. The second coder was well placed to evaluate the particular data collected because of her identification as a Black woman and personal experiences with identity negotiation.

**Step 6.** Once each transcript was analyzed using the interpretative process described above, a final table of 10 themes was constructed using Microsoft Excel. Deciding which themes to focus on was dependent upon not only the frequency of each theme, but also the richness, explicit

negotiations of intersectional identities, of particular passages that highlighted the themes. In addition, how the themes helped illuminate other aspects of identity negotiation was taken into account (Smith & Osborn, 2003). As an example, several themes were connected with one another, which exemplifies that identity negotiation is an interlocking process of multiple factors relative to the intersectionality of identities, stereotypes, and experiences of racism.

**Step 7.** Next in order to narrow down the final themes, I examined the relationships within and across the larger themes; based on these relationships, some themes were clustered together to have a final count of 6 themes and 16 sub-themes. The themes were narrowed down by the highest number of prevalent topics among the co-searchers and committee members assisted with narrowing down the number of themes. Consistent with Creswell (2009), it is suggested that narrowing down to five to seven themes is sufficient.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Throughout the study, procedures regarding data collection, data analysis, and findings, were taken in order to maintain ethical considerations of the confidentiality of the co-researchers in the study.

### **Transferability**

External validity and transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of the one study can be applied to other situations (Merriam, 2009). For instance with IPA, it requires that the sample is a closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant (Smith et al., 2007). Merriam (2009) suggests that one can assess generalizability in qualitative research in terms of reader and user generalizability. The extent to which a study's findings apply to other situations is dependent upon whether or not the reader decides the findings can apply to his or her particular situation. One of the ways in which data can be transferable is through the use

of rich thick description, a highly descriptive and detailed presentation of the context and the findings of the study, such as detailed descriptions of the settings and participants and a detailed description of the findings with sufficient support of the findings through quotes (Merriam, 2009). In the current study, detailed description of the participants and criterion selection of the participants, and a detailed description of the procedures were presented in order for transferability to be adequate.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

One way in which researchers can increase the credibility of their findings is through triangulation. Triangulation is the process where two or more measurements are used in order to establish convergence and credibility (Merriam, 2009). According to Denzin (1978), there are four types of triangulation: use of multiple methods (e.g., conducting interviews and observations), multiple sources of data (e.g., follow up interviews), multiple investigators (e.g., multiple investigators collecting and/or analyzing the data), or multiple theories to confirm the emerging themes (e.g., approaching the data with multiple theories in mind to see the associations in relation to the data). The type of triangulation used in the present study represents investigator triangulation. The dissertation committee members assisted with the evaluation of the credibility of the data. The investigator consistently communicated with committee members in order to keep them abreast of how the data were collected and analyzed. In addition, documentation was collected through the entire process, such as memo notes, critical incidents, and interview notes for external checking to be conducted for credibility. Additionally, a second coder re-evaluated all of the codings conducted by the main investigator for any differences and inconsistencies, and the investigator and second coder discussed the

discrepancies until resolved. This process is known as auditability such that another researcher can arrive at comparable conclusions based on the same data and context (Poland, 1995).

To ensure reliability, the primary researcher reviewed each transcript to ensure no obvious errors were made while transcribing the interviews. All of the transcripts were checked against the original audio-recording to minimize these errors. Research suggests that to ensure quality transcriptions, researchers should conduct “member checks” to contribute to the trustworthiness of the current study (Creswell, 2007); this study used member checking to maintain credibility and internal validity. This process allows the respondents to review their transcripts and/or allows the researcher to elicit feedback on emerging themes from some of the people who were interviewed (Merriam, 2009). This process is one of the most important ways to rule out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what the respondents said (Maxwell, 2005). Each co-researcher was provided with a copy of the interview transcript via email and was given the opportunity to provide any corrections, additional information, or feedback that may not have been otherwise included. Subsequently, I used the final transcript edited by the co-researchers in all of the analyses.

In summary, a phenomenological study was conducted to examine the following research questions: 1) How do academically successful Black women describe their race, gender, and class identities?, 2) What is the effect of race, class, and gender on interpersonal interactions among academically successful Black women?, and 3) How do Black women negotiate their identities in social, home, and work contexts that are predominantly Black and comparatively to those that are predominantly White? The data were analyzed using IPA to explore the phenomenon of identity negotiation among academically successful Black women and narratives

were used to allow the co-researchers to verbally express their daily lived experiences through story telling.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Step out of your comfort zone and do things that you would normally not do, because stepping out of your comfort zone will definitely exercise your brain. Meet new people, do different things and emerge yourself in different cultures. Also be open minded, well-versed and don't let anyone walk all over you, always stand up for what you believe in.-Harriett

Research studies on recent college graduate Black women employed in the workforce have yet to address perceptions of self and the phenomenon of identity negotiation (e.g., Jackson, 2005). The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to explore the negotiation of identities among academically successful Black women within work and social environments. Ten Black professional women in six different states in the U.S. were interviewed for this study. Each co-researcher completed at least a Bachelor's degree, lives in or near a predominantly Black environment, and previously worked/currently works in a mixed or predominantly White environment.

Background information on each co-researcher is provided in the following section. To ensure confidentiality, each co-researcher was assigned a pseudonym. Each profile provides a brief biography, as well as insight into the co-researcher's professional development. Drawing information from the co-researchers' home and professional lives sets the stage for a phenomenological analysis of their identity negotiation in these two contexts.

### **Co-Researcher Biographies**

This interpretative phenomenological study involved ten co-researchers who were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. This particular section highlights the co-researchers' introductions consisting of demographics, self-characteristics, and an overview of



their professional careers. In order to main confidentiality, each co-researcher either selected or was assigned a pseudonym.

### **Kara**

Kara is a 26-year-old Black woman who works in student affairs in higher education. She describes herself as fun loving, dependable, and someone who enjoys caring for others. She initially majored in psychology with the intent of becoming a marriage counselor, but then realized that this was not the right professional fit for her. Therefore, she changed her major to sociology and during her last year of undergraduate study, she started to work in athletics. It had never occurred to her that she could secure a job in athletics in higher education. So, after she fulfilled the requirements for a bachelor's degree, she attended graduate school in student affairs working with football players. She indicates, "I think that they {the athletes} have shown me that although I love working with the athletes, academics is not for me and I want to actually take a different route. It actually transformed my entire thinking that I want to do something with a little more of like community relations, kind of life skills piece which is along the lines of service."

### **Brittany**

Brittany is a 24-year-old Black woman who is currently an elementary school teacher and a graduate of a HBCU. Brittany describes herself as very out-going, strong-willed, and determined. She did not know that she was going to go into teaching as she had high hopes of attending law school, but her senior year in undergrad, she met someone who was involved in a teaching fellowship and "realized that I wanted to do something where I could give back."

**Jessica**

Jessica is a 26-year-old Black woman who attended a HBCU. She describes herself as a friendly person who has compassion for others. She started off in political science with the intentions of pursuing a degree in law. She realized that law school was not the best fit for her and then decided that she had an interest in service and the non-profit sector. She attended graduate school, while working at a non-profit organization. After obtaining her graduate degree, she realized that she enjoyed combining both non-profit sectors and higher education. “I still like politics and like still want to do political work in some aspect but I have a lot of interests and so I tried to switch gears a lot and now I am doing higher education.”

**Angie**

Angie is a 26-year-old Black woman who describes herself as being curious about the world, energetic, and a nurturer. Growing up she always imagined being a teacher. Once she attended college, through process of elimination, she realized that sociology was the best fit since she was interested in the well being of others. She “actually wanted to do something about the problem,” and chose to go into family services.

**Nicole**

Nicole is a 26-year-old Black woman who currently works in the non-profit sector. As described by Nicole, she always speaks the truth and treats people the way she wants to be treated: “I just try to always do unto others, just be the best person I can to other people.” In college, she received the opportunity to travel to Africa, which changed her perspective. She initially planned on going to school for interior design and after visiting Africa, she changed her major to sociology and African American studies. Thus, she began to “develop a really large

passion for international relations, especially as it pertains to crimes against humanity, humanitarian efforts, African and U.S. relations, those types of things.” After graduating with a bachelor’s degree, she went on to obtain an advanced degree in international policy. At the present time, she is not working in the field of international studies, but wishes to obtain a career within that arena. However, she is aware that this will be a very difficult task.

### **Levi**

Levi is a 27-year-old Black woman who works in pharmaceuticals. At the young age of five, she knew that she wanted to be a medical doctor. After graduating from undergrad at a HBCU, she attended graduate school for one year. Due to personal issues, she decided to enter the workforce, but then realized that was not the best option for her. As a result, she returned to graduate school, graduated with a master’s degree in the biological/chemical sciences, and is currently in the workforce. She is still focused on achieving her goals and plans to go to medical school in the next year or two. “I am going to make it happen for myself like I am going to have to create my own opportunities if it doesn’t present itself again.”

### **Claire**

Claire is a 26-year-old Black woman who works as a physical therapist. She describes herself as very energetic, passionate person, who is always eager to learn. “When I was in high school, I knew that I wanted to be a physical therapist, but I went back and forth mainly because of deciding I was deciding between wanting to go into healthcare or a physical therapist position.” Once she entered college, she assumed that the path was aligning to enter medical school. She had taken most of the prerequisites but during her last year she realized it was not

the best career path for her. Therefore, she decided to go to physical therapy school, and obtained her doctorate.

### **Nikki**

Nikki is a 22-year-old Black woman who works in the healthcare industry. As described by Nikki, she is forthcoming, positive, energetic, passionate, and forgiving. She has always been interested in health, especially health access for marginalized communities. Nikki points out that due to her sense of family obligation and financial commitments, she had to break from the millennial generation. “I wanted to find a job that I could have a direct effect but also so that I could learn and not really feel like a typical millennial and really feel like the boss and wanted to change the world and just really learn.” She currently is a health care researcher in the same location as her undergraduate institution.

### **Harriett**

Harriett is a 23-year-old Black woman who is currently an elementary school teacher. Harriet describes herself as being honest, curious, adventurous, and flexible. Initially, she was interested in attending medical school, however once she participated in a summer program with medical and dental students, she realized that dentistry was the best profession for her. After graduating with a bachelor’s degree in the hard sciences, she became an elementary educator, while preparing to apply to dentistry schools. “Being fresh out of college with a young experience and a new vision, but also being petite, you have to be assertive and a tad bit

aggressive because everybody has their own agenda and they are just ready to run over you in order to accomplish their own needs.”

### **Jasmine**

Jasmine is a 28-year-old Black woman who is in student affairs in higher education. She describes herself as being laid back, fun, empathetic, and conversational. When she graduated from college with a degree in history, she knew that she wanted to do something related to social justice. The job that she is currently in became available and one of her old directors encouraged her to apply. Her position allows her to offset tuition, and it does not have the high stress of a corporate job, so she began to take graduate courses. “I still had a free exchange of ideas and knowledge that was happening and also do good work and I wasn’t like doing administration work and I didn’t feel like doing it anymore.”

### **Constructed Themes**

The following section critically explores constructed themes from the interviews with these women. These themes describe and relate to the experiences associated with the long overdue recognition of identity negotiation of race, class, and gender among academically successful Black women. The themes constructed from the data include: a) the complexity of the intersectionality of race, gender, and class identities, b) negotiation of identities in predominantly White social and work communities, c) negotiation of identities in predominantly Black communities, d) triggers for the negotiation of race, class, and gender identities, and e) mixed feelings towards negotiating identities. Each of the emergent themes and sub-themes identified during the coding process is applied to the following research questions: 1) How do academically successful Black women describe their race, gender, and class identities?, 2) What is the effect of race, class, and gender on interpersonal interactions among academically successful Black

women?, and 3) How do Black women negotiate their identities in social, home, and work contexts that are predominantly Black and comparatively to those that are predominantly White?

The five constructed themes and 14 sub-themes focused on common narratives (e.g., themes had to appear four or more times) of each interview and/or important data that emerged. These benchmarks were relevant to better understand each co-researcher's experiences of negotiating their race, class, and gender identities in social, familial, and professional environments. After the themes were finalized, I re-reviewed each transcript using the themes and sub-themes to synthesize common data elements.

### **Theme: The Complexity of the Intersectionality of Race, Gender, and Class Identities**

The identity theme captured the true essence of the importance of race, class, and gender identities for each co-researcher. Intersectionality serves as an illumination of the ways multiple oppressed identities are experienced and how they influence one another. Black women have multiple identities related to their personal and professional lives; however for the purposes of this study, the three main identities that are discussed are race, gender, and class and because they were the most salient identities in the data. The critical theory of intersectionality is best suited to understand the interlocking oppressions of race, class, and gender (Crenshaw, 1993). All co-researchers identified as being Black/African American women who were currently in the workforce and each co-researcher conveyed the significance of all three identities in shaping their worldview and daily life experiences as a Black woman. The complexities of their identities were made perceptible when it became difficult for some co-researchers to describe their gender and class identities.

In this section, the primary researcher explored responses to the following interview questions: *1) Is your racial identity an important aspect of your identity, why or not? 2) If your*

*gender identity an important aspect of your identity, why or why not? 3) If your class identity an important aspect of your identity, why or why not? 4) Are you proud to be a Black Woman, if so, what makes you proud? and 5) What are some of the major difficulties that you face as a Black woman?* These questions were asked to get a sense of how Black women identify to set up for a discussion of how they negotiate those identities within predominantly White social and workspaces, and primarily Black familial and social environments. The complexity of race, class, and gender identities of each co-researcher consisted of multiple sub-themes, including: racial identity and historical implications, indistinguishable gender identity, the perplexity of class identity, and the pride and double marginalization of “being Black and female.”

#### **Sub-theme: Racial Identity and Historical Implications**

Each co-researcher identified as a Black/African American woman and believes that her race is an important aspect of her identity. Discussions around how their race shapes their worldview and daily experiences, and how it is related back to their history, family, and ancestry, were prevalent during the interviews. Two co-researchers emphasized how their upbringing was pivotal to their racial identity. Nicole stated, “Yes I love being Black, partially because of the way I was raised. My parents are very militant, they’ve always instilled in us like that you’re Black and it’s okay to be Black and don’t let nobody tell you that it’s not.” The connotation associated with her parents being militant is that their identities were forged in the organization of the Black Power movement, a historical time of racial tensions and race riots. Her parents tried to instill in her and her siblings the Black Power movement mantra that “Black is beautiful” and to be proud of their race. The nostalgia of the struggle resonated because they believed, once again, they were witnessing harsh and negative connotations associated with being Black.

Moreover, five of the co-researchers mentioned that no matter what, they will be judged first off of their skin color. Kara and Levi stated,

I was a very optimistic person and I am still optimistic, but I have become more of a realist. I understood that everyone is not fair and people won't be always as nice or treat you the way that you treat them and that's all strictly off of race and not even gender so that's probably the overarching picture that I have learned and how it plays a role in everyday life. -Kara

I think overall, people for the most part, even though we try to remove those labels or those practices where people judge you based off of your skin color, um I think no matter what happens in this world, we are always going to be judged off of our skin color. -Levi

Kara discussed how the influence of racial identity on her psyche, has evolved. She indicated that she was first optimistic about race relations but became more realistic, and is aware that she is not going to be treated fairly because of her skin color and how that impacts her daily life experiences. Additionally, Claire discussed a cultural practice associated with her race/ethnicity, "It's who I am and it's what I think about. I mean it's New Years and I did my black eyed peas and collard greens because that's who I am and I am excited to do it." Eating black-eyed peas and collard greens for New Year's has long been an African-American and Southern tradition, which signifies luck and prosperity. This example indicates that race emerges as a dominant identity within the intersections of race, class, and gender, which was consistent within four of the interviews.

Also, four co-researchers indicated that being Black was an important part of their identity both because of historical implications and their cultural upbringing, thus suggesting that race can be both limiting and empowering. Jessica, who grew up in a racially mixed neighborhood but attended predominantly White primary and secondary schools, discussed how she hopes to pay homage to her cultural history through her professional goals and aspirations.



I think race is an important part of my identity because it kind of shapes who I am, where I come from, and my history. It helps put things into perspective for my goals and aspirations...So it's kind of paying homage to that history and really cherishing it.

Similarly, Jasmine, who grew up in a predominantly Black neighborhood, but attended an ethnically mixed primary and secondary school, emphasized the struggle and accomplishments faced by her ancestors and questioned whether she was doing enough:

It's an important part of my identity because I have to be aware and cautious of what I am doing and what that means for a whole group of other people. Is what I am doing disrespectful to a generation or a slew of generations before me? All of my ancestors, who went through incredible amounts of sorrow and pain, but were strong and able to ride through that, enough to the fact that we are still here. So I always think am I doing enough? Then, also what am I doing that is representing or beneficial to my people, is it countering or hindering them? Does it add to the negative stereotypes?

