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PARTICULAR PAINS, PARTICULAR SUFFERINGS: USING SISTA CIRCLE TO EXPLORE BELONGINGNESS AS A FACTOR AFFECTING THE ACADEMIC PERSISTENCE OF BLACK, WOMEN DOCTORAL RECIPIENTS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS IN THE SOUTH

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by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to understand if belongingness, or the need to belong, is an inhibiting factor for Black women to the completion of doctoral programs, specifically at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) in the South. This qualitative study employs the Sista Circle methodology to discuss the lived experiences of Black female doctoral recipients from Southern PWIs. The Sense of Belonging Model and the Sista Circle Methodology is used to inform the experiences of Black women doctoral students in relation to their academic persistence and overall programmatic experience. The findings from this study can also provide insight for diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in higher education and corporate spaces. The intersectionality of being both Black and woman, while navigating the social (nonacademic) implications of doctoral studies, without a cultural connection or sense of belonging, to the majority of faculty and peers, was posed as the toughest factor affecting the doctoral persistence and programmatic satisfaction of Sistas in the study.

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girl that marched to the rhythm of her own music. Thank you for challenging yourself to understand things that you had not experienced firsthand. Your love and light have guided me throughout this journey and journeys to come.

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DEDICATION

"The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman."

-Malcolm X

I dedicate this dissertation to every single Black girl and woman who has ever felt the need to shrink herself, in order to be socially accepted by her nonblack or male peers. I wrote this phenomenological study, in hopes that it calls our White and Black nonwomen colleagues, to take action— to ultimately create safer spaces for us to coexist. I dedicate this dissertation to my daughter, who like this study, I carried in my belly, knowing that she too will one day change the world.

Black woman, I see you.

Black woman, I understand you.

Black woman, I champion you.

Black women, this is for us!

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BFT	Black Feminist Thought
DEI	Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion
HBCU	Historically Black Colleges and Universities
PWI	Predominantly White Institution
SBM	Sense of Belonging Model
SCM	Sista Circle Methodology
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

The underrepresentation of Black students in United States' graduate programs directly correlates to the number of Black doctoral degree recipients, which is far below the national average (Milner, 2004; Tierney et al., 2004). The post-secondary rate of enrollment for Black people has gradually increased throughout history. In 2018, the Black college enrollment rate was 40% (NCES, 2019). In 2020, 53,754 Black people enrolled in graduate school and made up 12.3% of all first-time graduate enrollees in the United States (CGS, 2021). Research supports the idea that Black women do not graduate from graduate programs at the same rate as their Black male, White, or Asian counterparts (NCES, 2019; CGS, 2015; CGS, 2021, Sowell, et al. 2015). The Council of Graduate Schools (2015) suggests that though Underrepresented Minorities (URM) have not been historically afforded the opportunity to participate in doctoral education in the same manner as their peers, the disparity in URM completion rates continues to trend the lowest for Black doctoral students (Sowell, et al, 2015). In 2015, Black doctoral students, regardless of discipline, were reported to have a seven-year completion rate of 38% and a ten-year completion rate of 50%, though there was a 12 percent increase between seven- and ten-year completers; this was still the lowest completion rate of all the URMs reported. The racial disparity in graduate school enrollment and persistence is alarming. The disproportion of Black doctoral recipients is a direct result of the low completion rates of Black men and women, not low enrollment rates (Hinton-Johnson, 2003; Patterson-Stewart, et al, 1997). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) completed a study that observed graduate enrollment from 1976 to 2008 by ethnic group and highlighted the fact that Black graduate student enrollment increased from 90,000 in

1976 to 315,000 in 2008. The significant increase in Black graduate enrollment over the 30-year period is on par with the increase in the group's undergraduate enrollment. However, the disparity in Black doctoral recipients is still a concern. In 2010, a total of 81,953 women earned doctoral degrees and 4.7% (3,622) were Black.

To create and foster strategies and programs that will support Black women in the attainment of graduate degrees, researchers must explore what is known about their experiences with belongingness and how it negatively or positively affected their ability to persist through to completion. It is speculated that a student's sense of belongingness, or a lack thereof, plays a pivotal role in academic achievement (Evans et al., 2010; Freeman et al., 2007; Rosenberg & McCullogh, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989). This study seeks to understand if belongingness, or the need to belong, is a contributing factor in the doctoral completion of Black women, specifically at Predominately White Institutions in the South.

Background

The Civil Rights Era is responsible for pushing southern PWIs to admit and accommodate students of color (Polgar, 2011). It was not until 1972 that the United States Department of Education required federally funded colleges and universities such as the University of Mississippi, the University of Georgia, and the University of Louisiana, to open their doors to all students, regardless of race or status. Though the integration of higher education occurred towards the end of the Civil Rights Movement, racial equality in education was not yet a reality. The forced integration of college and university campuses, brought on the idea that institutions of higher education could justify race-based preferences for underrepresented groups in their admissions process, in

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order to purposely diversify the student body (Estlund, 2005). The integration of people of color into southern PWIs has progressed over the years, resulting in the erection of minority affairs departments in many PWIs across the country (Brown, et al, 2005). Minority programming came about to address the stress inflicted on Black students by way of racial experiences fueled by the lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity on college/university campuses (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Student affairs professionals at PWIs came to understand, post Jim Crow, that without intentional programmatic efforts, they would not be able to meet the academic and psychological needs of their Black and Brown learners.

At the end of the Civil Rights Movement, racism became less overt and more systemic. Instead of public hangings, Black and Brown people experience police brutality. Though there are no longer separate entrances at public places, there are disparities in access to equitable education, housing, and compensation. Michael Eric Dyson (2004) suggests that "the symptoms of racial antipathy persisted; they are harder to prove and more difficult to analyze" (p. 215). After the 1960s, many Whites adopted the ideology of "colorblindness," "as a method to avoid discriminating based upon race" (Thomas, 2018), and yet continued to enjoy the societal and social privileges of their Whiteness (Leonardo, 2009). According to Bonilla-Silva (2010) "racial considerations shade almost everything in America" (p.1). Many old racial biases are being reworked and recycled into new biases. One of the most apparent biases is systemic racism in higher education. Critical Race Theory scholars (Harris, 1993; Solorzano et al., 2000) define systemic racism as everyday experiences of racism which are often embedded into societal norms. In *The Shape of the River,* authors and economists, William Bowen and

Derek Bok (2000) suggest that after controlling for academic indicators such as high school GPA, standardized test scores, and socioeconomic status, as well as gender, school selectivity, and major, Black students still fare worse than White students at PWIs. They speculate that systemic racism is the rationale for this.

Abundant research exists on the academic persistence of Black students after the integration of higher education (Brantlinger, 1991; Eitle & Eitle, 2004; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Hinojosa, 2008; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011; Singham, 2003; Skiba et al., 2002), but there is not an abundance of research on the persistence of Black female doctoral recipients from Predominantly White Institutions in the South. Studies suggest that Black people traditionally enroll in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) for undergraduate studies at a greater rate than PWIs (Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010). However, HBCUs lag behind their White counterparts in graduate and professional degree offerings, and 90% of the nation's HBCUs exist in ten southern states, more Black people enroll in PWIs for graduate/professional studies (Chen, Ingram, & Davis, 2014). The findings from previous research suggests that Black students who attend PWIs typically experience feelings of isolation and lack faculty support, resulting in delayed or no graduation (Uqdah et al., 2009).

Purpose of the Study

Many organizations try to provide a general definition of belongingness that will encompass the thoughts and feelings for entire groups. Far too often, they fall short due to the idea of belongingness being an individual construct. This study seeks to examine belongingness as a factor that contributes to the success of Black female doctoral

students. This study seeks to assist colleges and universities, specifically predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in their quest to create environments that foster better (matriculation/graduation/enrollment) outcomes for these students (Poock, 2007). Many studies have evaluated the concept of Black belongingness at the undergraduate level, and within specific disciplines (Hausmann et al., 2007), but very few have focused on the experiences and belongingness of Black doctorate recipients at PWIs (Brewley et al., 2005; Ellis, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Turner & Thompson, 1993). The graduation rates of Black women in doctoral programs are low across the United States even though the completion rates of other groups continue to rise (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Leonardo, 2009). In the fall of 2018, applications for admission to graduate school increased by 2.2% with a total graduate enrollment increase of 1.5% (Council of Graduate Schools, 2019). At the same time, 11.8% of those who enrolled in graduate school were Black; 54.4% of the Black applicants identified as women (CGS, 2019). There are many factors which suggest why Black women are not completing graduate school at the same rate as their White counterparts, but they have not been discussed at great lengths in literature. The relationship between Black female doctoral recipients and their sense of belongingness regarding the institutional type, by evaluating the interactions with peers and faculty, has primarily been explored at the undergraduate level (Brooks et al., 2012; Jones & Michelle, 2006; Roberston & Mason, 2008; Schwitzer et al., 1999).

This study seeks to examine sense of belongingness as a factor in the doctoral completion of Black women from southern PWIs. Many researchers suggest that the post-segregation remnants of oppression are visible in the Black student experience, by

way of emotional disconnections between campus environments and their firsthand experiences (Coker, 2003; Watt, 2006). Many faculty members and staff at PWIs lack awareness of the special emotional challenges that Black women face (Hannon, 2016; Gonzalez-Prendes & Thomas, 2011; Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2015). Black and Brown women at PWIs face challenges around imposter syndrome due to the lack of representation in their respective programs. They also endure feelings of isolation and microaggressions e.g., being singled out by security personnel, belittled intellectually, or treated as indistinguishable from other Black people (Hope et al., 2016; Jackson & Wingfield, 2013; Sue, 2010). Numerous studies indicate that Black graduate students have negative graduate experiences at their Predominantly White Institutions and have encountered racism, sexism, lack of financial and social support, and a small percentage of ethnic diversity within the faculty (Ellis, 2000: Johnson-Bailey, 2004; King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996; Milner, 2004; Patterson-Stewart et al., 1997; Turner & Thompson, 1993; M. R. Williams et al., 2005). This study seeks to explore if belongingness or the lack of belongingness plays a role in the attainment, or delayed attainment of Black women seeking doctoral degrees from southern Predominately White Institutions.