Also, an unexpected characteristic stated by one of the co-researchers came up during the interview. Though not a prevalent topic among all the co-researchers, it was an interesting perspective on racial identity, identified by one of the co-researchers. Levi, who grew up in a predominantly Black neighborhood, discussed how although Black race is an important part of her identity, she tries not to focus on it or let it dictate her roles and opportunities. Levi said in the very beginning of answering the question, regarding if race is an important part of her identity, that,

I would say that race is an important aspect of my identity, but it is not something that I focus on all of the time...When I go to work or apply for a job, I take other important things into consideration. I am not thinking, "Oh man I am Black or I am going to get it because of affirmative action, or I am not going to get it because I'm not White." I don't think about that. I focus on my ability because I think sometimes when you are always pulling the Black card, I think that's how sometimes we put ourselves at a disservice.

Levi noted that she tries to advance people the benefit of the doubt at the time of first encounters and tries not to focus on negative particulars. Her remarks are indicative of

sophisticated coping mechanism and identity negotiation, a constantly evolving process in which residues of racism and discrimination continues to resonate subliminally. This coping mechanism of not focusing on race can be seen as an adaptation to an environmental stress (i.e., racism) that is based on conscious or unconscious choice to enhance one's control over behavior to give one's self psychological comfort. Moreover, as previously noted, she has friends who always pull the "Black card" and she does not want to be perceived in such manners. Levi's maturity is further challenged in the workplace and other environments as she come head to head with those in her cohort that at times feel justified to pull the "Black card." Then the predicament perhaps is why this "pull the Black card" strategy is rationalized due to structural racial inequalities. The initial assertion is that race may be perceived as both limiting and empowering to the co-researchers and signifies challenges of negotiating Black female identity.

#### **Sub-theme: Indistinguishable Gender Identity**

Similar to the discussions around racial identity, remembering history and paying homage to ancestors were reoccurring dialogues associated with gender identity. Seven co-researchers stated that gender is an important part of their identity because of past women's achievements and how this continues to resonate among women. Jessica described how she wants to stay committed to her gender identity and to her history, recognizing the obstacles that all women of different racial/ethnic backgrounds had to overcome; thus separating her gender identity from her racial identity.

I want to make sure that I stay true to myself and stay true to my history, and pay homage to those strong women who have come before me. Also, because women have gone through a lot to overcome certain obstacles as well, so I want to make sure that I am proudly representing people that have gone through a lot to get where they are, that's why I would say it would be a strong part of my identity.

Interestingly, Jessica discusses how she navigates personal and/or political commitment, acknowledging that she cannot remain grounded in relation to her gender identity in certain contexts. In given contexts, there is a struggle to be politically committed to the Black movement and politically committed to the women's movements, however, Jessica does not perceive the two political movements coexisting, such as with the Black feminist movement. Another discussion topic that came up was gender stereotypes. Angie focused on discussing the difficulties faced by all women of different ethnic backgrounds and defined herself as "gender progressive" in that she does not believe in gender stereotypical roles.

I just feel like all of these things that you are supposed to do as a gender, you are feeling those stereotypical roles and it's still not good enough . . . So in my mind I'm like F gender roles like that's really what gender roles do for you? I'm very gender progressive and I hate to see my grandmother do that . . . like still today serving a plate on his lap. So gender is really important to me because of the cycle of like violence and how that plays out.

Observing her grandmother's engagement with stereotypical patriarchal roles embodied in her grandfather clearly influenced Angie's gender identity. A societal injustice, these complications are further exasperated in some communities of color with exaggerated physical abuse and violence. The violence that women experience is shaped by the intersection of other identities, such as their race and class.

Unexpectedly, while most of the co-researchers did see their racial identity as an important aspect of their identity, three did not perceive their gender identity as an important aspect of their identity. They state that gender was not an important part of their identity because they resist gender roles by not letting their gender inhibit certain roles and opportunities. In particular, Nicole stated that, "I would say yes and no because I don't feel as though because I am a woman that I can or can't do certain things or because I'm a woman, I cannot do things that a man does." Nicole said that her gender was not an important part of her identity because she

did not let it hinder her ability to do certain things because she was a woman. Similarly, Claire and Levi indicated their gender identities were not important currently because they do not let their gender identities dictate their opportunities. As Levi put it, “I don't really think gender is important and I would have to say that because no matter what, the fact that I am a female, I won't let that stop me from doing certain things.” Similarly, Claire stated “ I think it's important, however . . . I try not to again, let it dictate how I handle my job performance . . . I just learn better ways to do things that a guy would be able to do.” This is a glaring example of how Black women develop a coping mechanism to deal with gendered dynamics in the workplace, specifically, choosing not to focus on their marginalized identities, which can become an inhibition as Claire struggles to navigate opportunities that are not equally dispersed with different ethnicities and genders. This learned survival skill is to not accept racial/gender identity as an important part of their identity and to not focus on the negative aspects of their gender identity.

### **Sub-theme: The Perplexity of Class Identity**

The majority of the co-researchers identified as belonging to the middle class, except for Brittany and Kara who identified as part of the working class. The co-researcher's class identity was not significant to some of the co-researchers, however, until they moved up in class status. The relationship between class and identity was a confusing topic for most of the co-researchers. Six co-researchers never answered the question fully and did not explicitly state that class was an important part of their identity. This omission points to subjective, often acculturated misconception concerning class. Some said that they do not really think about their social class; others, like Harriet, noted that it is easier to disguise her class identity than her racial and gender identities; and Angie stated that she has enough money to support herself and that is sufficient

for her indicating that she does not have a clear class identification. Likewise, Jessica and Brittany stated that they do not really have to think about their social class. Jessica said,

Oh that's interesting because I would say that by default. I am sure it is a part of my identity I think because I probably experience certain things because of my class . . . By default it is a part of my identity but I don't think necessarily that it defines my identity, but it is a part of my identity.

In essence, Jessica does not necessarily think about her class, although she is aware that it is a part of her identity, possibly suggesting that this is one of her privileged identifiers. On the other hand, both Harriet and Kara stated that in relation to their race and gender identities, they could easily disguise or shift their class identity. For instance, Harriet described this sense of agency about her class, "Unlike race and gender, social class is easier to disguise and/or manipulate. For me, social class is a way of improving my quality of life." Harriet suggests that if she wants to, she can change her social class in order to improve her quality of life, taking matters into her own hands.

Out of all of the co-researchers, only two indicated that class is an important part of their identity and illustrated class awareness. Jasmine discussed how her class identity was an important part of her identity because she grew up poor:

It is important because of my socio-economic status and how I grew up is important because I think my situation is unique because I had no money and grew up very poor but in the middle class.

For Jasmine, she was made aware occasionally, in relation to her family and peers, that she did not have a lot of money, and was, at times, financially strapped, nevertheless her essential needs were never neglected. The experiences she described helped to shape her emerging identity and her location within an ever-evolving economic dynamic. Along similar lines, while Nikki did grow up economically comfortable, she stated that class was an important aspect of her identity because her parents raised Nikki to be conscious of class disparities and to remain cognizant of

the underprivileged plight. Consistent with earlier findings, home life shapes identity within given contexts, such as the workplace.

Alternatively, two co-researchers described class as unimportant to their identities. For example, in relation to both her race and gender identities, Levi does not classify her class as an important part of her social identity and is dismissive of structural inequalities that may influence her career advancements and achievements within certain contexts.

. . . Because people have proven themselves time and time again and I know I feel that I have proven myself time and time again, considering my background . . . I am not going to discredit myself with that. I recognize where I am from and I own it and I am proud of it.

Levi recognizes that she had a difficult time financially when she was growing up, however, she does acknowledge that she came from a middle class household and made it through that situation. As a navigation skill, she is aware of her class, but does not let it hinder experiences, due to the already existent negative perceptions associated with being a Black woman.

Comparably, Nicole stated that class is not an important part of her identity because she interacts with people from different social classes and is not discriminated against because of her class: “I am not one of those types of people who look down on others because of their wealth or lack thereof or what you have.” This quote implies that Nicole sees class awareness as signifying some sort of judgment and therefore, she chooses not to “see” class to be less judgmental. In a similar light, Brittany stated that, “I guess I would consider myself a part of the working class, but I don’t think I distinguish myself from somebody who is lower than me in the lower class.”

This ambivalence may be a coping mechanism to negotiate her recognition of the persistent inequalities plaguing communities of color. Intriguingly, these findings imply that for some of the co-researchers, acknowledging class is associated with being judgmental, similar to the mechanisms of how some people argue that it is best to say that we live in a “colorblind” society.

Both of these mechanisms are detrimental and harmful to an individual with oppressed identities by ignoring distinctive experiences that individuals have based on their racial/class identities.

**Sub-theme: Intersectionality of Race and Gender Identities: “Being a Black Woman”**

In discussions of their gender identity, a majority (i.e., six) of the co-researchers discussed the importance of their gender identity in relation to their racial identity, which is different from their stand-alone racial and stand-alone gender identities. One co-researcher in particular, Jasmine stated “. . . they are one in the same, gender and race for me . . . I feel them consistently and inconsistently in different ways and in different contexts, but I always feel them.” This suggests that she does not see her race and gender identities separately, and always feels them both simultaneously, even though she recognizes that they are two different identities. Another co-researcher, Brittany, discussed this intersectionality of race and gender: “I think as a woman of color that kind of adds to who I am. I do think they both play the same role because if I was an African American man, it would still be a little different for me.” Similarly, Jessica distinctly discussed the multiple layers of oppression.

So you are not only overcoming the female piece and wanting to get the respect that you deserve and the respect that you should be getting even though you are a woman, and then the Black piece, you have to overcome the piece where it’s like you want to be respected and you know you have to overcome some people’s thoughts of you that are not as good or you’re not as talented.

Further connecting their experiences of race and gender, the co-researchers described their unique experiences of being Black women, especially in the face of layered discrimination. Kara stated, “So that question to me is why when I have a daughter do I have to explain to her that you can’t act this certain type of way or you have to do this or you have to be aware of this.” Further complicating the intersection of race and gender, Jasmine discussed the mysteriousness

of her skin color “. . . but you know, it’s something mysterious behind a Black woman who is dark skin, who walks with pride and is like accept that I am this or whatever.” She mentions that there is this fascination with the dark Black female body, particularly when a Black woman carries herself with confidence, despite the dominant societal preference for light skin over dark skin. Intriguingly, Jasmine also discussed how dark skinned Black men get more affection as compared to dark skinned Black women:

I don't understand really why . . . Black men I think are sexually objectified because they are Black men and they are supposed to be this sexual people and they love them, and so dark Black men get a lot of love . . . but I don't think it is genuine . . . like almost this star status and Black women don't get that and when we are sexualized and we are, dark skinned women, often like in a way of hiding it.

Jasmine discusses how most Black men receive better reception, regardless of the color of their skin, while Black women who are darker complexion, are regarded with disdain. Here, Jasmine only focuses on Black men compared to other men. This illustrates the intersection of race and gender, and personal dynamics of Black male and female relations.

Several co-researchers elaborated on the connection between race and masculinity. In discussions about the importance of one’s gender to one’s identity, three co-researchers mentioned their relations with Black men. Nicole described the double standards that Black women face in relation to Black men:

I can't do things that a man does. I feel like I only get those types of situations when dealing with other Black men because they feel as though like oh, “you're we a woman you can't do x, or oh you're a woman you're not supposed to do x.” I feel like you do it so like I don't answer why because I am a female that you know I can't date two people if I want to, you did it.

It seems significant that she’s talking about her race and gender in reaction to Black men.

Nicole is focusing on what she can and cannot do as a Black woman, rather than just as a woman. It appears that many of the co-researchers are thinking about their gender identity in an



essentializing binary and dichotomous framework, where their gender identity is in relation to men and in particular, Black men, and not in relation to men of other races. This suggests that many of the co-researchers are comparing their life experiences to others who share in their same marginalization of being Black, as opposed to comparing their experiences to women and men of other races.

### **Sub-theme: The Pride and Double Marginalization of being Black and Female**

This preceding section addresses how the co-researchers view the rewards and difficulties they face living in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to understand how they negotiate their identities in social and professional environments. An important and unifying focus of each co-researcher was their sense of pride and accomplishment with being a Black woman. For instance, Levi said, “I am very proud to be a Black woman because I recognize those who came before me, who had to work really hard, so I don’t take it for granted.” Seven other co-researchers discussed the importance of their commitment in overcoming obstacles, implying that a Black female identity is associated with experiences of both struggle and triumph. This resilience in turn instilled another layer of pride and celebration of accomplishments associated with successful Black women. Some co-researchers explored the unique struggles of Black womanhood; for example, Jessica described the double marginalization of being both Black and a female:

So you are not only overcoming the female piece and wanting to get respect that you deserve and the respect that you should be getting even though you are a woman. Then with the Black piece, you have to overcome the piece where it’s like you want to be respected and you know you have to overcome some people’s thoughts of you are not as good or you’re not talented. I think having those two things can make it hard in some instances because you have to overcome two sets of obstacles as versus one or the other.

Likewise, Angie discussed how “So you have to survive as Black person in America as having this double consciousness, being aware of who you are and also being aware of everything around you.” As implied by Angie, she views everything around her as a racist/sexist world that forces her to negotiate her identities differently within given contexts.

In the discussions of the intersection of being Black and female there were some unique responses that are worth examining. One co-researcher did not acknowledge Black feminist emancipatory contributions in historical records; while another ignored the racial/gender inequalities that still exist today. One co-researcher, Claire, examined the history of women and Blacks separately, suggesting the following:

Oh absolutely, just look at history of women and women’s suffrages and how far women have come since the beginning of the 1900 and then I look at the civil rights movement as it related to African Americans and how we weren’t really getting major rights until the 1960’s.

As Claire thought about the importance of history in relation to her pride in being a Black woman, she discussed Anglo/Eurocentric women’s history and Black’s history, draws attention to the absence of the history of Black women’s suffrage and the Black feminist movement. Additionally, as seen as a coping mechanism, Levi did not come up with any difficulties that she has faced as a Black woman because she solely puts the blame on herself.

I mean anything that hasn’t really worked out; I can only blame myself for it because I’ve been afforded the same opportunities as everyone else... So I can’t really say that I’ve been shortchanged, for a lack of a better word, because I’m Black.

Interestingly, when asked about her experiences as a Black woman, Levi focuses on her racial identity. As a coping mechanism in response to experiencing discrimination, Levi is self-reflexive on her racial identity, signifying that racial/gender identities are blurring into each other. Claire and Levi’s conversations speak to the multiple dimensions of the simultaneous

pride and marginalization of being a Black woman, articulating the complexities of the negotiation of racial and gender identities among Black women in professional and social environments.

Interestingly, in discussions of difficulties faced by Black women, two major topics that came up were sexuality and Black men/women relations. Two of the co-researchers who mentioned the difficulty of Black male/female interactions were at first afraid of reinforcing racist/gendered stereotypes inherent in the expectations associated with prototypical Black women. Claire discussed how though she is accomplished, she is not going to dumb down herself to get a man and draws on critiques of institutional inequalities:

I say that that one is probably the biggest one because I am accomplished and have accomplished a lot and I am not really ashamed of it. I am not going to act dumber than I am . . . I think that it is difficult because currently our counterparts, when you look at the statistics and who's going to college, it's way more Black women than men. Then it lets you know that there is going to be a skew and it's just becoming more and more skewed.

Claire went on to discuss the effect of the institutional structures of the criminal justice system, where there are disproportionate rates of men of color, particularly Black men, incarcerated, which leaves few options for partners for heterosexual Black women. The latent anxieties associated with finding a compatible Black male partner may be the persistent threat of “An Angry Black Man,” and how the possibility of jail/prison can/has an emasculating effect on the Black man. This can then overspill in the relation anxieties.

Relatedly, Nikki identified the major difficulty that she faces as a Black woman due to the low Black male to female ratio, and discusses critical dialogues needed with young Black men:

I do think that from a very young age we miss out a lot of critical dialogue that we should have with men because people grow up without dads and young Black men are raised to treat Black women in a very derogatory manner in the way that

they talk to us . . . I think that I can name off of the top of my head, men and male family members in my family who are in jail and on the same hand a number of Black female family members who got advanced degrees and it's really strange.

This quote demonstrates the distinct experiences of Black men and women due to the intersections of race, class, and gender and how the disproportionate incarceration rates of Black men also influence the livelihood of Black women resulting in absent fathers or brothers in the home and limiting options for close partnerships.

### **Sub-theme: Image of the Strong Black Woman**

One of the major topics discussed during the interviews was the image of what it means to be a “strong Black woman.” As an example, Claire discussed how Black women are brought up with an independent mindset and suggests that independence is also lonely: “I think it's very isolating because in the extent to how we were raised is a really independent mindset, where I can do that myself.” This is an example of an independent mindset and resolves to continue constructing strong Black woman after centuries of neglect and abuse inflicted upon them by variations of patriarchy, relative to family and other institutions. Also, Jasmine discussed that “..because I'm Black ,do people expect me to be strong..” Likewise, Nicole gave a detailed description of being a “strong Black woman”:

A woman who does not back down from what she believes in, who stands up for her beliefs, who is not afraid to voice her opinion and speak her mind or her voice when something is not right, or when she doesn't agree with something. I think that is very important because I've seen a lot of women, especially when it comes to men, female/male relationships who silence themselves because it's “not what you are supposed to do.” “A woman is supposed to stay in her place” and that's such bull shit like I feel as though if a man can feel as though he can say whatever he wants to say, so I am going to say it too . . . Standing on your own ground and being able to take care of yourself without having to depend on anybody . . .

What is very interesting about what Nicole stated is that it is a paradox. The very things that define “strong Black woman” and resemble the tenants of Black feminism subconsciously are

being articulated as Nicole is speaking her mind and voicing her opinions; yet the type of negotiating that Black women engage to penetrate professional spaces requires astute navigation and remaining circumspect. The idea of being a “strong Black woman” may pressure Black women to live up to this image and if one does not live up to this image, it can cause psychological issues of distress.

### **Theme: Negotiation of Identities in Predominantly White Environments**

The theme of negotiation of race, gender, and class identities serve as the central theme for the current study, focusing on identity negotiation in predominantly White workplace and social environments. This theme was assembled through the direct review of transcripts based on co-researchers’ responses to experiences of racism/discrimination on the job and their responses to two scenarios: *If you were in a professional setting with majority whites and you notice that you are the only Black woman in the room, would you/have you ever changed your behavior/language to fit in or to accommodate them?* and *If you were in a social setting with majority whites and you notice that you are the only Black woman in the room, would you/have you ever changed your behavior/language to fit in or to accommodate them?* The sub-themes constructed by the primary investigator from the data include the following: managing professionalism, managing interpersonal rejection: The stillness effect, and linguistic negotiating.

### **Sub-themes: Managing Professionalism**

One of the major narratives identified in the transcripts was the negotiating of identity mores within predominantly Euro-centric ascribed codes of conduct and professionalism. Seven co-researchers discussed the importance of maintaining professionalism, even when others are disrespectful to them. For instance, Kara, who works an academic counselor to athletes,

described how her decision to maintain professionalism in the face of disrespect is tied to her race and gender identifications:

Now granted I had few choice words that I wanted to say to him but I chose to keep them to myself because although he may not be professional I am always going to maintain my professionalism because as a young Black women especially working in athletics it's harder for people to respect you so you kind of have to, there's a constant fight to always work for that respect.

Likewise, Brittany discussed how the stereotypes of Black women affect her and increases the pressure she feels to act professional.

It has affected me and made me more aware of how to conduct myself in a professional setting, and even sometimes in my personal life I found that when I want to be taken seriously I have to get in that mindset like okay be serious right now.

In essence, Brittany describes that she has to act a particular way in professional settings among majority Whites in order to be taken seriously. Along those same lines, Brittany made a historical reference to racialized gender stereotypes of Black women and the transition of Black women into the workforce. "Our image was very overly sexualized and now we are women who are you know heading businesses and doctors and lawyers."

Also, in many discussions about professionalism that were raised, being professional was characterized as "acting White" due to the various ways that Black women feel pressure to assimilate to the White workplace culture. "Acting White" is analogous to a standard, etiquette, and way of speaking in professional settings. This pressure to appear professional applies outside the workplace as well. For instance, Brittany discussed how she was in a clothing store and one of the employees seemed annoyed when she asked her question and assumed that she

wasn't going to buy anything. In the face of experiencing discrimination in a social environment, she shifted her language to a "professional voice":

So, you know I kind of just put on my professional voice, I was not just like relaxed, I became professional, like "Oh yes ma'am, can you please get me this or oh yes I would like this," like I asserted myself and I think that's the right word to say. Instead of saying that I changed my tone, I feel as though I asserted.

For Brittany, engaging in Standard English would have qualified her as being professional, unlike her vernacular language. Although she did acknowledge that she shifted her language, she implied that she asserted herself, rather than changed her tone. Altering one's language can be empowering as well as an assimilatory act. This situation is also a perfect example of Brittany's unsettling feelings toward negotiation/shifting, which are discussed later on in this paper. The dynamics involved with identity negotiation in predominantly White environments consists of being professional even in the face of confronting racism and negative stereotypes associated with Black women. There is a workplace identity that Black women have to negotiate in their workspaces to be taken seriously.

#### **Sub-themes: Managing Interpersonal Rejection: Frozen Effect**

Another prevalent sub-theme that emerged from the interviews surrounds the idea of being silent. Four co-researchers discussed how they remain silent and/or get mentally paralyzed in predominantly White social or professional environments. For instance, Jasmine described how within a predominantly Euro-centric professional environment, she began to question her sense of voice: "All the time, so many times that I can't remember a specific story. Mostly I just won't talk like I would just kind of answer questions yeah or nay." Due to past experiences, Jasmine has developed a coping mechanism that works best for her in this type of environment:

to retreat into isolation and responds with concise replies when communicating with her colleagues.

Likewise, Nicki's personal experience with aversion exemplifies such encounters. At her job, most of the Black women work in the customer service department; however, she has a managerial position in another department. One day she was visiting a colleague who works near the customer service department. Nikki and her colleague, who is an Asian male, had headphones in their ears and were completing work. At least two other employees came to her and asked her to take out her headphones because customer service representatives are not allowed to wear them. Nikki stated:

I didn't do anything about it. I honestly just took my headphones out. I chalked it up to well when in Rome I will take my headphones out and get back to my corner of the building.

In response to this differential treatment she was nevertheless conflicted but stayed silent and did as she was told. It can be understood as a sense of solidarity with the other Black women who were working as customer service professionals; by not reacting negatively to her coworkers' comments, Nikki further stated that she did as she was told to prevent negative experiences from occurring for the Black women in customer service at her job. In this situation, it is assumed that Nikki weighed the costs and benefits of responding to her colleague and instead she chose to respond in a way that would benefit other Black women coming behind her, though it may have been a psychological cost of internal conflict to Nikki.

### **Sub-themes: Linguistic Negotiating**

In order to navigate the variations of differential treatment, the co-researchers described their experiences of negotiating their languages according to the situation. Seven co-researchers



discuss feeling the need to change their language dependent upon the environment. In a professional environment, Jessica discussed how she tones down her voice:

We were talking about a project and I was very careful about my tone, my articulation, not sounding too aggressive, and not speaking up as much in a meeting . . . I probably had an opinion on a few things but I didn't say it because I did not want to be too aggressive.

Jessica also discussed how she changes her language in a professional environment with predominantly Whites. "So I probably diminish by not speaking as loud or speak more articulately and not seem more aggressive. I think I have done that in meetings." In social environments, three co-researchers discussed toning down their personalities and the avoidance of bringing Black cultural topics into conversations. For instance, Kara described a time when she was at a conference for work and was one of few Blacks in the room and avoided bringing President Obama into the conversation because she saw it as a "hot button topic":

When other people tell their opinion about how they feel he is doing, especially when I am surrounded by majority White people, I usually don't say how I feel or what I think unless someone asks me because I don't want the assumption to be, "oh well you are only supporting him because he is Black."

To avoid the experience of discrimination and alienation, many of the co-researchers discussed negotiating their language identities and other identities to resist conforming to stereotypes of Black women, such as changing tone of voice to not appear as the "aggressive sapphire" stereotype of Black women.

### **Theme: Negotiation of Identities in Predominantly Black Environments**

Co-researchers were asked to respond to the following scenario: "If you were in a situation with majority blacks and you notice that there is a class difference. Have you ever changed your behavior or downplayed your achievements/education/career achievements? If so, please give an example." In conversations of class differences among predominantly Black

environments, language altering and downplaying career achievements were prominent among the Black women. In conversations about language altering, Angie talked about how she has to think about what language she is going to use before speaking. “I may have thought about what languages am I going to use or how am I going to interact with them . . .” Similarly, Jasmine mentioned how she is cautious about what she says depending on the context.

I think there are some things that are appropriate to come out and some things I may censor depending on who I am around . . . I altered my behavior, like to be, so she wouldn't think I was not cool . . .

Interestingly, three co-researchers discussed how they felt the need to negotiate their identities more in the Black community rather than in predominantly White communities. The same Black stereotypes were socially constructed by the dominant society are internalized in the Black community, and shapes how Black people feel they should behave and speak. For instance, Jessica discussed how she had to change her language more around Blacks because she grew up in a predominantly White area:

You grew up in a predominantly White environment, so you do not see it as changing because it's a part of who you are. Sometimes I was called an Oreo. So sometimes I felt like I had to assimilate more to how Black people wanted to me talk. My natural state is to talk like a White person, and this is just how I am.

Jessica indicates that she talks White, but acknowledging that her speech is White and not Black, illustrates that it is something she wrestles with in fitting in with certain Blacks.

Additionally, four co-researchers discussed how they do not bring up their career achievements unless asked. For instance, Kara stated, “I wouldn't necessarily say that I downplay it, I wasn't mentioning it unless somebody asked me because you don't want to come off as if you are throwing it in somebody's face.” Oftentimes, I think that marginalized groups,

in this particular situation Black women, do not bring up their achievements and accomplishments due to the fear of being “bougie.” Analogous to previous articulations, Levi described one situation where she was volunteering at a hospital and talking to another Black woman, and noticed a class difference that led her to decide not to bring up her career/academic achievement:

So I just listened to her. I didn't have to say well you know I'm from such and such, and I have this degree and that degree. We had a normal conversation as if we knew each other, from way back, but I did not find it necessary to promote myself or sell myself because it was not the right time nor place.

Levi stated that she does not need to promote herself, which can be seen as a form of negotiating her class identity in this particular space. Overall, in a sense it can be stated that they are downplaying a part of their class identities and can allude to the idea that this area may be a privilege for them. Identity negotiation among predominantly Black social and home environments suggests that the reason why co-researchers changed their language and behaviors may be to not appear “better than” other Black people, but rather part of the Black community.

### **Theme: Triggers for the Negotiation of Race, Class, and Gender Identities**

Another structural theme that was constructed from the data was the reasons for negotiation of identities. This theme epitomizes everyday experiences in which the co-researchers have to identify and actively negotiate their identities. They start off with these identities, which may not be grounded, and then waiver with these dynamics in this theme relative to their identities. Several triggers that led the co-researchers to actively negotiate race, class, and gender include: assimilating in the face of White power structures, confronting and refuting stereotypes of Black women, model Black citizenship, building and maintaining relationships, and avoidance of the perception of being labeled the Black elite.

### **Sub-theme: Assimilating in Face of the White Power Structures**

In similar discussions, four co-researchers discussed the need of Black women to assimilate to whatever situation they are confronted with. Six co-researchers discussed that they negotiate their behaviors and/or languages due to cultural differences. In predominantly Euro-centric environments, some co-researchers discuss how they avoid void speaking in workspaces because they may not relate to their co-workers to dominant White culture. Jasmine stated that she becomes silent in predominantly White professional environments because:

They don't understand and it just makes me more of the zoo animal, when people are asking questions and staring or saying, 'tell me what that means,' 'tell me what you mean when you say tight?' 'Do you really mean that the lid is tight?'

Similarly, Angie described how she retreats to silence when a non-Black person makes a joke about Black people, but in times of intensity, she is proud of her Blackness.

I would have conversations with people of another race and hear a little joke about Black people, as if I am not even sitting there, but then again I didn't even vocalize about it...It is only in moments of intensity that we see in the news where we're like "Black Power" you know we want to claim that I'm Black and I'm proud.

To avoid uncomfortable encounters, Jasmine vacates to her comfort zone by not using her vernacular language and Angie chooses not to confront people when they make a derogatory comment about Black women, but owns her Black pride when she sees racial injustices in the media.

Thus, five co-researchers emphasized that they altered their behaviors and languages due to the need to engage with the predominant culture. Jessica describes the need to assimilate. She

stated, “I am always having to be a chameleon and assimilate to every situation.” Moreover she stated:

Whether it be the social setting or professional setting, feeling like you need to kind of assimilate a little bit to the predominant culture that you are around and the predominant culture was White. They were using slang and they weren’t slurring their words and maybe they were speaking a little bit more articulately . . . and if you use slang or did not pronounce your words as much then they may not respect you as much.

Similarly, Levi discussed specifically how altering behaviors and languages is something that Black women have to do to survive:

Black women we have to know how to adapt to our environments no matter what situation we are thrown in. We have to be able to act accordingly. You can’t allow someone else to catch up slipping.

Black women feel scrutinized, like they are under surveillance by the White culture, where they have to be on their tippy toes to avoid standing out and to prevent the outcome of confirming a Black female stereotype.

### **Sub-theme: Confronting and Refuting Stereotypes of Black Women**

One of the unifying reasons for negotiating identity among all of the co-researchers was to resist negative stereotypes associated with Black women. The co-researchers cited several prevailing stereotypes that they feel they have to defend their identity against: being loud (5 co-researchers); overly sexualized resembling the jezebel stereotype (5 co-researchers); welfare queen (4 co-researchers); and ghetto (5 co-researchers). This implies that race, gender, and class identities intersect in these stereotypes as a way of commenting on the intersectional identity negotiation that these women are undergoing on a daily basis. Jessica is aware of the stereotypes

and changes her language in avoidance of conforming to those stereotypes. Similarly, Harriet discussed the stereotypes of being overly sexualized and loud:

Some of the other stereotypes include the image of Sarah Baartman, the Hottentot Venus. This involves the idea that our bodies are meant to constantly be displayed for the enjoyment and/or curiosity of others. We are seen as sexual objects of very little value. We are assumed to be loud and only educated by the streets.

Another prevalent stereotype that the Black women in the study confront is being labeled as the “angry mad Black woman.” Jessica stated, “I probably tried not to be as aggressive and threatening sounding and acting because I don't want to be labeled the mad Black woman or something.” In this instance, Jessica changed the tone of her voice to avoid confirming the stereotype as the aggressive, angry Black woman.

While most of the co-researchers mainly reported negative stereotypes relative to Black women, some mentioned both positive and negative stereotypes. Angie and Claire mentioned that there are both positive and negative stereotypes of Black women, and that whether they are positive or negative depends on whom they are coming from. Angie states the following:

I would say that mainly you hear from Black males that we are educated, bougie type of Black women, but also on the other hand, she represents this symbol and it's really a dual view of them. So the awareness that we are smart, educated but on the other hand, as very much like a sex symbol type thing and are minimized down to body parts.

Angie mentions the extremity of positive to negative stereotypes that Black women have to confront and refute and signifies the fact that the co-researchers are negotiating stereotypes in both Black and White contexts. Similarly, Claire described a polarized view of stereotypes, where they are either very positive or very negative.

I feel like the reality leans towards that ghetto look of you know loud and three kids and you know, and then there's the slim population of the lonely bitter professional black women, like there's no in between. Those are the two aspects,

loud, boisterous with a whole bunch of kids, and CEO and lonely, like those are the types I see.

Even when acknowledged for their professional achievements and academic attainments, they are nevertheless perpetually objectified for a male gaze. This adds to the difficulty of having to negotiate both of those lines of perceptions and indicates that there is not a model for a “middle-ground” professional identity among the co-researchers.

### **Sub-theme: Model Black Citizenship**

Another prominent discussion among five co-researchers concerned perceptions of having to be a representative on behalf of all Blacks. Most of the co-researchers discussed how they have to be mindful that they are representing other Blacks, such as family members, in professional environments. Similarly, Angie described how other Black people set the bar for how other Blacks are supposed to act in the workspace and academic environment:

It's like one black person sets the bar for how other black people are supposed to be. So I don't know if that was an internal thing you know like, or to be this representation or the Black token, or sometimes to be the only Black person in class. It's also like if something racial comes up, how you are expected to know all of the answers and guide everybody.

In addition, Jasmine discussed how she has to be conscious about what she is saying or doing to make sure that it is not counter to what Black people have fought against within this country.