Research Questions

The primary research questions for this study are:

1. Does sense of belonging influence persistence and the overall programmatic experiences of Black women (female) doctoral recipients in terms of their enrollment and journey to and through doctoral programs at PWIs?

2. How do lived experiences of Black women doctoral recipients at southern

   Predominately White Institutions affect their sense of belongingness?

The hypotheses of the study include:

- Sense of belongingness, or the lack thereof, directly influences Black women's

  ability to persist through doctoral programs at PWIs.

- Black women have lived experiences that are particular to them. Thus, the

  doctoral experiences of Black Women at southern PWIs are peculiar and their

  stories and experiences are only able to be told by them.

Conceptual Framework

This study will use theories that have been applied to students of color, mainly at

the undergraduate level, to contextualize the sense of belongingness of Black women

doctoral recipients. The conceptual framework that best informs this study is based on

Hurtado and Carter's (1997) Sense of Belonging Model (SBM). Due to the nature of

most models seeking to understand the impact of belongingness as it pertains to White

students, the SBM is the best choice for this research. It is thought that persistence is

positively or negatively impacted by a student's commitment to their education as well as

their experiences at the college/university (Tinto, 1993). Hurtado and Carter (1997)

refute claims made by Tinto based on the lack of cultural variables that potentially play a

role in the academic and social integration of students of color at PWIs. The researcher

will utilize Hurtado and Carter's (1997) Sense of Belonging Model to theorize the

experiences of Black graduates that either encourage or delay their academic persistence.

The SBM has been traditionally used to inform studies about undergraduate

students, however, the model is transferable across multiple levels. Hurtado and Carter

(1997) define sense of belonging as "the psychological sense of identification and affiliation with the campus community" (p. 338). In addition to this, Baumeister and Leary (1995) determine that regular social contact and feelings of connectedness are essential components of belongingness. On a college/university campus, social contact is one of the primary factors that helps students feel as if they belong, no matter their classification. It is speculated that if one understands the extent to which a student "belongs" one should also be able to understand their perception of experiences that may positively or negatively affect their ability or desire to persist (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Research suggests that a sense of belonging is important in determining academic motivation/persistence (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

In 2005, Pascarella and Terenzini postulated that a student's sense of "belonging is related to persistence, degree attainment, and pursuit of graduate education" (p. 425). When a student feels like they belong, they are better able to persist in their educational journey and graduate (Astin, 1993). This study will explore the idea that Black women doctoral students need to belong, and not belonging negatively affects their completion rate. This notion is conceived based on the theory that graduate students are less likely to be involved in college/university happenings; therefore, finding spaces where one belongs within their program is important. Graduate students are usually adult learners who live off campus, often with jobs and families (Polson, 2003). Therefore, the idea of belongingness from Hoffman et al. (2003), as defined in literature fails to explore the experiences of minority doctoral experiences (specifically Black people) but instead focus mostly on White undergraduate student experiences.

Successfully integrating into the college community directly impacts a student's ability to persist (Tinto, 1993). It can be inferred that students who do not integrate in campus communities are more likely to not persist. Understanding and defining the college community for graduate students and how social integration, a student's interaction with another peer or faculty member, and academic integration, the student's academic development and the care and concern of the faculty regarding said development, is important when assessing factors that contribute to student persistence (Tinto, 1993). Hurtado and Carter (1997) suggest that social integration is often difficult for minority students attending PWIs. The SBM categorizes belongingness to understand how social and academic integration contribute to minority students' ability to identify with their institution and ultimately their ability to persist (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). The need to belong or the concept of belonging creates a situation of insiders and outsiders (Crisp, 2010) which is often the case on the campus of PWIs, where the Black students feel like outsiders.

At the undergraduate level, researchers (Gilliard, 1996; Mandell, Mulvey, & Bond, 1992; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003) identify a chilly racial climate as a key factor in explaining why students of color were less likely to socially integrate into their college campuses. Research on PWIs and the perception of racial climate by minority students conclude that students of color are often left feeling isolated and alone (Hurtado et al., 1999). Research findings conclude that the graduate and undergraduate experiences of Black people at HBCUs are parallel to one another (Palmer et al., 2012). HBCUs continue to thrive in creating a safe, supportive environment for minority students, which results in a higher percentage of Black students who persist as compared to their

predominately White counterparts. However, one must take in consideration that upon

inception, HBCUs were designed to provide education to Black students (Taylor, 2012).

However, many HBCUs only offer graduate degrees at the master's level. Due to this,

many Black students who choose to pursue advanced degrees, such as doctorates and

professional degrees, enroll in PWIs.

Methodology (Significance)

This study will examine the sense of belongingness of Black female doctoral

recipients at southern PWIs. To address the research questions, a qualitative study

employing the Sista Circle methodology will be used to discuss the lived experiences of

Black female doctoral recipients at PWIs in the South. The Sista Circle design is

perceived to be the most practical method for this research study as it is a qualitative

research method and support group for examining the lived experiences of Black women

(Lacy, 2017). This method was chosen specifically due to three key features:

communication dynamics, centrality or empowerment, and the researcher's ability to

participate in the circle (Lacy, 2017).

In addition to using the Sista Circle to discuss the lived experiences of Black

female doctoral recipients, the theoretical framework of Black Feminist Thought (BFT)

will be utilized. The overarching purpose of U.S. Black feminist thought it to resist

oppression (Collins, 2000). Within PWIs, many Black female doctoral recipients deal

with various forms of oppression, from being forced/bullied into writing dissertations on

topics which do not resonate with them to being forced into a type of degree program that

they do not wish to pursue. Black women are often unable to speak freely and to voice

their opinions as they need to, out of fear of being perceived as aggressive or angry

(Hrabowski, et al, 2002). Black women are often unable to determine who they are based on their own definitions of themselves because society has already decided who they are (hooks, 1989). The concept of BFT along with the Sista Circle will allow Black women doctoral recipients to share their feelings surrounding their experiences with earning their doctoral degrees at PWIs. By employing BFT, the participants can focus on their own educational excellence outside of the expectations of White norms within the PWI (Lewis-Flenaugh, 2021).

Significance of the Study

As Black college student enrollment increases, it is important that these students not only enroll, but satisfactorily persist and complete their degree programs. This study will consider belongingness as a factor and its influence on persistence. The significance of this study is to contribute to existing knowledge on Black women' sense of belongingness at PWIs in direct correlation with their ability to persist, while focusing on Black female doctoral recipients, which has not been explored. Belongingness is a major factor in the persistence of Black female doctoral recipients at PWIs. Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement postulates that the acclimation of individuals to their college/university environment is directly correlated with retention and ultimately persistence.

Definition of Terms

Academic and Social Integration-These terms may be used together or separately. They refer to the way in which a student identifies and interacts with academic members, such as faculty and staff, and social members, such as peers and the entire college institution at large. "Academic and social integration may describe a condition (that is,

the individual's place in the academic and social systems) or an individual perception (that is, the individual's personal sense of place in those systems)" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 53).

Academic Persistence- In this study, the term persistence or academic persistence refers to a student's continued progress through a course or program with satisfactory completion of coursework from semester to semester, which will ultimately result in degree completion (O'Toole et al., 2003).

Belongingness/Sense of Belonging- The extent to which students feel a part of, connected to, and supported by their campus community (Inkelas & Associates, 2004). It also refers to the feeling of connectedness one may feel to their peers, faculty, graduate program, or university at large. Belongingness is the need to be and perception of being involved with others at differing interpersonal levels, which contributes to one's sense of connectedness (being part of, feeling accepted, and fitting in), and esteem (being cared about, valued, and respected by others), while providing reciprocal acceptance, caring, and valuing to others.

Assumptions

The main objective of this study is to understand if belongingness plays a role in the academic persistence of Black female doctoral recipients at southern PWIs. It is based on the primary assumption that statistically Black women do not persist in postsecondary education, both undergraduate and graduate, at the same rate as their White, Asian, and Latino counterparts (Brantlinger, 1991; Eitle & Eitle, 2004; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Hinojosa, 2008; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Singham, 2003; Poguero & Shekarkhar, 2011). The Sense of Belonging Model and the Sista Circle

method will inform the experiences of Black female graduate students in relation to their academic persistence. It is assumed that the participants will be forthright about their experiences as graduate students at a PWI. Because this study seeks to understand institutional belongingness as a factor that may or may not have affected the academic persistence of the observed population, the researcher assumes that each participant initially had the desire to enroll and ultimately complete their graduate program within seven years. Lastly, it is assumed that the researcher will be able to codify all responses in a way that the data will answer the study's research questions.

Limitations

The focus of this qualitative study is to understand Black female doctoral recipients' sense of belonging while in their doctoral program and the impact it had on their academic persistence. Generalizations based on the findings of this study should be carefully examined as limitations do exist. One of the primary limitations is the definition of belongingness as a concept. Research on the theory of belongingness suggests that the idea of belonging is one that is relative or personal to the individual; therefore, studies on the same notion may be called a myriad of other things such as attachment, inclusion, closeness, etc. (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Johnson et al., 2007, Maestas et al., 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007).

Delimitations

This qualitative study will determine whether the institutional belongingness of Black female graduate recipients from southern PWIs directly contributes to academic persistence. To collect data from the targeted population, the researcher will utilize the Sense of Belonging Model and the Sista Circle to answer the research questions. The

Sista Circle will consist of Black women who have completed their doctoral degrees at PWIs in the South. This study focuses on Black women who received their doctorates from southern PWIs, yields to the historical implications of education oppression for Black women in the deep South.

Since the Sista Circle Methodology calls on the researcher to also be a participant, it is imperative to name the lived experiences that influence the researcher's perspective. The researcher is a Black woman who has attended both a Historically Black College and a Predominately White Institution. The researcher has also exceeded the desired six-to-seven-year completion timeframe for traditional doctoral students. The researcher made a conscious decision to explore the particular pains and sufferings of Black women as a marginalized group, not only for the sake of the academy, but also as a practitioner in education.

Summary

The increase in Black college enrollment is phenomenal (NCES, 2011) considering the historic boundaries placed on this group related to the pursuit of education. Despite Black female graduate student enrollment being at an all-time high, academic persistence or degree completion is still significantly low. Many scholars postulate that the persistence of most students, regardless of race, is indicative of how well they acclimate, fit in, and connect with their college/university (Astin, 1993). Understanding the concept of belongingness and how it plays a role in the persistence of Black female graduate students will offer new insight into how institutions may help future students persist to graduation.