Because of this history, she feels the need to be a model citizen for Black people:

All of my ancestors who just you know went through incredible amounts of sorrow and pain, but were strong and able to ride through that enough, to the fact that we are still here. So I always think am I doing enough? Then also what I am doing that is representing or beneficial to my people, is it counter or hindering them? Does it add to the negative stereotypes?

Similarly, Levi discussed how professionalism is associated with being a representative for others: “I define professionalism as you're keeping in mind that you are an ambassador for not

only yourself but for your family . . .” This quote articulates a collective identity that seems to be emerging here and the tension between an independent and community-minded woman.

The model citizen idea can be both a pressure and an advantage among the co-researchers and is internalized by the co-researchers differently. Significantly, Nikki used the concept of the “model Black citizen” to her advantage. She stated that if she has to negotiate her identities to make life easier for another Black woman coming after her, then she doesn’t mind:

So I think that if I can do my best to be a model Black citizen then hopefully, somebody who has a negative perception of Black people or Black women that we are loud and uneducated, and ghetto and all of that other stuff, then maybe if they meet me then the next woman they meet they won’t be like that and will be a little bit more open to seeing her as an individual.

Nikki focused on the positive aspect of negotiating, where it may not serve her purpose correctly, but she hopes to make the experiences better for other Black women coming after her. On a similar note, Nikki discussed her experience with serving as a managerial role at her job, where most of the other Black women at her job work in customer service. She speaks about being a representative for those Black women, because they may not have a voice or sense of agency in that particular environment:

We have a huge customer service population of Blacks and Black women are completely overrepresented in that space and I am very far from that space. So sometimes even where I may feel the most comfortable, I’m not there and I tend to have to be the representative for them and also be uncomfortable all of the time so.

Black model citizen suggests that being in a managerial position can be potentially lonely and secluded from other people of color, but Nikki suggests the importance of representing other



Black women. Being a model Black citizen may benefit other Black women in disadvantaged positions, but can be a risk to one's feelings of being at ease in her workplace.

### **Sub-theme: Building and Maintaining Relationships**

Another prominent sub-theme constructed from the data is negotiating identities in order to build and maintain personal and professional relationships, which are essential for social and professional advancement. Seven co-researchers discussed the need to build relationships in order to thrive in social and professional environments. For instance, Harriet discussed how negotiating identities has allowed her to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds:

The positive result is that my interaction with various groups of people and cultures has allowed me to become culturally competent. Therefore, I am able to interact with a diverse group of people without being offensive or degrading.

Similarly, Jasmine described how she avoided social environments where she was the only Black woman to avoid being uncomfortable; however she recognizes this can hinder her ability to develop relationships with co-workers: "It probably, interferes and stifles or adds challenges to my professional relationships because I am not relating to them during kind of downtime in fun and genuine ways."

While most co-researchers did see maintenance of relationships as a motivating factor for negotiating their identities, they also discussed how this can be seen as a negative. In particular, Angie spoke about how not being one's self in social and/or professional environments can inhibit authentic relationships:

I mean our world is kind of based off of relationships, professional relationships and social relationships. So I think that can be a negative downfall being able to create actual, genuine connection with somebody, so that could be a downfall.

Also, Angie suggested a narrative that Black women can either decide to prioritize their relationships or prioritize their feelings:

We can prioritize our social relationships or we can prioritize our feelings, it doesn't always have to be so conservative. We can prioritize all avenues of life, we don't have to focus on the negative, that type of thing.

It appears that Angie is suggesting that Black women have placed others before themselves, rather than focusing on their own feelings, and Black women need to rethink what they prioritize and put their needs before the needs of others. It is possible that putting others before the needs of the co-researchers can put them at a disadvantaged to their own mental and physical health.

### **Sub-theme: Avoidance of Being Called the Black Elite**

Five co-researchers stated that they alter their languages in predominantly Black environments because they do not want to look like they think they are better than others. Subsequently, three co-researchers held that Black women have to confront the stereotype being classified as “bougie” by other Blacks. For instance, Kara stated “I wouldn't want anybody to, don't take it personal just because I'm talking like that, it's nothing against you.” Similar to such accounts, Angie discussed how other Blacks often times discriminate her against because of her demeanor:

People have this perception that you talk White or you do this or that. I'm like I am not committing a crime. I'm not doing anything wrong, but I feel like I have been discriminated against because of how I act . . . you act this way, you act White, you talk White, or you think you're better because of this.

Angie is still dealing with this experience being in the middle, where she does not completely fit into the dominant culture, however when around other Blacks, she is criticized for acting and speaking White. Thus, there is a no win-win situation for her. Angie's identity is “in-between”

and thus does not fit anywhere; further, there is no win-win situation and also likely a confusing and alienating one.

Another conversation that came up quite frequently surrounds the issue of not wanting to get teased by other Blacks. Five co-researchers discussed how they do not want to get pestered by other Blacks because they speak a particular way. Jessica recalls the time where she did negotiate her language to avoid being called “an Oreo.” Levi likewise discussed how she does not want to get teased by her family members, so she alters her language:

Then when it comes to interacting with your family, I don't want them to tease me, like oh here you do using those big words or we don't understand what the heck you are talking about. So it is a matter of keeping the peace when it comes to my family.

Black women negotiate their identities in predominantly Black home and environments to avoid appearing better than other Black people and this offers unique challenges that Black women face when negotiating identity in both home and social environments.

### **Theme: Mixed Feelings Towards Negotiating Identities**

Among the co-researchers there were some mixed feelings associated with negotiating their identities. Three co-researchers specified that this process was stressful. Jessica said, “It makes me feel like I am always having to . . . I’m always juggling.” Having to negotiate identities in various environments and juggle interactions with various people caused significant emotional and psychological stress for these co-researchers. Additionally, Angie discussed how she is just doing it to survive, though it is stressful: “Having to curb my behavior, I’m just doing it to survive and to get to where I need to be, kind of like survival of the fittest, but it is difficult.”

Four co-researchers discussed how altering their behaviors and languages are all a part of who they are. For instance, Jessica said, “I grew up in a predominantly White environment, so you do not see it as changing, because it’s a part of who you are.” It is possible that Jessica

either feels a stable sense of self when she negotiates or that the negotiation itself is constant for her. Moreover, Angie stated that she does not think she has altered her behaviors or changed her languages, “because a lot of the times, I act White anyways.” Intriguingly, these co-researchers suggest that they “act White” and so they do not see themselves as altering their behaviors and languages. This brings into question that some Black women may not see that they are altering their behaviors or languages; instead, the different vocal tones are all a part of who they are, where the co-researchers are closely linking identity and voice.

Alternatively, six co-researchers discussed how they could not be their true selves when they negotiate their identities. For instance, Angie discussed her internal struggle with not being true to her self.

I feel like you feel like you are not being your true self and you know when you're not being yourself , , , you know when you are out of character in whatever situations. You know those things and when some things are off with you, we all have an internal instinct whether we do something about it or not is another story, but we all know when something is off.

On an interesting note, Angie touches on an affective response of changing behaviors and languages. Although some people may not want to admit that they are altering their behaviors and languages, among Black women there are negative and stressful feelings associated with not being one's authentic self and indicates that there are psychological ramifications to identity negotiation.

What is noteworthy is that the two co-researchers who stated that altering their behaviors and languages is a part of who they are, also said that they felt like they could not be their true selves. The inconsistencies add to the complexity of understanding the intersectionality of the negotiation of oppressed identities, particularly among young academically successful Black

women in this sample. The complexity can cause inconsistent behaviors mixed feelings toward identity negotiation among Black women.

### **Summary**

The study was designed to identify and explore the experience of identity negotiation among academically successful Black women in the workforce. Co-researchers included ten academically successful Black women in the workforce located throughout the United States. The study introduced the importance of racialized gender identity for Black women and explored how race, class, and gender identities affect interpersonal relations and interactions. Through the process of negotiating race, class, and gender identities, each co-researcher determined the positive and negative outcomes of negotiating identities in social and professional predominantly Black and predominantly White environments. Most co-researchers discussed the importance of various navigation skills to cross through various professional and social environments.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Know the demographics, and the population. You're going to end up in a workplace where you might get the perfect job but have none of those other aspects and do realize that it could potentially have big impact on your job performance and your level of comfort in that office.- Claire

This chapter is divided into sections and will first discuss the overview of in the findings in relation to the literature, limitations, the primary investigator's theoretical model, implications, future research, conclusion, and closing reflection.

### **Discussion**

Findings from this study provide insight into factors that may influence Black women's participation in the negotiation of their race, class, and gender identities, and the unique experiences of young college-educated Black women in the United States. In particular, there is a perception the United States is currently a "post racial" society because the United States has their first Black president, Barack Obama, but this is far from the reality. Although there are increased enrollments of Black women in higher education and increased employment of Black women, they still experience both blatant and subtle forms of racism and discrimination (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2012). Accordingly, the millennial population faces a difficult dilemma, as they are perceived to live in a post racial society, but simultaneously they are required to confront long-standing stereotypes and prejudices, which require the shifting and negotiation of their identities.

### **Review of Themes**

Based on the analyses, the overarching themes constructed from the data include: a) the complexity of the intersectionality of race, gender, and class identities, b) negotiation of identities in predominantly White social and work communities, c) negotiation of identities in predominantly Black communities, d) triggers for the negotiation of race, class, and gender

identities, and e) mixed feelings towards negotiating identities. Also it is important to note that there is some overlap in these themes, which seems like a natural outcome of the negotiation of the intersectionality of race, class, and gender identities. These themes help us to better understand some of the unique and common experiences among the co-researchers related to negotiating their race, class, and gender identities in social and professional environments. Overall, the findings provide insight into the phenomenon of complex, intersectional identity negotiation and the competing demands of this negotiation in various contexts.

### **The Complex Intersectionality of Race, Gender, and Class Identities**

The first theme of “the complexity of the intersectionality of race, gender, and class identities” related to the vast perspectives on the importance and/or insignificance of race, gender, and class identities among the co-researchers. Co-researchers also discussed how others perceived their race, class, and gender identities within the paradigm of social, home, and professional environments, which in turn affected their decision making skills in negotiating or not negotiating their race, class, and gender identities. The most prevalent identities discussed by the co-researchers were race and gender identities, primarily in predominantly White work and social spaces; class became more important in predominantly Black home and social environments. According to Jackson (1999), the ability to define self, such as one’s identity, predetermines who a person thinks he or she is in relation to what an individual thinks they should be doing. How others will perceive a Black woman’s identities is an important component to better understand the complexity of the negotiation of intersecting identities.

The current findings show the complexity of race, gender, and class identities and the confused feelings and identity negotiation among Black women navigating predominantly White communities (e.g., school, professional, and social spaces) and predominantly Black

communities (e.g., school, social, home, and church spaces). Segregation still exists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the United States, such as racially segregated communities and institutions of higher learning, and there are still distinct differences between Black and White culture. The co-researchers learned to adapt to and function differently into these kinds of spaces. The way in which their class identity was structured added to the complexity of their identities and varied among co-researchers; there was not a clear sense of the importance of class identity to some of the co-researchers. The findings show that race, class, and gender identities are complex when having to articulate what it means to be a Black woman in a particular class structure due to the difficulty for some to see these three intersecting identities as distinct entities.

Co-researchers also consistently discussed their combined racial and gender identity, where they do not see their race and gender identities as separate, but instead identify as a Black woman. This perspective is consistent with the literature suggesting that Black women place equal importance on their race and gender, where the Black-woman identity is often more significant than either the Black or woman identities separately (Settles, 2006). Co-researchers also discussed the pride of being a Black woman, yet were aware of the extremely negative and extremely positive stereotypes that plague Black women, such as being the domineering sapphire or the strong, independent Black woman. Thus, there is a unique intersection of race and gender among Black women and they come to see themselves in terms of the combined identity (Settles, 2006). Research argues that Black Americans code their experiences with White Americans and with social institutions in terms of race, not class or gender (Ogbu, 2004). However, in the current study, the co-researchers conceptually could not tease apart their racial and gender



identities which speaks to the importance of grasping how these identities interlock and that these Black women exemplify Settles' statement.

In discussions about racial identity, most co-researchers identified their racial identity as very important to them. One co-researcher in particular discussed that being Black is an important part of her identity because she is cautious about what she is doing and what that means in relation to the Black community as a whole. Another co-researcher mentioned how her racial identity is a major part of her character because her parents were militant and instilled in her the sense that "Black is beautiful." According to the literature, there are positive associations between militant attitudes, attitudes associated with a Black Nationalist agenda, and a positive in-group image among Blacks (e.g., Porter & Washington, 1979). More specifically, past research has found that the Black urban middle class has the most militant attitudes and highest level of self-esteem. A number of studies' findings suggest that groups with middle levels of income and education have more militant attitudes (Matthews & Prothro 1966; Marx 1967) and a high degree of ethnic pride and identification (Sampson & Milam, 1975). Also, in discussions of racial identity, studies report that Black parents are oftentimes concerned that their children may encounter racial barriers and negative stereotypes and in response, they instill racial pride (Hughes, Rodriguez, Smith, Johnson, Stevenson, & Spicer, 2006). This was evident among the co-researchers who mentioned how their upbringing influenced their pride associated with being a Black woman. This association suggests that upbringing has a strong influence on identity negotiation in the workspace and other environments.

A major component of how the co-researchers viewed their gender identity relates to racial and gender socialization (Hill, 2002). Black women have been socialized through their racialized gender in unique ways that speak to the intersectionality of their race, gender, and

class identities. Many co-researchers said that their gender identity is important due to their history, recognizing the obstacles that all women of different racial/ethnic backgrounds had to overcome and more specifically, acknowledging the intersection of racialized and gendered stereotypical roles. Research suggests that Black girls learn racialized gender roles based on traditional-gender values and through the teaching of economic self-reliance, community activism, and assertiveness (Hill, 2002). The co-researchers reported that they were taught a proper way and an incorrect way to act and speak in professional and social predominantly White environments, due to how they were raised socially to interact with others. This is also consistent with literature exploring racialized gender. For instance some Black women are taught that Black girls are “warriors” for the racial justice cause, while they are also taught that the “man is supposed to take care of them” (Hills, 2002). This contradiction was also mentioned by the co-researchers in the conflict surrounding being a “strong Black woman,” where one is taught to have an independent mindset, but are aware that this type of thinking also can lead to being without a partner.

Another theme constructed from the data discussed the co-researchers’ relationships with Black men. Some co-researchers expressed the double standards that Black women face in relation to Black men, such as dating more than one person at the same time. Several co-researchers identified one of the major difficulties they face as Black women as the Black male/female ratio and Black male/female relations. This quandary is consistent with the love and trouble tradition among Black men and women (Cade & Bambara, 1970; Hill Collins, 2000; Gutman, 1976). Toni Cade Bambara in “On the Issues of Roles” states, “now it doesn’t take any particular expertise to observe that one of the most characteristic features of our community is the antagonism between our men and our women” (Bambara, 1970, p. 106). Moreover these

discussions, with the theoretical engagement of Black feminism, suggest that historically in social movements, such as the abolitionist and civil rights movements (Hill Collins, 2001), Black men responded to racism but ignored the dimensions of sexism, and in some areas this same mentality still exist today. Because of the omission of the experiences of racial and gender oppression among Black women, historically this has caused a tension within the Black community. Further, Black women's troubles with Black men have created anger and through that anger a sense of self-reflection (Hill Collins, 2001). As an example, one co-researcher discussed how young Black men are raised to treat Black women in a derogatory manner due to the structural issues associated with absentee fathers in the household, due to high disproportionate rates of Black men in jail versus in college. Daniels (1979) describes, "We have been and are angry sometimes, not for what men have done, but for what we have allowed ourselves to become, again and again in my past, in my mother's past, in my centuries of womanhood passed over, for the sake of men, whose manhood we've helped undermine" (p. 62). Several co-researchers discussed the "love hate" relationship among Black women and men describing the love that Black women exude to Black men, but at times, feels like that love is not reciprocated. This dynamic indicates the recognition of the unique relationship between Black men and women, and the desire to improve Black male and female relations.