Graduate admission standards are used as a vetting process to assess the readiness of an applicant to persist throughout the program. Considering these standards are more rigorous than ever and the number of Black graduate student enrollees continue to climb, one would infer that these students are academically prepared to persist in their chosen programs (St. John, et al, 2005). This research will examine social factors such as the need to belong and sense of belonging as a determinant of academic persistence.

This dissertation continues with a literature review in Chapter Two, which will review the literature to provide a greater foundational perspective of the particular pains and suffering of Black women's journey to and through education. Each subsection is directly linked to laying a literary foundation for each research question.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines research on the experiences of Black women doctoral recipients during their educational journey at PWIs. In order to begin discussing the literature, there must be a discussion of the historical context of Black women in spaces that were not traditionally created for them, such as the academy (Jaggers, 2019). Organizations such as Black sororities serve as a space for empowerment, mentorship, and professional networking opportunities for them as students at PWIs (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Jaggers, 2019). Unfortunately, not enough of these spaces exist. In addition to this, there must be a discussion about the Black experience of obtaining a PhD, especially for women.

Introduction

One key limitation is the lack of research that investigates the experiences, specifically belongingness, of Black women doctoral recipients from PWIs. There is literature that speaks to the experiences of Black women doctoral recipients at HBCUs and PWIs (Cropps, 2018; Dortch & Patel, 2017; Lewis, 2018; Slusher, 2018; Hewitt, 2021; Strayhorn, 2018) but does not focus on the plight of the Black women doctoral recipients. Belongingness as a factor that affects persistence and completion, for Black men, has been studied in many capacities (Brooms, Clark, & Druery, 2019; Boston & Warren, 2017; Wright, 2016) due to them having the lowest retention and graduation rates compared to women and other ethnic groups (Planty et al., 2009). There is also an abundance of literature that speaks to the sense of belongingness that Black high school students feel (Booker, 2007; Boston & Warren, 2017; Wright, 2016) and the sense of belongingness that men of color feel in various school settings, such as colleges and

universities (Fils-Aime, 2021; Thelamour, et al., 2019); however, literature that speaks to the sense of belongingness and its effect on the persistence of Black women doctoral recipients at southern PWIs is lacking.

Deciding to obtain a PhD is not a minor ordeal and it is no easy feat (Barker, 2011). There is a certain respect and prestige given to those with a terminal degree in any field. Revered as the "pinnacle of educational achievement," (Jones, 2013) Black women tend to seek doctorates as a means of notoriety and validation in their fields (Bickham-Chavers, 2003). Navigating through graduate school in pursuit of a terminal degree is a challenging endeavor for most Black women (Williams, et al., 2005). In 2019, 7.1% of doctorates were awarded to Black students (JBHE, 2020). Black female doctoral recipients at PWIs may not always receive the support and recognition they deserve. Black female doctoral recipients are often seen as less than their White counterparts and are excluded or marginalized in academia (Evans, 2007).

There is an expectation that people must succeed when they enter college, no matter their race. However, there is a communal and cultural sense of obligation to succeed put on Black students since the era of desegregation and the integration of colleges and universities. For any student to persist in college, he or she must learn to adapt to that college's formal and informal rules and expectations for success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Black students, specifically, must learn how to "speak the language" of academia, regardless of where they choose to attend college. Examples of learning to "speak the language" of academia include Black students learning how to interact with peers, faculty, and staff, how to succeed in class, and how to access needed resources, etc. (Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004). When Black students decide to attend PWIs, they

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often face a variety of challenges such as hostile campuses, culturally ignorant students and staff, limited and decreasing economic assistance, lack of Black faculty, and cultural alienation and isolation (Easley, 1993; Hawkins, 1989; Nagasawa & Wong, 1999). Additionally, there are many forms of oppression experienced by Black women in academia (Dowdy, 2008). Ultimately, there are gaps in the literature which investigate the factors that play a role in the persistence, retention, and degree attainment for Black women doctoral recipients (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017).

Exploring Intersectionality

In 1991, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality to describe the intersection of racism and sexism factors in Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately (Wright, 2021). Intersectionality can help with understanding how Black women's experiences in higher education is unique compared to that of others due to them being caught between two worlds which can be very harmful to their development and progress as a group (Wright, 2021).

Research on minorities and women often ignores the unique position and experiences of Black women which renders Black women virtually invisible (Moses, 1997). Additionally Black women doctoral recipients are living contradictions (Turner, 2002) where being Black and in academe are not viewed as things that go together. Leadership positions are typically held by White men and PWIs support the advancement of men and tend to limit the opportunities for Black women (Dixon, 2005). Therefore, as Black women opt to obtain doctorates from PWIs, they usually lack representation of themselves in the faculty and staff at their respective institution. The

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1976 Civil Rights Act and affirmative action requirements gave an additional impetus to colleges and universities to recruit additional Black faculty and administrators (Mosley, 1980).

When higher education opportunities arose for the Black population, Black men were the ones who were able to attend. Oberlin College was founded in 1833 and welcomed Black students as equals to Whites (Cowan & Maguire, 1995). The opportunities for African American women to enroll in institutions of higher education such as Oberlin College and Minor Teacher College were the exception (Carter, 1944). By 1890, only 30 African American women held college degrees compared to 300 African American men and 250 White women (Fletcher, 1943). White male perspectives pervade academia (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000) and because Black women do not meet the scholar-in-training mold of a White man, many Black women must redefine what it means to be a scholar (Souto-Manning & Ray, 2007).

Oftentimes Black women who receive doctoral degrees and/or work in higher education have complex lives with multiple identities and histories as scholars (Dowdy, 2008). There is a complex sense of ambiguity for these women as they seek to improve the plight of Black women in higher education. Black women are not able to walk through the halls as women or Black, but they must walk as survivors of the intersectional consequences of anti-Blackness, White supremacy, and patriarchy (Dancy, et al., 2018; Hills, 2019). Black women doctoral recipients must be aware of space and place as it relates to race and gender in the academic community and are almost always thinking about the people in the room, the space they occupy, and the role that they may or may not play in certain scenarios (Roby & Cook, 2019). Black women doctoral

recipients are not allowed to just be Black women. They always have to navigate a campus community and educational system which was not designed to cater to the specific needs of Black women (Roby & Cook, 2019).

PWIs can be perceived as difficult places for Black women to coexist because they face a double minority status that negatively impacts perceptions of them as less than capable educators, researchers, and scholars (Wilson 2012). Black women must navigate negative racial perceptions in addition to encountering the duality of race and gender bias (Domingue, 2015; Porter & Dean, 2015; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Support services are necessary for Black women at PWIs to provide a space where their experiences are shared, accepted, and validated (Johnson, 2012), while Black women need the space to also self-disclose in order to resist social oppression (Collins, 2000; Johnson, 2012).

Finding a Sense of Belongingness

Belongingness is defined as the extent to which students feel a part of, connected to, or supported by their campus community (Inkelas & Associates, 2004). There is a distinct difference between the experience of belongingness for Black women who attend HBCUs and those who attend PWIs. Typically, they have these feelings regarding belongingness based on their emotional connections to a common history and shared experiences and being in a space where they can embrace their ethnic standards without fear or stigma (Kumar et al., 2017). Additionally, students' racial identity can influence their feelings of belongingness and achievement at school (Byrd & Chavous, 2011; Boston & Warren, 2017).

Individuals experience a sense of belonging when they feel that they are valued and respected members of a community (Kumar et al., 2019). This includes the academic arena and is not limited to specific degree programs. The need to belong and be accepted is fundamental and drives much of human pursuit, activity, and thinking (Levett-Jones et al., 2007). When Black women decide to obtain their doctoral degrees at PWIs, they are often left to cope with feelings of social isolation, discrimination, aggression, and/or general dissatisfaction by adopting a sense of "belonging-within-alienation" and typically feel connected to others with similar racial or ethnic backgrounds (Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004). Black students have reported harassment, hostile classroom interactions, feelings of disidentification, exclusion, and low self-esteem (Green & Glasson, 2009; Hope et al., 2013; Booker, 2016) which may influence their sense of belongingness and/or connectedness.

Ultimately, feeling as if one belongs involves becoming an insider within a group of people who have common attributes or beliefs such as Black female doctoral students on a PWI campus (Crisp, 2010). The successful or unsuccessful experiences of these women at a PWI is both directly and indirectly related to a blend of individual, environmental and racial experiences, which may be affected by interventions designed to reduce Black student dropout rates (Hamilton, 2009; Slusher, 2018).

Black Women in the Academy

For the first Black women college graduates in the 1850s, no faculty positions were available (Evans, 2007). *Brown v. Topeka* and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 resulted in more Black women faculty being hired by PWIs (Dowdy, 2008). Currently, Black women make up less than 5% of faculty (NCES, 2019) and tend to not be placed in

professional paths that could lead them to academic leadership (Dixon, 2005). The most significant number of Black administrators are relegated to positions in mid-level management and oversee special programs without much autonomy or power (Moore & Wagstaff, 1974, as cited in Lightsey, 2020).

For the dominant culture, doctoral degrees were less training for pedagogy than a ticket to a professorship in which good teaching became optional and public service expendable (Evans, 2007). Education, particularly higher education, has always been viewed as an avenue to access knowledge and gain upward mobility in America (Johnson, 2012). In 1964, the Robbins Committee recommended the mass expansion of higher education as a universal provision for any individual having the necessary ability which meant that access to higher education would rest on merit, rather than on the ability to pay (Jones, 2006).

Several Black women in and outside of the academy have experienced microaggressions. They often internalize the unfavorable opinions of others and spend time defending themselves and their character as Black women. Black women faculty are often trapped in negative race and gender stereotypes where they are considered both aggressive and less competent by their male colleagues and students when being assertive (Aparicio, 1999; Walkington, 2017). Black women faculty are tasked with avoiding the 'angry Black woman' stigma, even when expressing legitimate concerns about discrimination (Davis & Brown, 2017). Many Black women faculty experience living contradictions and ambiguous empowerment (Turner, 2002). Turner's lived contradiction was being a professor, which could be considered an Anglo thing to do, while being a Latina, which is not an Anglo (2002). Many Black women who are

professors or other members of the academy have similar lived contradictions. Far too often, professional Black women speak about the way they came into their positions despite their gender or race all the while having people wonder how they achieved their positions, be it merit or increasing diversity (Aguirre, 2000; Calasanti & Smith, 1998; Hagg, 2008; Kobayashi, 2002).

Black women have participated in higher education for more than a century but are almost totally absent from the research literature especially in terms of racism and sexism against Black women in academe (Moses, 1997). Black doctoral recipients are not exempt from these types of experiences. They face unique experiences at the intersections of race, class, and gender (Walkington, 2017). While Black women are not alone in facing the challenges of assimilation into the academy or the absence of inclusion, they face fundamental and unique issues rooted in gender and race inequalities as faculty members (Grant & Ghee, 2015; Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021). Many of the difficulties faced can leave Black women with perspectives of inferiority and imposter syndrome affecting their academic and social progress while in the academy (Allen & Joseph, 2018).

Black women in higher education often suffer from imposter phenomenon/syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). The term imposter syndrome was created to describe feeling like an academic or professional fraud (Edwards, 2019). Black women in higher education experience an internal struggle between their identity and society's influence and expectations and experience imposter syndrome at a higher rate than any other racial group (Wright, 2021). Women who suffer from imposter syndrome do not feel worthy of the praise they receive on the premise of

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their academic or professional accomplishments and perceive them as overestimations of their gifts and talents (Edwards, 2019). Additionally, these women are hesitant to believe that they are as intelligent, skilled, and deserving of their success as their colleagues and often believe this unfounded truth will be discovered by others at any moment (Abdelaal, 2020; Clance & Imes, 1978; Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021). Imposter syndrome is multifaceted, and it is mostly present when there is a lack of representation of both race and gender in majority White spaces (Monture, 2010). Underrepresented minorities, specifically women, face specific challenges and experiences that often lead to feeling as if the faculty, administrators, and students in the predominately White academy feel as if they not only do not belong, but did not get there on basis of their own merit (Leonard, 2014; Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021).

African American women face many barriers to success within academia (Dixon, 2005). These barriers include financing education, obtaining respect from professors and peers, networking, gaining recognition in the department, and receiving faculty mentoring support (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Patton, 2009). While looking at the barriers that Black women report, there are some barriers that they may not even know exist such as the way that applicants are admitted to various programs (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). More specifically, why Black women are denied admission or even encouraged to pursue an Ed.D. rather than a Ph.D. by faculty members/advisors (Felder, 2010). For a majority of PWIs, the lack of faculty of color who can serve as mentors and advisors, especially those who are Black, serves as a barrier to fostering supportive environments for underrepresented minority students (Cropps, 2018). While it is expected that effective mentoring relationships flourish at the

graduate level, Black women doctoral recipients often experienced more isolation and

less access to mentors and role-models than their non-minority peers (Girves et al., 2005;

Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007).

The Road to Equity

There is substantial literature that exists about the experiences of Black students

who attend PWIs and research focusing on the experiences of Black doctoral students has

increased (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010; Dortch, 2016; Grant & Simmons,

2008; Patton, 2009). However, the literature regarding Black women who have received

doctorates from PWIs is less than substantial. Much of the literature that exists is about

documenting the lack of equity which exists between Black people and Whites in a

variety of settings, including PWIs. One key point is that there have been many attempts

at remedying racial relations and discrimination through minority admissions (Bell, 1979)

and the use of affirmative action, or the use of race-based preferences for admitting

underrepresented groups in university admissions (Estlund, 2005). There has been a shift

from "equity" to "diversity" due to the use of affirmative action and the Supreme Court

understanding that a racially diverse campus is one of educational value (Renner &

Moore, 2004). Black women encounter several challenges while working to pursue their

doctoral degrees (Patterson-Stephens, Lane, & Vital, 2017) and feel pressure to prove

themselves and combat negative stereotypes (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010;

Dortch, 2016; Robinson et al., 2013) and tend to confront ignorance about Black culture

at PWIs (Allen et al., 1991). It must be noted that in 1977, true equality of opportunity

for women in higher education as students and faculty existed scatteredly (Watson,

1977). Black women know that no matter how valued Whites in power view them, they would never be considered equal to Whites (Walkington, 2017).

Summary

The review of literature revealed several factors that impact the experiences of Black women who receive doctorates at PWIs. Black women who receive doctorates at PWIs are examples of courage, confidence, and excellence (Witynski, 2021) though their experiences may often be far from favorable. The reality is, these Black women who receive doctorates at PWIs exist in a dual reality, one that often renders many challenges and barriers such as: imposter syndrome, culturally insensitive students and staff, limited and decreasing economic assistance, lack of Black faculty, and experience alienation and isolation (Easley, 1993; Hawkins, 1989; Nagasawa & Wong, 1999; Taylor, 1989). This review suggests that there is a gap in the literature regarding the experience of Black women doctoral recipients at PWIs as it relates to the exploration of their belongingness and its effect on how they were able to persist through their program.

The studies about belongingness for Black men at PWIs is a start in determining how to approach the concept as it relates to Black women. However, the literature shows that Black women have particular pains and sufferings that must be explored separately. There must be more research done to provide insight into how belongingness, or the lack thereof, affects Black women in their doctoral pursuit.

This study will give a voice to the many Black women who have received doctoral degrees from PWIs. It will provide insight into the ongoing struggle that Black women face when they occupy/infiltrate traditionally White spaces such as the academy. While Black women who obtain doctoral degrees from PWIs face a multitude

of challenges, their ability to persist is worth studying and documenting. What is known

through this literature review is that there is much work to be done to ensure that Black

women who seek to obtain doctoral degrees from PWIs have the space and grace to do

so.

CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the researcher describes in greater detail the research methodology, including, but not limited to general qualitative research methodology and overview of the Sista Circle design along with its multiple relative components. The chapter goes on to outline the proposed recruitment and selection of participants, including exploring the researcher as a participant in the study. The ways in which the data will be collected and analyzed and a summary of how the theoretical framework will guide this study will end this chapter.

Through this research, the researcher seeks to expand the literature and understanding of the individual and collective experiences of Black women who have received doctorates from southern PWIs. This study is important as educational and economic gaps continue to widen despite the growing number of Black college degree recipients, specifically women (Reeves & Guyot, 2017). Expanding the literature around Black sense of belongingness in White spaces will support the ability of institutions and organizations who are actively seeking to dismantle the isolation and marginalization of Black women through diversity equity and inclusion (coined D.E.I.) work and anti-racism efforts (Asare, 2021).

Research Design

The goal of this study is to amplify the individual and collective voices of Black women doctoral recipients from southern PWIs. The researcher understands that the historical implications of educational oppression of Black women nationally, but specifically in the South, have given this group of individuals particular pains and sufferings as it relates to their journey to and through doctoral programs at southern

PWIs. Due to the nature of this study, selecting a methodology that is designed to capture and elevate the voices of Black women led the researcher to select Sista Circle while using Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as a theoretical, interpretive lens.

Qualitative Research

This study is designed to explore the intersectionality of Black women doctoral recipients from PWIs in the South through the lens of belongingness. Rooted in intentionality, this research calls for a methodological approach that will expand current research in both higher education and practical fields. Qualitative research explores perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes as a driver of human behaviors and motivations (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Therefore, when selecting a methodology for this study, the researcher asked five rudimentary research questions: who, what, why, where, and how.

When conceptualizing this study, the researcher pondered, "Who is this study about?" The gap in the literature supports that this study is about Black women doctoral recipients and their experiences getting to and going through a doctoral program at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) in the South. The South has been a hostile environment, both educationally and economically, for Black folks since slavery, more specifically for Black women.

After understanding who, it was important for the researcher to establish what and why. This study is designed to explore a sense of belongingness as a factor that influenced their persistence through their respective programs. It is important to academia because there are very few studies of this type. Furthermore, as the racial climate continues to intensify and organizations are focusing more on the diversity, equity, and

inclusion (DEI) of marginalized groups, it is imperative that practitioners have both scientific and anecdotal data to guide their efforts.

Finally, the researcher establishes where the study fits and how its participants will share their perspectives. This study fits in the wealth of research that exists that explores Black women's achievement. However, there is a gap in the research that exists that explores the very specific factors of belongingness as an influencer of persistence, and narrows down its participants as being Black, women, and doctoral recipients from a PWI. The participants in this study will have a platform to speak about their individual and collective experiences. Through guided questions rooted within the research questions, the participants will be able to dive deeply into this study, free from judgement or biases in the Sista Circle.

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach that provided the space to truly delve into the individual and shared experiences of Black women doctoral recipients.

Sista Circle Methodology

Sista Circle is not a new concept in the Black community; however, it is a relatively new qualitative research methodology to academia. The Sista Circle methodology was created by Latoya Johnson, "to examine the lived experiences of Black women" (Johnson, 2015, p. 43). Sista Circle Methodology (SCM) is in essence created for Black women by a Black woman. Considering the historical documented research biases integrated in the fabric of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, there is a need for methodologies like SCM, that were intentionally created to give cultural perspectives and insight into marginalized groups (Byrne et al., 2009). This reality is evident in most of the scholarly literature referenced in Chapter two of this

study. Studies do not usually take into consideration cultural usage and understanding of the English language or Black Vernacular English; therefore, often skewing the data because the participant may not have understood the questions due to cultural language biases. Sista Circle was birthed due to the research biases that exist in historical and modern methodologies. Latoya Johnson (2015) states, "...Western educational research is disfigured by a near complete dismissal of the social and cultural relations of Black women, yet Western research methodologies continue to serve as the norm" (p. 43). Over the last seven years, Black women in a myriad of disciplines have used SCM to amplify the voices of their Black and brown female participants (Brown et al., 2021; Johnson, 2015; Patterson-Stephens & Hernandez, 2018; Wilson, 2018).

When utilizing Sista Circle as a methodology, it is important to make sure that the research design stays true to the original model. Sista Circle Methodology has three features that distinguish the model from focus group or group interviews. These features: (1) communication dynamics (2) centrality of empowerment, and (3) researcher as participant, must be honored when keeping the integrity of this model sacred, because it does share some similarities with other models (Johnson, 2015).