Alternatively, there is a long tradition of the love that Black women have for Black men. Numerous slave narratives written by Black women talked about how emancipated Black women spent years trying to locate family, spouses, fathers, and male loved ones (Gutman, 1976) and several love poems and songs by Black women discuss their love and commitment towards Black men (Hill Collins, 2000). Similarly, Black male vocalists (e.g., Marvin Gaye) identify relationships with Black women as being a source of strength and support for Black men

(Harrison, 1978 cited in Hill Collins, 2000). Overall, this reflects a collective love between Black women and Black men. Black women have a special understanding about what Black men experience that no one else is privy to. Hill Collins (2000, p. 64) suggests, “Both the tensions between African American women and men and the strong attachment that we feel for one another represent a rejection of binary thinking and an acceptance of the both/conceptual stance in Black feminist thought.” Black feminism is perceived to others as emasculating the Black men, but instead, Black feminism speaks on and recognizes the roles between Black women and Black men in order to socially, politically, and economically improve the Black community. Although the “love and trouble” relationship exists between Black women and men, the focus was on the celebration of each other and their men rather than internalizing the divide in which the structural systems of slavery was designed to keep us separated. These dynamics are constant with the findings in the study. In the study, Nikki truly exemplified the “love and trouble” relationship by offering suggestions on how Black women can be support and teach young Black men how to treat women, so that the cycle does not continue. Consistent with Hill Collins (2000), she discusses this strong sense of support between Black men and women that transcends through obstacles and intersectional experiences.

In regards to gender identity, co-researchers referred to the particular sexual politics of being a Black woman. Angie described the experience of seeing her grandmother in a violent relationship. According to Hill Collins (1993), sexual politics assesses the connection between sexuality and power. To have a better understanding of sexuality, it is important to distinguish between sex and gender, where sex is the biological category attached to the body (male or female) and gender is the marking the categories of biological sex with socially constructed gender meanings of femininity and masculinity (Hill Collins, 1993). Historically, Black women

occupy a sex/gender hierarchy where the inequalities of race and social class have been sexualized, where the dominant culture defines their sexual practices as the mythical norm and label other groups and sexual practices that diverge from this norm as deviant and threatening (Collins, 1993; Lorde, 1984).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Black women's bodies were objects of display. One clear objectification of Black women's bodies was that of Sarah Baartman also known as Hottentot Venus, whose body became placed in an exhibition in freak show attractions in Europe. Sara Baartman's displayed body was an original example of how Black female bodies were sexually objectified to specifically provide entertainment for the White elite because of the "exotic" nature of her body (Hill Collins, 1993). Black feminists, such as Patricia Hill Collins, have investigated how sexual violence against Black women is rooted in the interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppressions (Hill Collins, 1993). Black female bodies have been sexually objectified and this is the lens that the co-researchers are working from.

In discussions of gender and class identities, there was ambivalence among the co-researchers regarding gender and class identities. Several co-researchers did not see their gender identity as an important aspect of their self, exemplifying that their concept of was not clearly identified. The ambiguity in descriptions of gender identity is possibly relevant to their participation in a post-modern and post-feminist society. In particular, Crenshaw (1991) argues that there is a political intersectionality of race and gender in which women of color are situated in at least two subordinate groups, which may cause conflicting political agendas. This conflict may be associated with difficulty in articulating the concrete dimensions of sexism and classism, which was evident in the interviews, however, the experience of being a woman of color

suggests that racialized gender are inextricable and thus it's almost impossible to articulate them separately.

Furthermore, in regards to class, most of the co-researchers did not explicitly state that class was an important part of their identity, although many of them did identify as middle class on the demographic survey. Because the income disparity is much more pronounced in the Black community than any other racial/ethnic group (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006), Blacks may choose to disengage and overlook this disparity because they did not want to be seen as judging those who were economically worse off than they were. Within communities of color, in particular among Black Americans, there is no visible spectrum along class lines within the media; you are either an Oprah or Jay Z or you are at the bottom. The small number of middle class people within communities of color, which in and of itself a problematic category, can create an illusion of progress (Hill, 1979). The small number of Black middle class communities impacts the larger Black communities because it implies that there are greater numbers of Black people in the working/poor classes.

There is a false illusion among European Americans and other Black people that Black middle class Americans have secured the promise of the American dream (Feagin & Sikes, 1994) and the Black middle class is synonymous to the White middle class, but this is far from the truth. Black middle class families' incomes have less than half the net worth of White families with comparable incomes (Conley, 1999). Additionally, because of the prevalence of racially segregated communities, Black middle class families are more likely to live geographically surrounded by poor communities and have higher crime rates, in comparison to White middle class communities which are often geographically adjacent to upper class communities in very safe environments (Patillo-McCoy, 1999). Simultaneously, Black people

are popularly represented in the mainstream media as only poor and working class, even though there is a vibrant Black middle class. This misrepresentation of Black class dynamics can lead to further discrimination against Black women in the workplace due to the false illusions that either they are successful so racism must no longer exist, or the illusion that they are poor because they are Black among the White dominant culture.

Some of the co-researchers who identified as Middle class Black Americans, seem to be unable to see as clearly how certain issues such as exploitation and colonialism are layered oppressions on women of color. As such, it is possible that there is a lack of development among Black women of a sophisticated awareness of residuals of oppression developed and shaped by circumstances of slavery, which continue to subtly persist. Throughout history, it is evident that there have been class differences within the Black community. Towards the late 1880's there were the "free Blacks" "and enslaved Blacks." The Black middle class did not emerge until the pre-Reconstruction era and further developed during the industrial era. Although the Black middle class is relatively small, it is evident that following Reconstruction, many cities had an active Black professional class (Jackson & Stewart, 2003). While there was an increase in enrollment into the Black professional class, there were disproportionate rates of people apart of the Black working class. Therefore, it may be very difficult for academically successful Black women to see where they fit on this class spectrum, now that they have pursued a college degree. As a result, this may cause different variations in the understanding of the patterns of race and class-consciousness among subgroups (e.g., the middle class) of Black populations.

While Jasmine and Nikki had a sense of class-consciousness, which Marx (1969) defines as an awareness of common interests and membership in a community of economic interests that lead to social action on the part of group members, the other co-researchers did not specifically

state that their class was an important part of their identity. During the decades of the 1960's and 1970's there was a growing number of Blacks in America who entered a vast range of occupations. Following the creation of government programs and policies associated with affirmative action, it helped increase Black representation in professional positions, but resulted in growth in class differentiation (Wilson, 1978). As a case in point, Bill Cosby is known for placing personal blame on the Black people for the state of Black America, while ignoring the structural systems that keep the Black community in disproportionate social, political and economic statuses. Cosby (2004) stated at the NAACP 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary gala that “the lower-economic and middle-economic people are not holding up their end in this deal,” which brought up several discussions about differences in perspectives based on class in the Black community.

In the current study, two co-researchers, both of whom identified as being a part of the middle class, stated that class identity was not important to them and therefore choose not to focus on their class identity. This suggests that either their class identity was not emphasized in their upbringing or they choose to disengage from their class identity. One strategy used by individuals who are targets of racism and discrimination, is to psychologically disengage from a marginalized social identity. Disengagement is described as a defensive attachment of self-esteem from outcomes and can occur in several ways, such as to define or redefine identity by disidentifying with that particular social domain (Major et al., 1998). Therefore, class may be negated completely because some Blacks may not know how class will be perceived in dominant society, and because they want to retain those ties to the Black community. Blacks are cognizant of the communal connections, however, the societal norm is forcing them to assimilate to the dominant culture. Class is negotiated in a majority Black community in relation to not wanting to come across as being “elite,” while class is negotiated in a predominantly White workspace



has having to shift language and behaviors to not be perceived as “poor” and uneducated. Some of the co-researchers were raised in a predominantly White neighborhood or attended predominantly White schools, thus culturally they were marked as White and middle class because they were raised within a predominantly White culture. Within a majority White workspace culture, there are certain ways that one should take and behave, such as “sounding proper.” Those individuals are aware of how things work in the White culture and have an easier time navigating both the Black world and the White world. They have transformed these negotiation skills learned from schools to the workplace. Therefore, authenticity as Black people and commitment to Blackness comes into question and can cause an internal struggle to accommodate to one culture at work, while accommodating to another culture outside of the workspace.

The societal pressure to assimilate to dominant White middle class culture signifies not only class structures but racial structures as well; thus, Black women negotiate a racialized class. This notion of racialized class represents how due to the double marginalization of race and class identities, people of color may think of their class position in relation to their race as well. This dynamic affects interactions between Black people and White people. In a workplace environment, race is classed in a certain type of way, where Blacks are seen as poor, lazy, on welfare, among other stereotypes, and thus feel pressure to act professional to negate “lower-class Black” stereotypes in addition to stereotypes of Black women (Gibbs & Hines, 1989). As a result of the pressures to assimilate to the dominant culture, the co-researchers discussed negotiating their class in the respective environments. Some co-researchers negotiated their identities in predominantly White environments to strategically enhance their professional and social connections, which is consistent with the literature on accommodation with assimilation

(Ogbu, 2004). As an example, co-researchers described adopting Euro-centric cultural and language practices in order to succeed in school or other predominantly White institutions, such process is referred to as accommodation. Accommodation helps a Black person maintain their stability in a society not conscious of race and helps them get ahead in Euro-centric organizations (Ogbu, 2004). This speaks to the complexities of intersectionality and the kinds of power systems that Black women have to face. It is brilliant for the co-researchers of handling all of these power structures and intersectionality of identities. In some regard, they had to come to terms with a complex set of challenges that they are forced to face on a daily basis. It causes this tension of being one way here and another way there. This can shape the establishment and maintenance of true authentic professional and personal relationships if they are based on accommodating to others within a given context.

The “complexity of identities” theme is particularly important because of the effect that identity has on decision-making, daily-lived experiences, and other personal characteristics. Co-researchers each reported how their identity as a Black woman impacted them as professionals, partners, daughters, and sisters, among other roles. Co-researchers discussed the collective race and gender identity, where they do not see their race and gender identities separate. Also they discussed the difficulty of negotiating their pride in being a Black woman alongside the negative stereotypes that plague Black women, such as being the domineering sapphire or the strong, independent Black woman. Because of these negative stereotypes and class dynamics, race, class, and gender ultimately shape how Black women are perceived by others, due to the stigma that is attached to the double marginalization of being a working/middle class Black woman.

### **Triggers for the Negotiation of Race, Class, and Gender Identities**

Another important theme that came up was “the triggers for negotiation of identities.”

Co-researchers cited several reasons for negotiating race, class, and gender, including: assimilating in the face of White power structures, confronting and refuting stereotypes of Black women, model Black citizenship, building and maintaining relationships, and avoidance of being labeled the Black elite. These factors are a result of how the co-researchers are perceived by others.

The findings indicated that there are multiple factors impacting identity negotiation among Black women. One of the unique reasons for identity negotiation among Black people, in particular Black women, is the psychological impacts of slavery. According to Leary (2005), the post-traumatic slave syndrome (PTSS) explains the cause of many adaptive survival behaviors in Blacks throughout the United States and rest of the Diaspora. This is a result of multigenerational oppression of Africans and their descendants resulting from centuries of chattel slavery. Specific behaviors associated with PTSS are feelings of hopelessness, depression, marked feelings of anger and violence, racial socialization, and internalized racism (Leary, 2005). PTSS can also be part of the criteria used to explain the causes of identity negotiation, specifically among Black people.

Some of the co-researchers discussed perceptions of being a representative on behalf of the Black race and more specifically, for Black women. Historically, Whites made Blacks collectively responsible for the offense of a single Black person. As an example, “in Rosewood, Florida in January, 1923, about 1,500 White men from Rosewood and surrounding communities went to the Black neighborhood in Rosewood and killed 40 black men, women and children in retaliation for an alleged rape of a White woman by a Black man (CBS Television Magazine, 60

Minutes (August 5, 1984)” (Ogbu, 2004, p. 11). This is also consistent with the out-group homogeneity effect (Quattrone & Jones, 1980), which argues that the dominant culture may have a misperception that underrepresented groups are more similar to one another than people a part of the dominant group. As a result, out-group members, in this case Black women, are at risk of being seen as interchangeable or expendable, and thus are more likely to be stereotyped. Because of being stereotyped, this can affect their chances of getting promotions on jobs or moving up in the career due to the unfortunate stereotypes of Black women being unreliable and not having credibility.

One of the unifying reasons for negotiation among all of the co-researchers was to confront and refute the stereotypes of Black women. Every co-researcher discussed the need to confront and refute the stereotypes of Black women by altering their behaviors and languages. This began with the fact that slave owners took deliberate steps to rid slaves of their indigenous African languages and the enslaved African were forced to speak English, but not to write, to avoid planning an escape or slave revolt (e.g., Ogbu, 2004). Presently, due to societal images and expectations of Black women, which they are classified as aggressive, sexually promiscuous, dominant, and the strong Black woman (e.g., Bell, 1992, Mitchell & Herring, 1998; Thomas et al., 2004), the co-researchers discussed assimilating to White language norms around the dominant culture in order to avoid sounding “ignorant” and “aggressive” in the workplace. For some, in order to not be labeled as the “domineering sapphire,” the co-researchers discussed how they might report shifting their language more to not appear as aggressive. This shows that however prototypically “Black” someone is perceived to be, the more likely they are to be stereotyped as such. This then may result in cultural adaption (Kim, 2001) in the process by which an individual modifies his or her personal habits and customs to fit in to a particular

culture. The possible psychological ramifications of cultural adaption are overstressing due to adaption demands and uncertainty regarding one's identity.

Additionally some of the co-researchers cited the need to care for others, and put other's feelings above their own. This philosophy is in alignment with past research conducted by Thomas and colleagues (2004) that explored the effect of stereotypes of Black women (e.g., overly sexualized jezebel) and their self-esteem. The results show that participants who internalize mammy stereotypes may need to serve and care for others, often setting aside their own needs. Women who internalize the sapphire stereotypes may fear being perceived as overly aggressive and have difficulty expressing their anger. Thus, these perceptions speak to the necessity of speaking more articulately and not aggressively in the dominant culture, as described by some of the co-researchers.

The "triggers" for identity negotiation among the co-researchers speak to the daily obstacles that the Black women are confronted with. Being aware of the negative stereotypes of Black women and having to confront those stereotypes daily can sometimes be a daunting task. Simultaneously, the co-researchers felt pressure to be a representative for the Black community in a predominantly White workforce, but also had to negotiate their class identity within predominantly Black communities to avoid seeming "better than." These complex dynamics can be mentally draining and thus influence productivity on the job and mental state at home.

### **Negotiation of Identities in Predominantly White Environments**

Negotiating identities in predominantly White social and professional environments serves as one of the central themes for the current study. The theme itself captured the reported elements of the experiences of the co-researchers related to their professional roles and work in a predominantly White setting. The study findings provide useful insight into being a college-

educated Black woman and working in a predominantly White setting, addressing unique struggles of a working in this environment, as well as indirectly addressing elements that may not be unique to these workspaces and other social environments.

In a predominantly White social or professional environment, the co-researchers discussed navigating their racialized gendered class, and in predominantly Black environments, navigating their gendered class identity. This results in class navigation and alienation, where it feels like most of the co-researchers discussed being “stuck in middle.” Being in the middle, she has one foot in one community and one foot in the other. Because her educational status ensures she transcends in her class status, she is no longer fully a part of her old community, but then because she works in a predominantly White institution, she may not be fully accepted in that community either. This is consistent with Hill Collins’ (2000) description of the “outsider within” status of Black women in the academy, which emphasizes how gender, race, and class collectively constitute *insiders* and *outsiders* in organizations that are controlled by White males. Hence, women of all racial/ethnic groups and men of color can join such organizations; however, they are seen as outsiders because they cannot receive the full benefits that White male members consistently enjoy.

Overall, it appears that some college-educated Black women working in predominantly White settings are crossing over into a different class world from how they were raised and have to straddle the fence between their class from their upbringing and their new class based on their career/academic achievement. This is consistent with the legacy of slavery, which as Ogbu (2004) explains, led to Black Americans becoming “bi-cultural and bi-dialectical” because “they lived and worked in two different worlds which expected them to think, act and react in a particular way, depending on where they found themselves” (p. 9). Additionally, this ideology is

consistent with Dubois's (1903) "double consciousness" where Blacks have to navigate for survival between two cultures: White and Black. Within the Euro-centric culture, Black women in this study discussed managing professionalism in predominantly Euro-centric environments, which speaks to the complicated, intersectional experience of Black female identity. Several co-researchers discussed managing their professionalism, even when they are confronted with racism and discrimination. It is important to note that the "double conscious" navigation of the "White world" and the "Black world" among Blacks, in particular Black women, still occurs hundreds of years after slavery and it is important to understand the psychological stressors associated with this "being in the middle" experience.

Another prominent finding mentioned in the face of experiencing racial and gender microaggressions in predominantly White environments was the "frozen effect." After experiencing discriminatory situations, some co-researchers discussed becoming silent and mentally paralyzed by mentally "checking out" in conversations. This is consistent with the literature exploring the invisibility syndrome among marginalized populations. According to Franklin (1999), invisibility is described as an inner struggle with the feeling that one's abilities and talents are not valued or ignored because of prejudice and racism. In particular, the invisibility syndrome (Franklin, 1999) is a conceptual model to understand the factors determining adaptive responses to racism and invisibility (e.g., lack of recognition, no gratification from encounter, and self-doubt).<sup>2</sup> As a result of racism, co--researchers discussed how they began to "shut down" and remove themselves from certain situations and conversations

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<sup>2</sup> Components of the invisibility syndrome include: "(a) one feels a lack of recognition or appropriate acknowledgment; (b) one feels there is no satisfaction or gratification from the encounter (it is painful and injurious); (c) one feels self-doubt about legitimacy—such as "Am I in the right place; should I be here?"; (d) there is no validation from the experience— "Am I a person of worth?"—or the person seeks some form of corroboration of experiences from another person; (e) one feels disrespected (this is led to by the previous elements and is linked to the following); (f) one's sense of dignity is compromised and challenged; (g) one's basic identity is shaken, if not uprooted" (Franklin, 1999, pgs. 763-764).

to avoid the internalized effect of racism. As a result, their coworkers may adopt the perception that Black women are not motivated or content in their current jobs, without having the knowledge of the societal stigma and experiences of racial and gender microaggressions that these women are facing. Thus, this could risk potential job promotions, and budding professional and personal relationships.

Additionally, in conversations, being professional was synonymous with “acting White.” Some of the co-researchers have an immediate experience of understanding the White world because they grew up in the environment and/or attended predominantly Euro-centric schools growing up. According to Ogbu (2004), Black professionals who choose to assimilate abandon their Black culture and dialect, and try to talk primarily in Euro-centric frames of reference. Alternatively, other Black people think that assimilating Black people reject Black dialect and appear to have self-hatred (Ogbu, 2004). These mixed feelings of assimilation were evident in the interviews as well.

Several co-researchers discussed the internal conflict associated with being professional, “acting White,” and being their true and authentic self. According to Fordham and Ogbu (1986), when Black adolescents encounter racism and discrimination, it can lead to anger and resentment, resulting in the development of an oppositional identity (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Oppositional identity theory describes the rejection of attitudes and behaviors associated with being White, because oftentimes Whiteness is associated with academic success. Since Whiteness is associated with academic success and professionalism, it suggests that a person of color, particularly a Black woman, cannot be herself if she wants to be successful. According to Tatum (1997), this can be problematic to youth who may be operating under a very limited understanding of what it means to be Black, much of which could be based on stereotype.



Although it is unclear how these thoughts affect youth as they move into adulthood, it is evident that this mentality had a similar influence among the adult co-researchers.

The “negotiation in predominantly White environments” theme is particularly important and speaks to the influence of context on identity negotiation. Co-researchers discussed factors associated with working in a White world, where there is a constant, unconscious and/or conscious, negotiation of identities based on how they are perceived by others and how others respond to their behavior. One co-researcher described how even in the face of discrimination, she had to maintain “professionalism” and not respond in the stereotypical way that Black women are perceived (aggressive and domineering). I commend the co-researchers for this daunting task. It takes a lot of strength and resiliency to encounter racism, on a sometimes daily or weekly basis, and still work effectively on the job. Though this is admirable, engaging in identity negotiation is also exhausting, thus influence the psychological health of Black women and can effect workplace dynamics by compromising the ability to form meaningful authentic relationships.

### **Negotiation of Identities in Predominantly Black Environments**

The theme of negotiating identities in predominantly Black social and home-based environments emerged as another central theme in the current study. The theme itself captured the co-researchers’ experiences of being an “outsider within.” The concept of the outsider within refers to a special standpoint consisting of the self, family, and society, and exemplifies the migration from a common cultural world (e.g., family) to the dominant culture within modern society (Collins, 2004). For instance, being a Black woman from a working class and transitioning to the middle class, and working in a predominantly dominant culture could lead that woman to feel like an outsider within the dominant culture. Although a Black woman may

become successful in a particular field, she may feel as though she never quite belongs. The implications of the study findings suggests that feelings of not belonging in either workplace or familial contexts provide useful insight into potential benefits of career advancement/connectedness to Black culture, but the price associated with not fitting in predominantly Black environments/negative perceptions at work, respectively.

Due to judgment for “acting white,” there was evidence that co-researchers also negotiated their identities within predominantly Black environments, which brought up another compromising situation for the co-researchers. While Black women have to assimilate to the dominant culture in their workplace, they do not want to appear “better than” by other Blacks. Remarkably, some of the co-researchers felt they had to negotiate their identities more in the Black community than in the White community. This is another example of being an outsider within, and also demonstrates a perfect example of internalized racism. Williams and Williams-Morris (2000) states that “internalized racism refers to the acceptance, by marginalized racial populations, of the negative societal beliefs and stereotypes about themselves” (p. 255). This could be due to the fact that some of the co-researchers grew up in predominantly White environments, adopted the dominant language and culture, and therefore had to change their language more around Blacks. This idea also brings up questions on what it means to “be Black.” Black people are beautiful and represent a long lineage of people of African descent who started off as kings and queens, and due to colonialism and slavery, have endured pain and massacre. Black people are resilient and despite all odds that have tried to break us, we remain resilient and steadfast. While, there is no one definition on what it means to Black, however, historically Blackness has been socially constructed as negative by the dominant culture in order to maintain their status of power. Blackness has been socially constructed to be associated with

the stereotypes, and in return, it is possible that Black people may have internalized the stereotypes of Black people to represent what it means to be Black.

Cultural imperialism, “the universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm” (Young, 1990, p. 59), has distorted and defined what is considered the norm and everyone who is not a part of the dominant group is considered to be “atypical.” For instance, “dominant group members stigmatize minorities’ food, clothing, music, values, behaviors and language or dialect as bad and inferior to theirs” (Ogbu, 2004, p. 4). This dismissiveness of Black culture began during slavery, with the myth that slaves came from a dark continent that was less “civilized” (e.g., Becknell, 1987; Ogbu, 2004). As a result, Black women may alter and change their behaviors, morals, language, and culture when it is not in accordance with the dominant culture to avoid being labeled the “stereotypical Black woman,” while also changing their behavior and language in a predominantly Black environment to avoid being called “White.” According to Ogbu (2004) some Blacks are afraid that mastering White English will cause them to disregard their Black identity and thus they resist or oppose speaking White English. For example, “several Black women in San Francisco considered ‘talking proper’ an attempt to dissociate oneself from the Black race, to show that one is superior to other Blacks and an act of betrayal” (Luster, 1992 as cited in Ogbu, 2004, p. 23). This back and forth negotiating can be detrimental to the self of the Black woman and causes a distortion in their perceived self and the perceptions of others.

Another component of negotiation in predominantly Black environments suggests that Blacks have adopted various strategies to cope with the dominant Eurocentric culture and institutions, including acculturation, accommodation, assimilation, and integration. In order to avoid the negative interpretation of “acting White,” Blacks have also adopted strategies to cope

with the concurrent demand of being a part of the Black community and adopting Euro-centric attitudes and behaviors in predominantly Euro-centric institutions. One accusation associated with “acting White” is the Black elite status. Half of the co-researchers stated that they alter their language in predominantly Black environments to avoid coming across as “better than.” “Acting White” is characterized in opposition to the collective Black identity. As described by Ogbu (2004), “collective identity refers to people’s sense of who they are, their “we feeling” or “belonging,” and people express their collective identity with emblems or cultural symbols which reflect their attitudes, beliefs, feelings, behaviors, and language or dialect (p. 3). The co-researchers did not want to come across as being “bougie,” a part of the bourgeoisie. This identity negotiation is historically grounded; Blacks who belonged to the Black middle class have typically been considered to be the following: bourgeoisie, professionals, and officials (e.g., Dubois, 1899; Jackson & Stewart, 2003; Wilson, 1978); and the small Black bourgeoisie historically was often described in terms of the following, “those persons who have the most money, with the greatest amount of education, those with the ‘best’ family backgrounds, and those who wield the greatest political power” (Drake & Cayton 1945, p. 526). Historically within the Black community, this group included white-collar wage earners, entrepreneurs, physicians, lawyers, and professional athletes, to name a few (Jackson & Stewart, 2003), individuals who “have played a long-standing role in servicing the psychological needs of the black community primarily through the positive reaffirmation of the black identity” (p. 443). It is possible that the co-researchers did not want to be associated as bougie because it implies that they “sold out” or is not socially/politically committed to the Black community.

Finally, the “Negotiation in predominantly Black environments” theme is important in discussions of being an “outsider within” one’s own cultural community. Co-researchers

reported that while assimilating the dominant culture may be appropriate for the workspace, it is not appropriate within Black communities. The co-researchers do not want to be perceived as “acting White” or seen as having an elite status when around other Black people. There is a struggle for some to assimilate to the dominant culture in professional environments while maintaining “insider” status in the Black community. Both within and outside of this study, being professional is synonymous with Whiteness; however, the discourse around this perception has to change so that Black people, particularly Black women, can be proud of their Black heritage and so that Blackness can be associated with professionalism.

### **Mixed Feelings Towards Negotiating Identities**

The theme of “mixed feelings towards negotiation” shows the complexity of identity negotiation and the diverse feelings that arose among the co-researchers. Some struggled with identity negotiation, for some believed that it was necessary to navigate through different cultural worlds, while simultaneously being aware of the anxiety and frustration of having to consistently negotiate their identities. Due to these mixed feelings, there were some inconsistencies in the responses of some of the co-researchers, where in the beginning of the interview they stated that they did not negotiate their identities, and later in the interview discussed the difficulties of identity negotiation. The inconsistencies add to the complexity of understanding identity negotiation among academically successful Black women in this sample and suggests that identity negotiation is not always a conscious process.

Due to the mixed feelings associated with identity negotiation, it was evident that some co-researchers negotiated their identities during the interview. In one particular instance, one co-researcher completely changed her responses to the questions surrounding identity negotiation, when given the opportunity for member checking, demonstrating why this methodology is

important. For instance, during the interview, she mentioned that it was difficult for her to negotiate her identities. "...It's definitely difficult and stresses me out to the point where I am like telling myself to stop it, you are doing the best that you can..." However, after reviewing her transcript, she said, "It is easy for me to code switch." This ambivalence surrounding identity negotiation is consistent with the historical dynamics of code-switching. After emancipation, some Blacks were hesitant about adopting Euro-centric behaviors and languages to achieve success because they did not believe that Black people had to "act White" in order to succeed (e.g., Ogbu, 2004). It is possible that after the co-researcher saw her initial responses, she had mixed feelings about whether or not it is best thing for her to negotiate her identities.

In other situations, some co-researchers stated that they do not see altering their behaviors and languages as identity negotiation, but rather feel that these dynamics represent asserting oneself more in the face of discrimination. On many occasions in the interviews, the co-researchers suggested that all of the identities are authentically theirs and were reluctant to admit to "negotiating" their identities. These varied perceptions support the notion that Black women are socialized to appear strong, tough, and resilient, even in the face of obstacles (Shorter-Gooden & Jackson, 2000). This misperception aligns with the stereotypes of Black women as being labeled the independent superwoman and the tough masculine mammy figure (Hill Collins, 2000). Past research suggest that Black women may develop a façade of strength and have difficulties admitting to difficulties in order to portray this "Strong Black Woman" mentality (McNair, 1992 as cited in Thomas et al., 2004), where "A Strong Black Woman does not show weakness or neediness but remains always stoic and competent" (Wyatt, 2008, p. 57). A thought-provoking paradox is that what defines the "Strong Black Woman" is the fact that she speaks her mind and voices her opinions, however the type of negotiation/shifting that Black

women do to succeed in professional and social spaces requires that they carefully navigate around speaking their mind. Past studies have shown that, "the need to portray an image of survival and strength prevents Black women from expressing their inner desires and needs, psychological distress, and depressive or anxiety symptoms" (Thomas et al., 2004, p. 430).

In regards to experiences of racism and discrimination, there were several contradictions among the co-researchers. In particular, one co-researcher indicated that she handles awkward situations surrounding discrimination well, but this was not evident in other parts of the interview when she discussed the difficulties and discrimination she faces as a Black woman. Remarkably, a group of co-researchers expressed to the primary investigator that they do not experience discrimination or rather they were cautious about making accusations of discrimination because of the ambiguity of the intentions of the perpetrator of the discriminatory act. These acts are consistent with the literature on cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1979), the excessive mental stress and discomfort that is experienced by an individual who holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values at the same time. This cognitive dissonance may allude to the difficulty of discussing discrimination and experiences of negotiating identities, while being cognizant of the careful navigation required through "White America" and "Black America."

The theme of "mixed feelings of identity negotiation" points to the various forms of ambiguity of negotiating race, gender, and class identities among the co-researchers. Due to societal pressures, the co-researchers discussed the need to negotiate in order to refute stereotypes of Black women, to assimilate due to power structures, to avoid being called the "Black elite," and because they are perceived as being the model Black citizen. Consistently negotiating identities takes up a lot of psychological resources and can be mentally depleting and

exhausting. This mental depletion can taxing and can cause a lack of motivation in work environments and affect professional and personal relationships. This could lead to the perception that Black women are not working as hard as their colleagues, and could affect future prospects of moving up the corporate ladder. This is a call of action to the field of psychology to conduct future research to better understand the psychological outcomes associated with identity negotiation which have may implications for health and economic disparities among individuals with multiple marginalized identities, specifically Black women.

### **Limitations**

While these findings contribute to our understanding of Black women's experiences in the workplace and social environments, there are some limitations that are important to highlight. The current study has three major limitations to be discussed: issues with member checking, distractions during video interviews, and generalizability. One limitation of the study is that because of the nature of a qualitative study, findings are not generalizable due to a non-representative sample. However, this limitation is mediated by the in-depth explanation of narratives as a procedural assessment of its methodology towards understanding the phenomenon of identity negotiation.

Also, there were some concerns regarding trustworthiness with member checking procedures. Another limitation of the study is extending co-researchers the opportunity to review their transcripts. While this process does add to the credibility of the study, there were some shortcomings in this process. One co-researcher completely changed her responses from the initial interview, which made it difficult to decipher her true genuine responses.

All of the interviews were conducted through videos, due to the demographic location of the researcher to all of the co-researchers. While this was a convenient method to both the



investigator and co-researchers, there were some problems with this method of interviewing. For instance, all of the interviews took place at the home of each co-researcher, and some of the co-researchers were distracted as they were engaged in other activities, such as texting on their phone or watching the television in between questions. For the future, it is best to remind the respondents at the beginning of the interview to try to put away all electronic devices during the interview so that they can focus on the subject at hand. Additionally, the video would freeze or cut off during the interviews at least one time with each co-researcher forcing the interview to be interrupted and the respondent had to refocus, however, this issue did not appear to be a bother to the respondents and they were easily able to re-engage. Although there were a few limitations using video interviewing, it allowed for respondents to be in the comfort of their home when asked to respond to questions about their personal lives. It also allowed the researcher to survey a wider geographical demographic of women, than wouldn't have happened otherwise.

### **“Matrix Theory of Negotiation:” Proposed Theoretical Model**

Given the body of work within this study, it is proposed that identity negotiation is a much more nuanced activity than how it is characterized academically. Within social psychology, identity negotiation theory (Toomey, 1999, pp. 26-27) states, “The identity negotiation theory focuses on the motif of identity security-vulnerability as the base that affects intercultural encounters. . . . It explains how one’s self-conception profoundly influences one’s cognitions, emotions and interactions.” Based on Toomey’s work, Jackson (2004) constructed “cultural contracts negotiation” which involves an individual choosing between three contract typologies: 1) ready to sign contract- of the enforcement to act or assimilate to the dominant culture (assimilation), 2) quasi-completed contract- straddling the fence between one’s Black culture and the European American culture (adaptation), and 3) co-created contract which

involves not changing Black cultural values (mutual valuation) (Jackson, 2004). However, identity negotiation is far more complex than previous has examined. Previous theories associated with identity negotiation do not take into account the complexity of intersectional identities. In the present study, based on the demographics of the co-researchers, only race, gender, and class identities were negotiated. However, if other identities, such as sexual orientation, religion, ability, and age also have to be negotiated, additional layers of identities in particular contexts must be taken into consideration.