Communication Dynamics- Historical and modern research methodologies can easily contain research biases against participants who identify as nonWhite (Dimitriadis, 2001). Sista Circles celebrate informal, personal social interactions between the participants and facilitators. It is designed to create space for organic expressions of Black and Brown female participants (Johnson, 2015). The relaxed nature of Sista Circles fosters an environment where participants can be themselves and speak freely about their experiences, both individually and collectively, Johnson (2016b) named this as "...taking

the oppressed away from the environment that may be oppressing them" (p. 4). The utilization of Black vernacular and southern colloquialisms that are shared amongst Black and Brown women are welcomed and ultimately set the precedent that the participants are invited to participate authentically (Cummins, 1985).

Centrality of Empowerment- Designed to empower and strengthen the voices of Black and Brown women, Sista Circle Methodology (SCM) champions the participant as an expert of their experience (Johnson, 2016b). The Sista Circle serves as a platform for the women participating in the study to unpack the particularities of their experiences. Through conversations with the other women in the circle, with similar qualifiers, each participant is empowered to draw on the organic connections made with one another in a focus group-like setting.

Researcher as participant- The Sista Circle design has many similarities with other methodologies; however, the creator was both thoughtful and methodical in the differences. Though the design shares components of both focus group and mentorship strategies, it champions all participants as experts of their experiences; therefore, the researcher does not operate in a facilitator capacity but as a participant (Johnson, 2016b). The subtle shift in the power structure of the Sista Circle lends itself to ensure that all participants feel valued and that their knowledgeable contributions are welcomed.

Sista Circle is a relatively new methodology that pays homage to the positionality of the researcher. A fundamental construct of Sista Circle calls on the researcher to also be a participant in the study. This nuance reverences the historical implications of Black research through storytelling. As Black academicians re-envision European research standards that were not inclusively designed, qualitative methodologies are beginning to

include storytelling to significantly influence and shift the ways in which cultural and social research is carried out (Hancox, 2011).

This approach to research has not emerged without criticism. MacFarlane (2021) suggests that positionality is often a vehicle used in modern research to debunk the empirical findings of some academics. MacFarlane (2021), calls on the Academy to regard some positionality practices as academic fraud, comparing it to reporting "Fake News." Accusations of "Self-stereotyping" positionality and "Positional Piety" are two of the major claims of academicians that oppose the use of positionality statements in research (Cousin, 2010; Hobbs, 2008; Merton, 1971). It is my position that the inclusion of positionality in qualitative research is both relative and necessary. Research that both elevates and acknowledges potential biases by way of illuminating personal narratives has become an integral part of creating greater insight and understanding of certain experiences (Hancox, 2011; Harter et al., 2005; Hartley, 2009).

In this study, the researcher is aligned with researchers that encourage the use of strategies that both recognize and analyze how the researcher's positionality facilitates specific forms of understanding and impedes others (McCorkel & Myers, 2003). As a Black woman pursuing a doctorate at a predominately White institution in the South, I am aware of my own personal experiences with belongingness via intersectionality, microaggressions, micro-affirmations, and mentorship. I do not believe that my experiences are transferable to all Black women with doctorates from Southern PWIs. I embrace and acknowledge that there are other qualifiers that contribute to my doctoral experience. I am a first-generation college student from what is coined the nation's poorest school system, the Mississippi Delta. College access was not an initiative on the

forefront of my K-12 school district, instead the focus was on vocational and other

tactical skills. Therefore, the ability to achieve college admission was of my own. I have

devoted my career to creating greater educational access to Black and Brown students in

the Deep South, specifically in Mississippi and Tennessee, through education reform.

Those experiences ultimately shaped who I am and are essential in my reasoning for

creating space in the Academy to amplify the voices of marginalized groups such as

Black women in predominantly White spaces.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Black women who received their Doctor of Philosophy from Predominantly

White Institutions housed in southern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana,

Mississippi, and Tennessee) were the targeted population for this study. The researcher

used the process of community nomination to identify plausible participants for this

study. Drawing upon connections within the community to source participants is a

method that lends to smaller research populations, traditionally needed for qualitative

studies (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Additionally, the researcher relied on access to

professional listservs to source additional qualified participants. The researcher sent

emails to potential participants detailing the study and requesting that they complete the

inclusion survey to determine eligibility.

Eight potential participants were identified as being a good fit for this study. The

eight potential Sistas were all Black women, who received doctorates from various

southern PWIs. Of the eight Sistas who self-elected to participate in the study and

completed the initial questionnaire, only six completed the consent form, solidifying their

place in the circle. The six Sistas were initially contacted in-person or via email in May

2022 and provided with a detailed explanation of the study and criteria. The overall criteria for inclusion included: (1) identification as a Black woman and (2) doctoral recipient from a PWI in the South (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and/or Tennessee). The selected Sistas agreed to participate in a 90-minute virtual Sista Circle and a 30-minute individual exit interview. Each Sista utilized Doodle to select the Sista Circle that best fit their available date and time to participate in the virtual Sista Circle. In chapter four, I introduce each Sista with quotes from books they selected that best describe their journey as doctoral students/recipients.

Participant Screening Survey

The participant screening survey was disseminated to multiple organizations whose membership is saturated with Black, educated, professional women. These organizations include but are not limited to: Black Women in Higher Education, local graduate chapters of Black, female Greek Letter Organizations, and PhDivas, in order to identify the eligibility of possible participants. A Qualtrics survey was utilized to create and easily collect the initial screening data. The initial screener survey was provided in the research overview email sent to the community stakeholders identified in the community nomination. All participants selected completed the initial screener survey to determine eligibility.

Data Collection

Several methods were utilized to collect data for this study: screener surveys (collected via Qualtrics), two 90-minute Sista circles (both focus groups will be conducted via Zoom and recorded), and individual exit surveys (collected via Qualtrics). Sista Circle I and II were composed of three Sistas each, along with the primary

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investigator. Each Sista, apart from the researcher, only participated in one circle. After

both circles were completed, the researcher analyzed the data for trends, and scheduled

the individual exit interviews with each Sista to ensure data integrity, and to ask any

clarifying questions that may have been illuminated in the data analysis. The data

collection process was designed to ensure the researcher was able to capture and

articulate the individual and shared experiences of the participants.

Data Analysis

The data in this study was manually collected and analyzed. There is limited

research or frameworks that suggest how focus group data should be analyzed. As a

result, research suggests that researchers who utilize focus groups as a methodology

should utilize other transferable qualitative techniques to analyze the focus group output

(Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 2014s). The researcher utilized data

reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, to manually analyze the

output of the Sista Circle Methodology used in this study (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data collection and analysis commenced after the successful approval of the University

of Southern Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Issues of Validity

The researcher acknowledged that though this study is highly dependent on the

participants as experts of their own experiences, data validity must be established. The

researcher utilized three tenants to ensure the validity of the research data: rich data,

member checks, and triangulation (Angen, 2000; Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 1999). Rich

data will be obtained through the Sista Circle process. The researcher asked the women in

the circle to provide situational and contextual information about their experiences, as

well as asked additional questions as needed to provide a greater understanding for all participants involved in the study. In order to provide member checks, the researcher required participants to complete exit surveys to provide feedback about the process as well as give the participants the space to share any additional information about the study that may have been missed in the initial circle. Finally, triangulation in the data collection was employed by diversifying the method in which the researcher solicited participants.

Summary

Chapter three outlined the research design. The researcher used Sista Circle Methodology (SCM) to amplify the voices of the Black women doctoral recipients from southern PWIs in this study. SCM was designed to be an informal, yet effective, qualitative methodology that empowers the Black woman as the study's content expert. The chapter also outlines how data will be collected and the ways in which the researcher will analyze the collected data. In chapter four, the researcher will provide the findings of this study.

CHAPTER IV – FINDINGS

In 2022, as Black women continue to shatter historical barriers, sitting in seats that at one time were unfathomable, it is easy for onlookers to believe that the journey to these spaces are now, more than ever, easier. Statistics that show an uptick in Black women degree recipients often paint an encouraging picture of educational equality but fail to give the numbers a narrative (Souto-Manning & Ray, 2007). What is known is that the exploration of Black women in White spaces, such as PWIs, is still relatively infrequently researched, and this particular group of students have been reported to be "the most dissatisfied and isolated students on PWI campuses" (Shavers & Moore, 2014). In this phenomenological study, the primary investigator seeks to amplify the voices of Black women who received doctorates from predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in the South, exploring if sense of belonging, or the lack thereof, affected the rate in which they persisted. For the sake of this study, the South is defined as Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. There were no other qualifiers for participation in this study.

As described in chapter three, the qualitative data was collected in the initial questionnaire, Sista Circle focus group, then analyzed by the primary investigator and checked for data authenticity in the post-circle one-on-one reflection interviews. In this chapter, the primary investigator provides an overview of the research topic and problems, introduces the Sistas and then details the findings from the study for the following research questions and the four tenets used to explore a sense of belongingness. The primary research topic for this study explores a sense of belonging as the glass ceiling in the Academy for Black women doctoral students.

The research problems are rooted in the literature:

1. Black women do not graduate from graduate programs at the same rate as their Black male, White (male or female), or Asian (male or female) counterparts (Milner, 2004; Tierney et al., 2004).

2. Post-segregation remnants of oppression are visible in the Black student experience by way of emotional disconnections between campus environments and their firsthand experiences (Coker, 2003; Watt, 2006).

3. A student's sense of belonging is related to persistence, degree attainment, and pursuit of graduate education (Pascarella & Terenzini p. 425).

The primary research questions for this study are:

1. Does sense of belonging influence persistence and the overall programmatic experiences of Black women doctoral recipients in terms of their enrollment and journey to and through doctoral programs at PWIs?

2. How do lived experiences of Black women doctoral recipients at southern Predominately White Institutions affect their sense of belongingness?

The findings are organized by the four tenets used to explore the sense of belongingness and probe the lived experiences of the Sistas in the study. At the beginning of each discussion, the tenet was operationally defined and guiding questions were asked to help facilitate the discussion. The four tenets are:

1. Intersectionality

2. Microaggressions

3. Micro-affirmations

4. Mentorship

At the opening of the Circle, an icebreaker was used to lighten the mood and create a safe place for the Sistas to begin to share. Each Sista was asked to introduce herself, including but not limited to their name, conferring university, and what they do for a living. Additionally, I asked them to name a book that describes their journey as a Black woman as doctoral recipients and reference a quote in said book that supports their claim. Their self-introductions will be used to introduce them in this study. It is to be noted that the Primary Investigator refers to the participants in the study as "the Sistas." To respect the unique design of the Sista Circle Methodology (SCM) that calls on the researcher to serve as a participant, the primary investigator utilizes "we" and "us" when referencing the study's participants. To further substantiate the utilization of storytelling in the sharing of experiences, the primary investigator will use informal, conversational language to represent the findings of the Sista Circle. Direct quotes and explanations of what occurred during the circles will be used to inform/highlight the lived experiences of each Sista.

Sista, Sista: Introducing the Participants

Sista 1, the Primary Investigator is a first-generation college student from the Mississippi Delta, who attended a historically Black, liberal arts college in North Mississippi for undergraduate studies. There I was accepted into the McNair Scholars program, created to increase the number of Black doctoral recipients. I continued my graduate education at a liberal art, predominantly White college in central Mississippi for master's studies, and I am pursuing a doctoral degree in Higher Education Administration from a mid-sized, research institution in South Mississippi. I currently serve as a Managing Director for a charter school network that leads schools rooted in love,

achievement, and antiracism for Black and Brown K-12 scholars in Mississippi and Tennessee. When asked what book describes my journey as a Black woman pursuing a doctorate, Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls who Contemplated Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf* was where I landed. As the primary investigator, I explained that I personally resonated with the spirit of Shange's short stories about the different women. I have struggled seeing myself for quite some time, but when I read, "Ever since I realized there waz someone callt/ a colored girl an evil woman a bitch or a nag/ I been tryin' not to be that & leave bitterness/ in somebody else's cup..." (Shange, 1975, p. 56). I felt that!

Sista 2, Dr. Alicia is a first-generation college graduate who attended a small, liberal arts historically Black college in the Southeast. After undergrad she moved to Mississippi to attend a mid-sized research institution in Southern Mississippi to obtain her masters and doctorate degrees. After receiving her doctorate in Higher Education Administration, she returned home to teach at her undergraduate institution and since then has found her love and passion for inspiring other first-generation college students through motivational speaking. When asked what book and quote best describes her journey, without hesitation she says "1865," particularly this quote about weathering the storm. It says, "And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about" (Hudson, 2017, p. 85). Dr. Alicia closed with these words, "My entire journey to and through college, as a first-generation college student, is one that has shaped me into the resilient woman I am proud to be."

Sista 3, Dr. Jane, is a first-generation college graduate from the Mississippi Delta, who attended a historically Black university in Mississippi for undergraduate studies and consecutively obtained her masters and doctorate degrees from predominantly White institutions in South Mississippi. Dr. Jane received her doctorate in Institutional Research and works tirelessly to address the health disparities of Black and Brown citizens in Mississippi through health equity and education. When asked what book and quote describes her journey, she paused and landed on Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The quote, "Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. so they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood comes alive. Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song" (Hurston, 1937, p. 32). Dr. Jane selected this quote because it reminded her of the jealousy and envy she experienced as a Black woman, but often did not know what to do with.

Sista 4, Dr. Lisa is a Louisiana native that migrated to Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. She obtained her doctorate at a mid-sized predominately White research university in North Mississippi in Counseling Education Supervision. She returned to the academy immediately after completing her doctorate. Now she serves as the program manager at a liberal arts university in Central Mississippi. When asked about a book and quote that informs her journey, she stated that the clarity in which Maya Angelou wrote always resonated with her. More specifically, *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings*. The quote, "There's no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you"

(Angelou, 1969, 74) resonated with Dr. Lisa feeling silenced throughout her doctoral journey.

Sista 5, Dr. LaToya, is a native of a small town in east Mississippi who attended predominantly white institutions for her entire college career. Dr. LaToya opens up to The Circle immediately saying, "growing up, I was deterred from attending HBCUs. I was always revered as smart, and when it came to the college application process, I was often told I was too smart to attend an HBCU. I regret not finding out for myself, but I only knew what I was told!" Dr. LaToya attended a large predominantly White research university in Louisiana for her doctorate. There she studied Curriculum, Instruction, and Leadership. She never returned to the Academy but found her niche in K-12. She is currently the founding principal of an elementary charter school in central Mississippi that will open its doors August 2022. When asked what book and quote describes her journey as a Black woman and doctoral recipient, without hesitation she says *Black Girls Must Die Exhausted*. Dr. LaToya stated, "as a Black woman, in a field usually filled with women, but led by men, White men, I resonate most with this quote:

> "A lot of times it does feel exhausting. Because everything bad in society is about you, but when it comes to the good, nothing is for you. I feel like I'm not enough and too much, all at the same time. And then, other times, being black feels exhilarating—because every good thing that happens feels like a victory, even the small things. Because you're constantly reminded that you're another, so you know whatever good happened in spite of. So there's celebration, there's some joy" (Allen, 2018, p. 46).

Sista 6, Dr. Sarah is a first-generation college student born and raised in a small town in Mississippi, 30 miles outside of the capital city. She attended a small, liberal arts Black College in Central Mississippi where she became a McNair Scholar and began her path to receive her doctorate. After undergrad, she went on to obtain her masters from a predominately White, mid-sized research university in North Mississippi. She later continued her graduate studies at a large, predominately White research university in Alabama, where she studied African American studies. When asked what book describes her journey, Dr. Sarah stated without hesitation, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, identifying this quote: "This is a book by a grown-ass woman written for other grown-ass women. This is a book for women who expect to be taken seriously and for men who take grown women seriously. This is a book for women who know shit is fucked up. These women want to change things but don't know where to begin" (Cooper, 2018, p. 1). Dr. Sarah referenced this quote because it gives a true depiction of her unapologetic stance around feminism and issues that affect women, particularly Black women.

Sista 7, Dr. Carla attended a historically Black university in Central Mississippi, where she studied Physics. After completion, she continued her education at a small, historically Black university in Tennessee. There she participated in a bridge program that allowed her to transition into a doctoral program in Biomedical Engineering at a large, private, predominantly White university in Tennessee. She became the first African American woman to receive a doctorate in that department. When Dr. Carla was asked what book and quote best describes her journey, she shared that *Hooded: A Black Guide to the Ph.D.* gave her the will to keep fighting. The book was written by a Black woman

that dared to inspire other Black women to get their doctorates, just like she does. She identified the quote, "As you start your journey, remember one thing: by simply being in these rooms, we are advocates. We are accomplishing what we hope others will someday accomplish without the hardships we endured. Don't just assimilate- TRANSFORM" (Grayson, 2020, p. 41).

Let's Talk, For Real: Findings

Each Sista circle took place virtually, with some Sistas being at home and others at work. While the location of where they logged in did not matter, it made a difference in their ability to fully lean into the conversation. Sistas who opted to join from work, were not able to be as present and vulnerable as others who joined from home. I wanted the Sistas to have the autonomy to select where they would participate. I did not send any initial questions or provide any context about what would be discussed, as I wanted them to honor the Sista Circle methodology, which calls for each Sista to be in their natural element.

When the Sistas logged in, I greeted them, and we lightly chatted. Each Sista was excited and a bit anxious about the circle, and little reservations were apparent. None of them had participated a Sista circle, and I was excited to have them be part of my first one as well. Once all the Sistas entered the zoom, with connected audio and camera, I began to share my reason for choosing the Sista circle methodology and shared background information, paying homage to its creator, Dr. Latoya Johnson.

As the primary researcher, it was my job to facilitate and participate in the Sista Circle. One thing that must be noted is that I did not want to impose strict rules/boundaries for the Sista circle. I wanted the Sistas to be able to speak openly and

freely. We all agreed that respect was sacred in the circle, while we engaged. Respect for our opinions, values, and feelings, were necessary components in honoring the experiences shared. To ensure that we would be able successfully navigate the Sista Circle, I presented each tenet, one by one, as a guide for them to address their experiences of belongingness as identified for the purpose of this study.

Each circle was a safe space where the Sistas could be themselves. It was a time where we were able to reflect on our past and current experiences with the four tenets: intersectionality, microaggressions, micro-affirmations, and mentorship. Some of the tenets brought us back to traumatic experiences. The Sistas were willing to share so much of themselves in order to be transparent, even when it hurt. We ended each circle with a new sense of connectedness and new Sistas that we could call on. In the next four sections, each tenet will be introduced with a book quote that encompasses the spirit of the discussion, how it is operationally defined in this study, and an overview of the findings.

Intersectionality

"Being alive and being a woman is all I got but being colored is a metaphysical dilemma I haven't conquered yet." –For Colored Girls who Contemplated Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf (Shange, 1975).

For the sake of this study, I defined intersectionality as the way in which multiple forms of inequality or oppression (such as racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism and more) can compound and create different modes of discrimination or disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989). It must be noted that the Sistas experienced multiple forms of oppression that were not reducible to just one aspect of their identities (Shaw, 2021).

Each Sista had a unique experience as it related to intersectionality. No matter which PWI we attended, we still had the similar experience of being the only Black person/woman or one of few in our respective programs. The way that intersectionality affected everyone played no role in the connectedness that the Sistas gave throughout the circles.

> Dr. Jane: My intersectionality was apparent at orientation. I was the only Black student in the room. I felt like I was representing Black women as a race/species. This was an added pressure.

> Primary Investigator: I don't remember the crossroad. It was just always there. I was one of very few Black women in my program. Choosing a dissertation chair was difficult because there were no Black women or Black professors.

> Dr. Sarah: I hated every moment of my grad school experience. I was placed with the only Black professor simply because we were both Black and they were the advisor to all the Black students.

The idea of representing all Black women is one that most, if not all, of the Sistas could identify with. Far too often we were seen as the voice for the whole, even though we were just a part and had our own thoughts and feelings. As the Sistas listened to her speaking, it was apparent that they were thinking of their own experiences in their doctoral programs that made them aware of their intersectionality. They were nodding their heads in agreement and shaking their heads as well. One Sista stood out, with her big personality and larger than life voice. Dr. Alicia made her presence known with every word.