Past work on identity negotiation theoretically informs the behaviors associated with identity negotiation, but does not include intersectional identities and the costs and benefits related to the outcomes of negotiating one's identities. Identity negotiation requires psychological resources and depending on how often one has to negotiate, an individual can be depleted of those resources. Once those psychological resources are eliminated or depleted, one may develop strategies to avoid negotiating, through signs of resistance and denial, such as being silent in conversations, limiting professional contacts, and restricting participation in social environments. Due to the intersectionality of oppressed identities, it may cause the negotiations of multiple identities in a given context. As depicted by the co-researchers, identity negotiation among Black women can lead to unauthentic personal and professional relationships, if there is a constant pressure to negotiate to fit in to the norm of each environment, and a loss in a sense of connectedness to their work, personal, and social communities. As an example, Black women may have to negotiate their Black identity in a room with predominantly White male and female colleagues, however, if Black women are in a room of all White males, then they may negotiate their identity as a Black woman, which can cause a strain on connectedness to their job if there is this constant negotiation of important racial and gender identities.

Furthermore, there may be a more complex negotiation of one's class and gender identities in relation to Black men.

As shown in Figure 1, the proposed “matrix of negotiation” theoretical model consists of a complexity that centers the individual and the intersectionality of one's identities, and adds factors such as the environment (e.g., workplace, family, school, social environments), salience of identities, costs and benefits, and values, to understand the phenomenon of identity negotiation. The proposed theory was adapted from Hill Collins' (2000) “matrix of domination,” which suggests that issues of oppression are all interconnected and that individuals may be affected in unique ways by how one identity, such as race, overlaps with other identities, such as gender and class. First it is important to grasp that each person has multiple identities and it is important to access how these identities interact and reinforce each other. Then, depending on the environment, some identities may be more or less salient. When a person is considered to be different or stands out in the group they are viewed as “other” and this can cause feelings of distress.

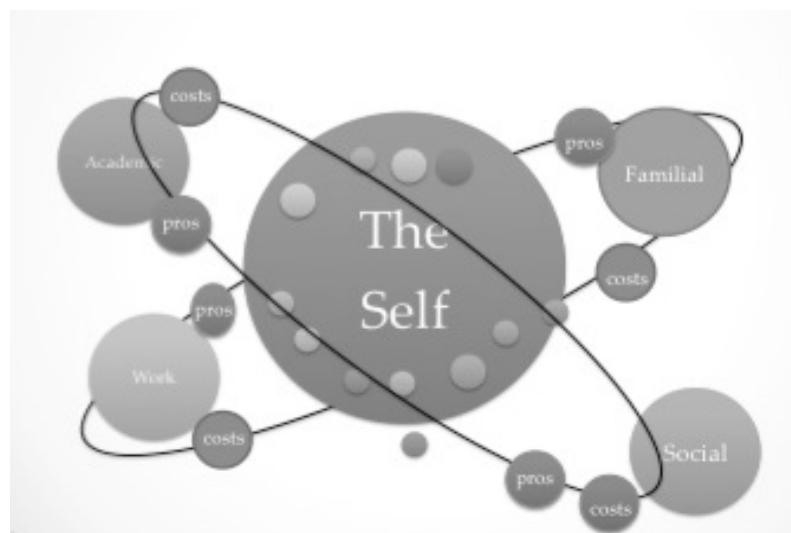


Figure 1. Proposed Theoretical Model: Matrix of Negotiation

The findings of the current study showed that the co-researchers negotiated their

identities in predominantly Black home and social communities and in predominantly White social and workplace communities to avoid standing out. Each environment requires that one re-adapts to the different structures surrounding community and in essence, the environment redefines who a person is or how they are perceived within a given context. For instance, academically successful Black women may negotiate their language within Black communities to sound more “ethnically Black,” while in a predominantly White workspace, Black women may negotiate by changing their behaviors and language to appear and sound “White and not ethnically Black.” Therefore, Black women negotiate in their workplace environment to be perceived as more professional. Thus, it takes psychological resources to negotiate one’s identities, dependent upon the context. In some situations, gender can become as important as race, requiring a series of gender based negotiations rather than racially motivated ones. Identity negotiation attempts to minimize the impact of the changing salience of various elements of identity within given environment and cultural contexts. As an individual moves to and from one environmental sphere to another, different parts of their identities increases in salience and importance, and increasing the psychological demand on the individual.

Once identity negotiation occurs, psychological costs and benefits increase, depending on the context. As an example, “acting White” may create a cost by triggering feelings of betrayal and abandonment to one’s allegiance to the Black community, but a benefit towards professional advancement. However, if a Black woman decides not to assimilate to the White dominant culture in the workspace, then that may put her at cost towards professional advancement, but a benefit of feeling connected to her Black culture in the workspace. Therefore, identity negotiation reduces the saliency for personal reasons/values and to fit into the norm of a specific context. As the environment shifts, the cost of not being professional increases, which is

dependent on what an individual values. As a case in point, if a Black woman values her commitment to the Black community and decides not to negotiate her racial/gender identities in the workspace, then that may result in others viewing her as “unprofessional,” which could lead to losing her position.

Overall, the success of identity negotiation depends on the level of experience associated with identity negotiation. Black women learn to negotiate power from peers, siblings, parents, and other family members. Some of the co-researchers stated that because they grew up in a predominantly White community or attended predominantly white schools, when they are “acting White,” it is a part of their self-identity. I would suggest that these individuals who are familiar with the White culture have an easier time negotiating their identities in the White cultural world and the Black cultural world. However, for those Black women who did not grow up in or attend predominantly White schools, like myself, it may cause more of an internal conflict to negotiate the White cultural world without having any prior experience. This may result in the development of strategies to resist negotiation, such as being silent or not attending work-related social functions, which can then negatively impact her work life, professional opportunities, and professional relations. . As discussed in the present study, most co-researchers described how having to negotiate their multiple stigmatized identities could be exhausting and as a result, they resisted negotiation.

Every individual at some point may engage in identity negotiation, however, identity negotiation has particularly high stakes for individuals who have multiple marginalized identities, such as Black women. There is a stigma attached to these identities due to power differentials, stereotypes, and negative stigma. As a result, to feel less powerless, a Black woman may engage in identity negotiation. There is an attempt on the behalf of the Black women to

negotiate their stigmatized identities. When a Black woman chooses to engage or not engage in identity negotiating, depending on her environment, it has certain costs and benefits. If she chooses not to change her Black vernacular or cultural behaviors working in a predominantly White context, that can influence her colleagues' perceptions of her work ethics, but she may benefit from feeling more authentic in the workplace. In this situation, the psychological cost of not assimilating to the "White norm" in her workplace may result in negative perceptions by her colleagues, yet she might feel more genuinely herself in the office.

Identity negotiation is a dynamic process that is constantly changing and fluctuating depending on which identities are salient depending on the context, values, and perceptions of others. The previous definition of identity negotiation and relevant theories do not address the costs and fluctuating components of the saliency of identities and the importance of values. One's values, such as family, commitment to community, or professional development, interact with these choices of how one negotiates one's identities. The proposed model of the "matrix of negotiation" adds factors such as the environment, costs and benefits, values, intersectionality of identities, and saliency of identities to complicate the phenomenon of identity negotiation. Unfortunately, for a person coming from multiple stigmatized groups, such as Black women, every choice has a cost; there's no "free lunch."

### **Implications**

As described in the introduction, research on the experiences of Black women in the workplace has focused primarily on more seasoned Black women, not taking into account Black women who are recent college graduates entering the workforce and who may just be beginning to engage in workplace identity negotiation. Therefore this study is significant as it addresses a void in the literature on the experiences of Black women who are recent college graduates and

contributes to the overall knowledge base in identity research among Black women. The practical significance of the study became more evident as I listened to the women and their stories and reflected on my own personal experiences relative to identity negotiation. It is evident that there are complexities associated with the negotiation of the intersection of race, gender, class, and among other identities. By understanding the issues that Black women face relative to their identity in the workforce, social environments, and familial environments, employers and community members can begin to understand one factor that is contributing to the social issues that are plaguing Black women, including mental and physical health concerns, economic freedom prosperity, and interpersonal relationships with Black men. The proposed model of the matrix theory of negotiation can be used to further examine the complexities associated with identity negotiation among individuals with multiple stigmatized identities.

One of the most prominent discussions among the co-researchers concerned the act of confronting and disputing stereotypes of Black women. According to Reynolds-Doss and colleagues (2008), although these stereotypes may not directly affect all Black women, many suffer from the implications of these stereotypes as they play out in White-dominated workplace. For instance, Black women who are viewed as Mammy are often placed in support-type positions and are viewed as the caretakers and advocates for Blacks and Black women. In contrast, Black women who are viewed as the Jezebel are seen as being unqualified workers and because they are perceived to use their bodies for upward mobility rather than their minds, they are not seen as valid leaders. Black women who are viewed as Sapphires are looked at having attitude problems and this image may limit Black women's professional development because it is an expectation that Black women will be hard and tough, which often times overshadows their professional skills. Lastly, the Strong Black woman often faces isolation and segregation in the

workplace because she is seen as being more component related to her women of color peers. Also, the Strong Black woman may be seen as a threat to others because she is highly talented and doesn't conform to the historical images of Black women (Reynolds-Doss et al., 2008). These dynamics associated with stereotypes of Black women have the potential to affect their economic gains, health concerns, and interpersonal relationships.

The implications of this study also suggest that identity negotiation can take a psychological toll on the psyche of Black women because it can be a very stressful process to engage in. Past studies have found that there is an association between racial/gender discrimination and health outcomes among Black women. For instance, a study conducted by Taylor and colleagues (2007) found that perceived experiences of racism are associated with increased rates of breast cancer particularly among younger Black women in the U.S. Other studies suggest that the prevalence of health issues among Black women is associated with the psychological stressors associated with perceived discrimination (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002; Kwate Valdimarsdottir & Guevarra, 2003). This research can inform counselors of the daily stress and exhaustion associated with identity negotiation among Black women, to better understand their experiences and the potential physical and psychological effects of stress associated with negotiation on other outcomes.

It is imperative to further explore the effect of identity negotiation on health outcomes among Black women. It is possible that a grasp of the mechanisms associated with identity negotiation can assist with the understanding and potential prevention of major health concerns facing Black women. Black people have the highest rates of health risks compared to other underrepresented ethnic groups. In particular, Black women are more likely than all other women to die from breast cancer, due to health disparities associated with lack of access to



health care (womenshealth.gov). Additionally, women account for about 1 in 4 new HIV/AIDS cases in the United States. Of these newly infected women, about 2 in 3 are African-American (womenshealth.gov). The future research of the primary investigator is to examine the influence of consistently negotiating identities in different contexts on health outcomes.

Identity negotiation research on Black women can help individuals in leadership positions and Black community members become aware of what identity conflicts are occurring and how they can be minimized. Additionally, this research allows for other Black women to make more conscious decisions as they navigate different contexts. As I was forced to navigate through the White cultural world during my graduate studies, I wish I had known about some of obstacles that I would have to confront as professional Black woman. Instead, I was blindsided by having to navigate these two worlds, because I grew up in a multicultural community and attended culturally diverse institutions and did not have firsthand experience in primarily White academic or workplace settings. Just as Freedom Schools were created for Blacks in America during the Civil Rights era for Black people to achieve social, political, and economic equality in the United States, an intervention program can be designed to assist with the identity development of Black women to foster positive professional, personal, and social relationships and promote economic and political commitment to the Black community.

### **Future Research**

This study focused on the experiences of ten academically successful Black women in social, home, familial, and professional environments. Future research about academically successful Black women who are recent college graduates will add to the literature and our understanding of their personal and professional interactions in the workplace (Reynolds-Dobbs

et al., 2012). Research pertaining to the intersectionality of race, class, and gender identities and its effect on interpersonal interactions is also supported by the findings of this study.

Future research might include a comparison of Black women who live in predominantly White environments to Black women living in predominantly Black environments. Such a study may better highlight the distinct differences in negotiating identity that result from geographic location. Other areas to consider would be studying the role that parental upbringing and racial socialization play in the lives of academically successful Black women. In speaking with each of the co-researchers, most stated that their parents/guardians had a huge influence on their racial/ethnic pride, and co-researchers identified this pride as something that helped them to deal with their perceived experiences of racism and discrimination. The findings from the current study can be extended in future studies to examine the association of racial socialization on the development of identity negotiation among Black female adolescents.

Another area that should be further explored by researchers is related to the psychological and health outcomes of identity negotiation among Black women. Throughout the interview, the co-researchers discussed how it was stressful to alter their behaviors and languages according to every situation. Specifically, given the information reported in the current study about the types of negotiation and influence of environmental factors, it would be interesting to explore if and how identity negotiation impacts feelings of depression and well being.

Though there are increasing enrollment rates of Black women in college and thus entering the workforce, it will be important for scholars, institutions, and workspaces to understand the social, psychological, and the behavioral experiences of Black women. Several studies discuss the mentoring dilemmas for Black women due to the lack of access to other Black women in certain sectors and the lack of Black role models that could serve as mentors (e.g.,

Blake, 1999). The pain and frustration associated with experiences of racial, gender, and/or class oppression, among other marginalized identities, remains a constant barrier to the survival of Black women in ivory communities (Harris, 2007). Devoting research to understanding the complexities of identity negotiation for people of color is critical to the efforts of workspaces to diversify their employees (Harris, 2007). It is possible that Black women will increasingly occupy high level positions, but in order for increased retention in addition to recruitment, research agendas and staff support should be aligned to make institutions more supportive of cultural languages and practices that differ from the dominant culture.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this investigation was to understand the phenomenon of the negotiation of race, class, and gender identities with enhanced understanding of Black women's self-perception, specifically as it relates to their participation in the workforce and personal and professional relationships. Using Black feminist thought as the theoretical lens through which to observe this phenomenon, a semi-structured interview guide was created by the primary research consisting of thirty questions and interviews with ten co-researchers who identify as Black/African American women,<sup>3</sup> graduated with their bachelor's degree in the past five years, live in a predominantly Black area, and work in a predominantly White institution.

The findings of the present research study provided new insights into the experiences of Black women as they relate to identity negotiation along race, class, and gender in predominantly White environments. The ten semi-structured recorded interviews were analyzed using Microsoft Word. Analysis of the data presented five themes: a) the complexity of the intersectionality of

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<sup>3</sup> Black/African American is stated separately here because it is evident that some of the co-researchers identify as Black while others choose to identify as African American. Therefore, I listed them out to be more inclusive.

race, gender, and class identities, b) negotiation of identities in predominantly white social and work environments, c) negotiation of identities in predominantly black environments, d) triggers for the negotiation of race, class, and gender identities, and e) mixed feelings towards negotiating identities. The results of this study may be utilized to develop intervention programs that support the development of academic and personal success among Black women. This study is one method allowing Black women to share their experiences of being in professional occupations, which can aid in bringing awareness to the mentoring needs among younger Black women.

### **Closing Reflections**

This has been an amazing and emotional journey to hear my colleagues reflect on their experiences of what it means to be a Black woman living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the United States. This is such an important historical time period to live in, where we have our first Black family in the White House, and while this is a great honor, Black people in America are still confronted daily with racism and discrimination. The idea for this study came to mind because of my own experiences as one of two Black people, in particular Black women, in my department. I became consciously aware of the process of identity negotiation, and because of my own engagement in identity negotiation I began to lose a sense of my Black cultural identity. I saw what working and living in a predominantly White environment did to my self-esteem and identity and I was curious to hear other experiences, to see how they were similar or different from my own.

Listening to the stories and experiences of ten Black women changed my perspective completely and made me realized the importance of exploring this topic. I had more negative associations of identity negotiation then I did positive ones. After conducting the interviews, I realized that while identity negotiation can be detrimental to one's psychological health, it is also

a technique used to combat structural systems of racism, sexism, and classism; thus further emphasizing the complexities of identity negotiation among Black women. These women were very caring, courageous, and successful, particularly considering that they only received a bachelor's degree in the past five years and were young members of their respective workplaces. They discussed how there were challenges along the way, and some are currently still grappling with the challenges, but they were able to overcome those obstacles and press forward. Some discussed how they never really thought about different experiences of discrimination, or what makes them proud to be Black women in the United States. I hope that this study was an initial step in continuing to have these conversations with others.

As I analyzed through the data collection and analyses processes, my assumptions of identity negotiation began to change. I realized that I was an “outsider within.” Since I began the process of returning to academia to obtain my doctoral degree, my perspectives have been altered by realities previously ignored. Though I am still an insider as a professional Black woman, I am also an outsider to the Black community as I am looked upon as an “expert” because I am pursuing my doctoral degree. Because of this outsider within status, I was no longer seen as an insider in the Black community, and something interesting happened in the interviews. I noticed that some of the co-researchers started to shift their identities within the interview. As I mentioned earlier, in one particular instance, a co-researcher completely changed her responses in regard to identity negotiation during member checking. In the initial interview, she had stated that it was difficult to alter her languages in behaviors and it caused a lot of stress. However, when given the opportunity to review her transcript, she indicated that altering her behaviors and languages was easy for her, without giving any explanation. My interpretation is that she did not want others to know her true experiences of identity negotiation because it is

seen as a negative aspect of her life. This contradiction opened my eyes that this process is more complex than I could have imagined and I also see that there is a lot more work to be done.