> Dr. Alicia: It started when none of my professors looked like me. I previously attended an HBCU, so I knew what it was like to see Black Excellence and Black educators. When I got to my masters and doctoral levels, the intersectionality was more apparent due to the number of White men.

Many of the Sistas had the same experience of attending an HBCU prior to their

doctoral experience, so they were aware of what Dr. Alicia meant. She shared that the

idea of an HBCU was looked at as a place just for colored people. I identified the HBCU

as a haven, where my thoughts were cared about. The PWI did not provide that for

me/us.

> Primary Investigator: The intersectionality of being both Black and a woman
> affected my life in the program and also in my life as a whole. I had to choose
> between finishing the program or sustaining my life. Sustainability won. I had to
> choose between finishing my program once or having a family. The family won.

Sometimes the idea of intersectionality comes from those closest to us, our family

members. Many of us are first generation college students and are also the first to obtain

a doctorate so we are in territories that our family members do not understand. Being the

first to break new ground means that we often go without contextual internal support. Our

families cannot understand academic journeys that are foreign to them. Then there's the

additional layer of not understanding why we would opt into attending PWIs.

> Dr. Carla: I have an aunt who basically asked why I didn't assimilate when I went
> into my doctoral program. She wanted to know why we needed Black
> organizations at PWIs.

Other ideas that were brought to light through intersectionality were time and

language. For many of the Sistas the lack of time, or inability to be full-time doctoral

students, while navigating being wives, mothers, and/or full-time employees, in order to

financially sustain, influenced their intersectionality and subsequently impacted their

persistence. Many of the Sistas spoke about not having the same opportunities with

assistantships and mentorships, as their white female or male counterparts, and how as

Black women they were often not afforded the same financial freedom as others to

simply just be a doctoral student. Some Sistas had to make a choice choose between

relationships, starting families, or continuing in the doctoral program in order to sustain

their life and obtain a doctorate.

> Dr. Lisa: For me, time was part of intersectionality. I was newly married when I began my doc program.

> In addition to being a newlywed, Dr. Lisa was dealing with being displaced due to

Hurricane Katrina. She dealt with racism, classism and more in her doctoral program.

Far too often racism is hidden beneath a veneer of normality, and it is only the most crude

and obvious forms of racism that are seen as problematic by most people (Gillborn,

2015).

> Dr. Sarah: I learned about intersectionality through the lens of a language that exists for the things you will experience going forward. I finally had words to express what would happen within the next six years.

> For most of the Sistas, in both circles, intersectionality was a factor, no matter

which PWI we attended. When we no longer saw a lot of Black faces, we knew that

things were different. For at least one Sista, there was always a limited number of Black

faces due to her only attending PWIs for all of her degrees.

> The topic of intersectionality really moved the Sistas in both circles. There was

no hesitation to respond when the tenet was introduced. The Sistas were fast friends-their

comfort levels with one another were apparent from the moment the circle started.

"What's always unique about the Black experience is how we always find the cookout."
-Primary Investigator

Microaggressions

"If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is
the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult."
–I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (Angelou, 1969).

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In this study, microaggressions are defined as the subtle, daily, and unintentional racial slights committed against people of color because they are members of a racialized group (Sue et al., 2007). This definition did not shy away of the impact of microaggressions but recognizes that they are sometime unintentional.

As Black women, microaggressions are common. Prior to beginning the Sista circle, the topic of microaggressions was one that was not discussed often. When I defined the term microaggressions, the light bulbs went off! It was as if each Sista had been awakened and enlightened. From this point on, I knew that the conversation was going to be impactful.

The idea that microaggressions occurred more often than not in all of our doctoral programs was a unifying factor. We were able to identify microaggressions that were common between us all and some that were unique based on which PWI we attended. It was apparent that we could have talked for days simply identifying and reflecting on the microaggressions that we were dealt. Each of us revisited a time, where a White male colleague or professor spewed condescending words that made each of us question our place at their universities.

Most of the Sistas had several examples of microaggressions that they dealt with during their doctoral journey. They almost always involved a White person who seemed to not be aware of how they came across. Most interactions involved White classmates, who exerted their privilege where they could.   Dr. Lisa's experience is one that stuck out. She was called by a White classmate who asked if she could send her the chapters of her dissertation that she completed because their chair said she had done well. As she

spoke about this, all the Sistas made similar grimacing faces. The feeling of "yikes,

that's terrible" was on all our faces.

> Dr. Lisa: Our chair told her that I had done really well in getting the first three chapters written and she wanted to see it. She was asking like she was asking for a cup of sugar. It was just easy breezy. I told her no. In my own way.

> As Dr. Lisa recalled telling her no, we all breathed a sigh of relief.

Microaggressions point out cultural differences in ways that put the target's non-

conformity into sharp focus, often causing anxiety and crises of belonging (Runyowa,

2015). The young lady wanted Dr. Lisa to give in. When she refused, it became an

issue, and the young lady avoided her as if she had done something wrong. Many of our

experiences of microaggressions came from people that we considered friends or close

acquaintances.

> Primary Investigator: During one of my classes, we completed an exercise where we were asked to take a step forward if a statement applied to us. The statements included "Take a step forward if you went to private school" and "Take a step forward if you had a car in high school." Both of those statements applied to me, so I took steps forward. A White man, whom I deemed my doctoral husband, told me that I didn't have to lie because everyone else was taking a step forward. I was stunned but laughed it off. I thought I knew him. I thought he knew me. In my mind I thought he was different. My feelings were and are still hurt.

> Dr. Alicia: I remember talking to a professor that I was fond of. He asked what I planned to do with my life after finishing my doctorate. I told him that I wanted to be a motivational speaker. He laughed in my face. If I was a White man, he would have been on board.

> Because we all attended PWIs for our doctoral degrees there were some things

that occurred that were almost commonplace. Things like nooses being hung around

trees or swastikas being spray painted on walls were just some of the things that Dr.

Sarah experienced. These were deemed as isolated incidents. When she said this, we all

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gave each other a sideways glance. "Isolated incidents grind my gears," Dr. Carla

said. We all groaned in agreement.

> Dr. Carla: When I was working in the lab, I was picked on by the post doc and the
> lab manager. The lab manager stated that because I got my masters from an
> HBCU it didn't count. When I cut my hair off, the post doc called me by a male
> name. I complained to my advisor, and he called them an isolated incident. He
> never asked/made the post doc apologize to me.

> Dr. LaToya: The microaggression that sticks out most to me, even though it is
> what covers most of my experiences in my PhD program. Anytime something
> happened as far as injustice to a Black person, for instance the Alton Sterling
> shooting, the Black voices were the ones that were asked to speak. Any other
> time race was a factor, our voices did not matter.

> Dr. Jane: I remember watching a movie in one of my classes that was about the
> indigenous people of Australia and what happened when the colonizers came
> in. Similar to what happened to Africans who were brought to the United
> States. My classmates expected me to speak about it as if I was an expert on
> oppression as if I was a slave. I didn't know that it was a microaggression at the
> time. But I know now.

> PI: My first chair would mark my work in red ink but did track changes on
> everyone else's work. I did not understand how he could tell me how to express
> myself. When I said something to him about it, he wrote a fragile letter to the
> department chair asking to be removed from my committee. It was as if I was
> aggressive.

When I finished speaking, we noticed that we all felt some kind of way about

being made to feel like we were the representatives for the whole race or that we were the

problem because we wanted to be respected. Far too often we experience these

microaggressions because the White people that we deal with cannot make connections

between our experiences and where we are trying to go (Dr. Alicia, Sista Circle). Our

experiences were valid to us but were often invalidated by those who were supposed to

lead us towards success. But we were deemed the aggressors by them because "it was

something about being a Black woman and getting feedback about aggression" (Primary

Investigator, Sista Circle).

"White people trying to beat you getting mad, is definitely a microaggression."
-Primary Investigator

Micro-affirmations

"I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp White background."
-How it Feels to be Colored Me (Hurston, 1928).

I selected Rowe's (2008) definition of micro-affirmations because it reverences

the impact of small acts that foster inclusion, listening, comfort, and support for people

who may feel isolated or invisible in an environment.

The next thing we discussed was micro-affirmations. Micro-affirmations were

new to most of the Sistas. We all know what affirmations are, but we had very little

knowledge/experience with the term micro-affirmations. Micro-affirmations are tiny acts

of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of

listening (The Sheridan Center, 2022).

What we noticed is that many of us received micro-affirmations from our peers

and not the people that we expected it to come from. Most, if not all, of us expected to

receive affirmations from our professors and committee members. Almost every one of

us had an example of a micro-affirmation that was given to us by a peer. There was

almost an unspoken rule amongst Black people where we would nod at one another or

speak to one another in the hallway. The encouragement came from the other Black

women. The way that we interact with one another was misunderstood or not

acknowledged by those around us, especially if they were White.

Dr. Jane: Black people, we check on each other. We really try to encourage one
another. It's something about the familiarity in the looks we give. While we had

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concern for White female peers, it was a different level being Black because we knew the looks and gestures.

Dr. Alicia paid homage to one of the Sistas. She got her through the program. Other Sistas mentioned their peers as systems of support and who provide them with micro-affirmations. At times, there was only one other Black face in the program, so many of the Sistas formed bonds with the people who looked like them.

> Dr. Alicia: My classmates, my peers, the Black women from HBCUs. They provided a different level of connection and love and understanding. To have someone who would say "I see you" was impactful.

> Dr. Lisa: It was my peers, not so much the professors. There was one African American lady in my cohort, and she was the one. She was supporting me, pushing me, and helping me. There were times when we would sit across from one another to share looks of support. Other times we would sit next to each other depending on what we needed. Our seating arrangements were affirmations that said, 'I'm here for you.'

> Primary Investigator: My peers provided all the micro-affirmations needed. I wouldn't have been successful without them. I do not remember having to force relationships in undergrad, with professors and/or peers. Far too often the people in my department did not look like me until this year.

At times we had to create our own groups for support. Working together with other women, we would create spaces that provided us with what we needed. "We understood and welcomed the Blackness in our cohorts, even if it was just a sprinkle" (Primary Investigator, Sista Circle).