I hope that this research, particularly the voices of the ten co-researchers, will support all institutions that have a passion, commitment, and hope to positively influence the lives of all of students/employees, especially those who are marginalized. Also, I have hope that we can begin to have more discussions in the Black community about experiences of identity negotiation and how we can foster more positive relationships and support among Black women, and between Black men and women. In the future, I hope to continue to build this research line to create a program that will prepare women of color with preparation and navigation skills as they leave college and embark on their lifelong journey of personal and academic success.

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## APPENDIX A

### Pilot Study-Original Interview Questions

1. How do you define the term identity?
2. What is the importance of being Black/African American?
3. What is the importance of being a Black/African American woman?
4. What is the importance of your class identity to you?
5. What is the importance of your religious/spiritual identity to you?
6. How do your identities (race, gender, class) influence your ability to work effectively on your job/at school?
7. What does it mean to you to be a Black woman living in America?
8. Let's now discuss your different identities, their salience, and level of importance. Are some identities (i.e., race, gender, class) more important than others? Why and why not? When? Please explain.
9. What are the stereotypes of Black women that you are aware of, and how have these stereotypes affected you?
10. Do you feel that you have had to change who you are in different social/professional contexts when dealing with other Black people? If so, please give an example by telling a story.
11. Do you feel that you have had to change who you are in different social/professional contexts when dealing with White people? If so, please give an example by telling a story.
12. Have you ever felt that you needed to alter your behavior in order to be accepted or fit into different contexts?
13. If you answered yes to any of the past three questions, how does it make you feel to change who you are in different situations?

## APPENDIX B

### **Recruitment Email/Internet Posting**

My name is Danielle Dickens, and I am a doctoral student in Applied Social and Health Psychology at Colorado State University. I am currently conducting my dissertation under the guidance of Dr. Ernest Chavez. I am interested in the narratives of Black/African American women, who are recent college graduates. It is our hope that with this study, we can contribute to the understanding of the identities and navigation skills of Black/African American women, who are recent college graduates, and are in the workforce. There is a demographic questionnaire to complete and a 60-90 minute semi-structured interview that will be conducted via video chat (e.g., Skype, Google chat, FaceTime). In order to participate, you must 1) self-identify as a Black/African American woman, 2) recently obtained bachelors degree in the past 1-5 years, 3) currently working in a predominantly White environment, and 4) living in a majority Black urban area. Your participation is essential to learning more about the experiences of Black women in the workforce, so we hope that you will take part in our study. If you would like to participate in the study, please contact Danielle Dickens at [danielle.dickens@colostate.edu](mailto:danielle.dickens@colostate.edu) or [danielle.dickens@gmail.com](mailto:danielle.dickens@gmail.com) to set up an interview time. This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Colorado State University. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Institutional Review Board by phone at (970) 491-1655; by email at [janell.barker@colostate.edu](mailto:janell.barker@colostate.edu). Also, feel free to forward this message to anyone you think might be interested. Thank you.

## APPENDIX C

### Cover Letter

**Department of Psychology**  
**Colorado State University**

**Project Title:** Experiences of Academically Successful Black Women

**Investigators:** Ernest Chavez, Ph.D.  
Danielle Dickens, M.S.  
Phone: [REDACTED]  
Email: [Danielle.dickens@colostate.edu](mailto:Danielle.dickens@colostate.edu)

Dear Potential Participant:

My name is Danielle Dickens, and I am a doctoral student in Applied Social and Health Psychology at Colorado State University. I am currently conducting a study under the guidance of Dr. Ernest Chavez. I am interested in the narratives of Black/African American women, who are recent college graduates. It is our hope that with this study, we can contribute to the understanding of the unique experiences of Black/African American women, who are recent college graduates, and are in the workforce. Your participation is essential to learning more about this issue, so we hope that you will take part in our study.

In order to participate, you must 1) self-identify as Black/African American woman, 2) recently obtained bachelors degree in the past 1-5 years, 3) currently working in a predominantly White environment, and 4) living in a majority Black urban area.

If you meet these criteria, we would ask you to fill out a short demographic form and participate in a 60- to 90-minute interview about your identities, and how you navigate through various life experiences and situations. The interview will take place via video chat and your responses will only be audio-recorded. Once your interview is complete, your responses will be transcribed verbatim from the audio-recording and you will have the opportunity to check the transcript to make sure that your responses were recorded correctly. All audio-recordings will be immediately deleted once the interview is transcribed. Also, you will have the option of using your username or a mock username for the purposes of confidentiality, which will be created by the researchers. Additionally, you may be contacted for a brief follow-up after the interview. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty. To express our appreciation for the time you dedicate to this study, you will be offered \$10 for your participation in the study.

Because this is a qualitative research project, interview data may be published as part of the results of the study. In order to maintain anonymity, all identifying information will be concealed through pseudonyms in the final write-up of the study. We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or from

viewing unedited interview data. For example, your name will be kept separate from your research records and these two things will be stored in different places under lock and key.

The only identified risk of your participation in this study may be emotional difficulty that may arise from the discussion of negative experiences. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researchers have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

Thank you very much in advance for your time! Please feel free to pass on information about this study to other people who might be eligible. This research study had been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board – Human Subjects in Research, Colorado State University. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, feel free to contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator, at 970- 491-1655. If you have any questions about this study, you can contact me at [Danielle.dickens@colostate.edu](mailto:Danielle.dickens@colostate.edu) or [REDACTED].

Sincerely,  
Ernest Chavez, Ph.D.  
Professor

Danielle Dickens, M.S.  
Graduate Student

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Protocol

Before we begin, let me review some information about this research project. I am a graduate student in the Department of Psychology at Colorado State University and this is my doctoral dissertation. This study will look at the experiences of Black/African American women, who are recent college graduates. We are particularly interested in your experiences of being a Black woman, identities, and how you navigate through various life experiences and situations. This interview will be audio-recorded and will last 60-90 minutes. Your participation is voluntary and the only identified risk is emotional discomfort that may arise from talking about negative experiences. If you are not comfortable answering a question, or if at any time and for any reason, you would prefer not to continue, please feel free not to. We can take a break, stop and continue at a later date, or stop altogether. You will not be penalized in any way for deciding to stop participation at any time. At the end of the interview today, you will be mailed \$10 for your participation in this study. Do you have any questions or concerns? This interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed by the research team. In order to maintain anonymity, identifying information will be removed from your transcript and your contact information will be linked to your interview data in a separate password-protected document using a numerical code. (For Skype call: As a reminder, this video chat will be audio-recorded, however, it will not be video recorded). Because this is a qualitative research project, interview data may be published as part of the results of the study using pseudonyms for all participants. We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team, who consists of myself, my advisor, and a research assistant who also identifies as a Black woman, from knowing that you gave us information, or from viewing unedited interview data. Once interview data is transcribed, we will contact you via email and give you the option of checking your transcribed interview data for accuracy. Can you tell me what this study is about? Do you have any questions or concerns? If you have questions later, you may contact me or Dr. Ernest Chavez in the Psychology Department. I will give also you a form at the end of the interview with more information about the study and with contact information for the researchers. Are you still interested in participating in this study?

## APPENDIX E

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Now we will begin the interview and let's begin with some questions about your career choice. I want you to talk to me as if I am one of your close friends.

1. I would like you to tell me in your own words how your thinking and planning about your career has evolved or developed over the past 5 years or so. Describe by telling a story.
2. Can you tell me more about your life currently? Specifically, what has it been like for you to leave college and move into this phase of your life?
3. How do you define success?
4. What does it mean to be professional?
5. Now we are going to complete a set of questions about yourself. What are the important characteristics about yourself?
6. Now we are going to discuss your different identities, and their levels of importance. Are some identities (i.e., such as your race, gender, and class) more important than others? Why or why not? When? Please explain.
7. Next question is, is race an important aspect of your identity? Why or why not? Please explain.
8. Is gender an important aspect of your identity? Why or why not? Please explain.
9. Is social class an important aspect of your identity? Why or why not? Please explain.
10. Is religion/spirituality an important aspect of your identity? Why or why not? Please explain.
11. Does your professional role impact your personal life? Why or why not? Please explain.
12. These next set of questions are related to your experiences on the job  
Have you been discrimination against on the job due to your race, which has hindered your ability to work effectively on your job? If so, please explain and give a specific example.
13. Have you been discriminated against due to your gender, which hindered your ability to work effectively on your job if so, please explain.
14. Have you been discrimination against on the job due to your class identity, which hindered your ability to work effectively on your job if so, please explain.
15. Has your career aspirations impacted your family/romantic relationships? If so, please explain
16. Now we are going to discuss your experiences as a Black woman in America. Are you proud to be a Black/African American woman? If so, what makes you proud?
17. What are some of the major difficulties that you face as a Black woman?
18. What are the stereotypes of Black women that you are aware of?
19. How have these stereotypes you named affected you? Please give a specific example or experience.
20. Now we are going to discuss your experiences related to your work and social environments. Do you have professional support on your job? If so, please describe.
21. Now I am going to read scenarios to you and I want you to tell me what you would do or what have you done in the following situations. If you were in a professional setting with

majority White people, say if you are in a meeting and you are the only Black woman in the room, would you/have you ever changed your behavior/language to fit in or to accommodate them?

22. Same scenario, but imagine if you were in a social setting with majority White people, would you/have you ever changed your behavior/language to fit in or accommodate others
23. If you were in a situation with majority Black people and you notice that there is a class difference. Have you ever changed your behavior or downplayed your achievements/education/career achievements? If so, please give an example.
24. Has your skin color impacted your experiences when around other Black people? Have you ever been discriminated against due to your skin color?
25. How does it make you feel to have to alter your language or behaviors in the scenarios discussed? What emotions come to mind?
26. Okay, so now I want us to talk about the experiences of changing behaviors and languages. What are the positive results of changing and altering behaviors in the scenarios discussed?
27. What are the negative results of changing and altering behaviors in the scenarios discussed? Please explain.
28. Would you say that this concept/experience of altering behaviors or languages is unique to Black women? Why or why not? Please explain.
29. What advice would you give to another Black woman who is graduating from undergrad and about to enter the workforce?
30. Is there anything else you want to add based off of what we talked about in the interview?

## APPENDIX F

### Demographic Survey

Please complete the demographic survey below. Your information will be combined with the information from the other participants. If you prefer to not answer any of the questions below, please feel free to skip any questions, without any penalty.

Pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your age?
2. Current location \_\_\_\_\_ (state)
3. What is the race of your mother? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is the race of your father? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What class do you consider yourself to be in?
  - a. Lower class
  - b. Working class
  - c. Lower middle class
  - d. Upper middle class
  - e. Upper class
  - f. Other \_\_\_\_\_
6. Please describe your childhood neighborhood, based on the options below.
  - a. Majority Black
  - b. Majority White
  - c. Mixed race
7. Please describe your current residence, based on the options below.
  - a. Majority Black
  - b. Majority White
  - c. Mixed race
8. Please describe the racial makeup of your elementary school, based on the options below.
  - a. Majority Black
  - b. Majority White
  - c. Mixed race
9. Please describe the racial makeup of your high school, based on the options below.
  - a. Majority Black
  - b. Majority White
  - c. Mixed race



10. Please describe the racial makeup of your college, based on the options below.

- a. Majority Black
- b. Majority White
- c. Mixed race

11. Where was your undergraduate institution located?

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

12. Highest level of education

- a. 2 year college (associates)
- b. 4 year college (bachelors)
- c. Masters degree
- d. Doctoral degree
- e. Professional degree (MD/JD)

13. If you attended graduate studies, what type of institution did you attend for your graduate studies

- a. Predominantly White institution
- b. Predominantly Black college
- c. Mixed race

14. Where was your graduate institution located?

State \_\_\_\_\_

15. What is your marital status?

- a. Single, never married
- b. Married
- c. Separated
- d. Divorced
- e. Remarried
- f. Live in partner

16. What is your parental status?

- a. Married
- b. Divorced
- c. Separated
- d. Mother remarried
- e. Father remarried

17. Do you have any children? If so, how many?

18. What is your current employment?

- a. Current position\_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Number of years in position\_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Number of promotions\_\_\_\_\_
19. What is your current status?
- a. Employed
  - b. Student and employed
20. What is the racial makeup of your work environment?
- a. Majority White
  - b. Majority Black
  - c. Mixed race
21. What is the racial makeup of your close network of friends?
- a. Majority White
  - b. Majority Black
  - c. Mixed race
22. What is your prior position to your current employment?
- a. Prior position\_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Number of years in position\_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Number of promotions\_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Status (hours per week)\_\_\_\_\_
23. What is your religious affiliation?
- a. Christian
  - b. Judaism
  - c. Muslim
  - d. Hinduism
  - e. Buddhist
  - f. African religion
  - g. Islamic
  - h. Agnostic
  - i. Other\_\_\_\_\_
  - j. No religion

## APPENDIX G

### Debriefing Form

#### Department of Psychology Colorado State University

**Project Title:** Experiences of Academically Successful Black Women

**Investigators:** Ernest Chavez, Ph.D.  
Danielle Dickens, M.S.  
Phone: [REDACTED]  
Email: Danielle.dickens@colostate.edu

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the present study is to understand the lived experiences of Black women who are recent college graduates within the past 5 years and is currently in the workforce. As a participant in this study you were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and were involved in an interview/open dialogue about your self, identities, and how you navigate through various life situations and experiences. We were interested in studying navigation skills, especially identity negotiation, which is known as the automatic or conscious process of shifting one's worldviews or culture behaviors to feel accepted, as this is more common among underrepresented ethnic groups, especially among Black women and we wanted to have a better understanding of how Black women negotiate/shift their identities.

#### **Methods/Procedures**

As a participant in this study you were asked to complete a demographic survey and participate in an interview about your identities, experiences of a Black woman, situations at work, and experiences of discrimination. Specifically, it has been suggested that due to negative experiences of discrimination, Black women over time learn how to navigate through life to avoid the impact and feelings due to discrimination. One navigation skill that some Black women participate in is the process of negotiating/shifting one's identity (Jackson, 2004). The information in this study will allow the researchers to explore and understand the underlying processes involved with shifting one's identity among Black women. In addition, the results of this study will aid in the development of programs focusing on Black women transitioning from college to the workforce.

#### **Use of the Data**

All the responses you gave in this study are confidential. Identifying information (emails and names) was collected, but only so that your responses can be linked to your interview. Only the primary investigator and co-primary investigator will have access to all of the identifying information and all identifying information will be destroyed once the interview is transcribed. Your information from the surveys will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write

about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be identified in any of these written materials.

### **Implications and applications**

While there are no direct benefits from participation in this study, your participation will help us to understand the intersectionality of identities and to comprehend the phenomenon of identity negotiation among Black women who are recent college graduates. Due to negative experiences of discrimination, Black women over time learn how to navigate through life to avoid the impact and feelings due to discrimination and identity negotiation is one skill that Black women use to avoid the impact of discrimination. In a recent national study, Black women perceived more job and educational opportunities for themselves now than ever before; however, they were still concerned about discrimination related to both their race and gender (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2012). Black women have learned to change their language and the way they talk in order to obtain a job or to sound more “professional.” Therefore, shifting/negotiation of one’s identity can be seen as adaptive, by allowing Black women to explore differences parts of themselves, and to interact with people from different backgrounds (Jones et al., 2004). Alternatively, identity negotiation can be seen as not being true to one’s self. Having to shift one’s identity can cause a conflict in which it causes a distortion of one’s perception of their self. Given the complex process of identity shifting, research such as this study is needed to understand perceptions of identity shifting and how it might have an impact on how Black women perceive their authentic self. With this study, we hope to explore the impact that identity negotiation has on views of the self among Black women.

### **Resources available to you**

*Black Women’s Health Hotline:* 800-288-1114

In acknowledgment of the need to increase awareness within the African American female community, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and the National Black Nurses Association have partnered in the National Campaign on Clinical Depression.

*Sisters Acquiring Financial Empowerment* 1-800-757-4919

For employment and career assistance, please call the number listed above.

We would like to thank you for participating in this study. Please contact the researchers if you have any questions about your participation in this study.