> Dr. LaToya: My first semester I created a group with about 10 other women. In that place/space I was absolutely affirmed. We created it in response to learning about Black feminism, White feminism and spaces for Black women, and queer and trans spaces.

> Dr. Sarah: I was affirmed in the Sista circle, a group of Black women who met on Saturday mornings and just talked about life. Some was related to being a PhD student and some of it was not. It was led by Black women, and it was for Black women. I was also affirmed by my writing partner. These were the only times I felt affirmed by members of the Black race.

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There were times when we received a micro-affirmation from an unintended

source. These sources may not have looked like us, but they did provide us with that

micro-affirmation that we needed to push us forward.

> Dr. Carla: I began advocating for myself and this is when things changed for me. At my dissertation defense, my advisor wrote up a two-page introduction and within it he affirmed me when he spoke about my persistence and resilience.

> Dr. Sarah: I wasn't affirmed by my chair or my co-chair until they said, "Congratulations Dr. Sarah."

<div align="center">"It's always been my peers." -Dr. Jane</div>

Mentorship

<div align="center">"Those who feel "empowered" talk about their personal power to change their individual condition. Those with actual power make decisions that are of social and material consequence to themselves and others." —Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower (Cooper, 2018).</div>

I selected Adams' (1998) definition of mentorship to frame our conversation.

Adams defines mentorship as "the relationship involving guiding, nurturing, and teaching

(both formally and informally) between individuals with differing degrees of experience"

(Adams, 1998).

Mentorship was another tenet that the Sistas did not have a lot of experience

with. Some sought out mentors while others were blessed with them. Formal mentoring

involves deliberate (often assigned) pairing of mentor and mentee, well-defined goals,

planned outcomes, and structured communication (Lucey & White, 2017). Dr. Jane was

a part of a formal mentorship program. She was assigned one from the beginning. This

person was someone who would talk through the program with the students and ensure

that they were on the right track with their courses and progress. They also made

approvals for the students.

Mentoring is a relationship that focuses on support in the areas of career and personal development (Mazerolle, Nottingham, & Coleman, 2018). Many of the Sistas found mentorship that focused more on their personal development than career. The example that Dr. Alicia mentioned about her professor laughing in her face about wanting to be a motivational speaker is a prime example of a person who would not be a mentor for her in the area of career.

> Dr. Lisa: My committee chair provided mentorship on the academic side. The young lady who was a year ahead of me provided me with mentorship that helped shape who I am. She helped me learn how to balance all of the pieces that I was dealing with in addition to academics. My family was also able to provide mentorship through their support and their ways of showing me how hard we work as a family.

> Dr. Jane: Outside of academics, my close friends and family are who I would consider my mentors. It is nice to be able to speak to someone about what you're going through, even if they do not have the same experience. My family would check in with me and allow me to discuss what I was dealing with. They would just listen and provide encouragement.

For many of the Sistas, the mentorship that they received was a key component to how they perceive their own place as a mentor. Dr. Lisa's experience with a lack of Black mentors in her department made her feel especially grateful to be the first brown person in her department. Her experiences shaped how she works with students in her department.

The limitations to seeking/finding mentorship were also discussed among the Sistas. For many of us, it was not that simple to find a mentor. Dr. Alicia stated that "For some it's as easy as walking to Karen's office and talking about puppies and coffee." For many of the Sistas, it was not easy to find a mentor-even when they sought them out.

Primary Investigator: I was still shocked that these relationships did not develop naturally. I attempted to lean and make space for myself where I did not fit. It was not to my advantage. I tried to create a space of mentorship with my professors because I thought that was what I was supposed to do. When it came down to my topic for my dissertation there was a disconnect. I was told that there was no gap, no need for my research. I struggled to balance it due to a lack of external mentorship.

Dr. LaToya: I did all of the seeking at LSU so I could have a safe space to be nurtured, taught, and guided as it related to my matriculation. I did receive internal mentorship during the dissertation phase. I found mentorship through the graduate school rep. External mentorship came through friends who had already received a PhD.

While I struggled to find mentorship within my department, I was sent women with PhDs who were able to help me. They saw me for who I am and helped me see myself in ways that I could not verbalize. Many of the Sistas shared similar stories. We wanted mentorship on our own terms and had to find ways to make that happen. Far too often we all felt like the people in our departments were supposed to mentor us. Unfortunately, this is not how things worked.

Dr. Carla was probably the only Sista who received mentorship throughout her entire program. Her undergrad mentor helped her get into the Bridge program. She had a mentor during her time in the Bridge program and this same mentor was also a mentor during her time of completing her masters and doctorate. Consistent support through mentorship made a difference in her time working on her PhD. Meanwhile, Dr. LaToya postulated that having a mentor early on would have helped her deal with a lot of the things that she experienced during her PhD journey.

Mentorship is an important part of any journey, but especially on one where people do not look the same. Most of the Sistas struggled with the idea of seeking out mentorship, whether it was internal or external, due to a thought that it should be

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automatic based on them being in the program. This was a rather damaging thought that hindered the progress of some of them.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the major findings that emerged from the Sista circles based on the four tenets of intersectionality, microaggressions, micro-affirmations, and mentorship. Through my analysis of the Sista circles and post interviews I was able to find answers to my research questions as it related to the tenets and the sense of belongingness and persistence. The use of the Sista circle methodology gave way to open and honest conversations which were ultimately filled with Blackness.

CHAPTER V – SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sista Circle conducted in this study revealed that the lived experience of

Black Women who received doctorates from Southern predominantly White universities,

from various disciplines and backgrounds shared a communal bond of experiences. These

experiences were categorized and discussed in four tenets: intersectionality,

microaggressions, micro-affirmations, and mentorship. The narrative presented in this

chapter provides insight and a deeper connection to the voices of the Black women that

are amplified in this study.

Summary

Intersectionality

The intersectionality of being a Black woman is a complex construct that is

naturally oppressive in nature. Since as far back as most can remember, societally there

was nothing worse than being a Black woman. In a 1962 speech, Malcolm X said, "The

most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person

in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black

woman" (1962). When the concept of intersectionality was introduced to The Circle, all

the Sistas immediately identified it as a pain point of their doctoral experiences. When

the slide flashed the screen, the discomfort was apparent on all of their faces. Dr. Sarah

stated, "Whewww chile, we're just gonna jump right in, huh?!?" What is to be

understood from this study is that this duality of being both Black and woman, is one that

cannot be ignored or brushed aside. There is an obligation to understand both aspects of

one's identity, both race and gender, when creating a safe space for them to belong.

The act of blatantly ignoring or choosing not to acknowledge the double entendre of intersectionality of Black Women, is synonymous with the many critiques of societal "color blindness." Literature suggests that though created to reduce cultural biases, the practice of color blindness exacerbates the biases and possibly yields cultural resentment from minorities (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Son & Shelton, 2012). This is because the act of not acknowledging one's racial identity, diminishes a very real, unavoidable aspect of who they are. This finding was pivotal in this study. Sistas reported not feeling seen, as Black or as women, in their respective departments. The Sistas reported being tasked with navigating the Academy, while the Academy chose to not acknowledge them in departmental representation, research, etc. (Moore, 2017). However, when they were seen as Black women, it was rarely in a positive light, specifically by their White, male colleagues and professors. Being referred to as aggressive in a class discussion, instead of passionate; or the expectation to share intellectual property and call it "group work" are a few instances of when Black women noticed that their intersectionality was acknowledged– as the angry Black woman or "The Help."

Microaggressions

"I'm pretty sure none of my White colleagues were discouraged from doing "White" research" (Dr. Alicia, Sista Circle). Being discouraged from researching Black issues, over-critiquing writing submissions—sowing seeds of inadequacies, passion during class discussions being misconstrued as aggressive behavior, and so much more are a few of the many recalled microaggressions that the Sistas shared in the Circle. Microaggressions are the post Jim Crow remnants that force people of color to reconsider

their proverbial place or sense of belonging in predominantly White spaces. In this study, microaggressions were directly associated with feelings of self-doubt, imposter syndrome, anxiety, depression, and a host of other long lasting mental health implications. Dr. Sarah shared that she unpacks the trauma of the lived experiences of her graduate studies to this very day in therapy, she is almost ten years post-doc.

Micro-affirmations

"Just a mere head nod from a fellow classmate, affirming me that I indeed had this, is all it took!" (Dr. Sarah, Sista Circle). Subtle gestures of acknowledgement are often a subconscious effort that is often instrumental in the success of those that feel marginalized and invisible (Rowe, 2008). Studies suggest that micro-affirmations can be used to foster support, by way of creating a sense of belonging for people who are socially oppressed which is usually most helpful for people of color and/or women (Bates et al., 2016; Powell et al., 2019; Ross, 2019). The Sistas in the Circle reported that they rarely received micro-affirmations from their non-Black professors and classmates. They relied heavily on the micro-affirmations of few Black men and women in their programs, as well as university support staff that assisted and supported them throughout their doctoral studies.

In chapter 4, when discussing the tenant of micro-affirmations, the ideology that Black women are innately tasked with providing moral and emotional support for each other and their Black male counterparts, is consistent with the findings of Black, academic research on biopsychosocial racist models, such as The Strong Black Woman (SBW) Schema. SBM is defined consistently by scholars as an archetype of how the ideal Black woman should act, specifically characterized by three main components: emotional

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restraint, independence, and caretaking (Jones, Harris, & Reynolds, 2020; Shahid, Nelson, & Cardemil, 2018; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). The idea of being a Strong Black Woman, is one of the many residual societal remnants of slavery. Black women do not receive the luxury of being soft, meek, or fragile and it is taxing.

In this study it was apparent that the burden of "caretaking," "looking out on" and/or "being there for" the other Black doctoral students, rested heavily on the shoulders of Black women. To note, only one Sista was able to recall one instance of feeling affirmed by a non-Black colleague or professor, and the reflection of this reality was disheartening for the participants. The realization that in their respective academic experiences, they were not owed true White Allyship was difficult to digest, but familiar.

Mentorship

Studies suggest that one of the primary issues that affects doctoral retention is mentorship (Holmes et al., 2010; Kaplan, 2012; Linden et al., 2013). Two out of seven of the Sistas acknowledged that their programs were designed with internal mentors, but only one of the Sistas reported that her relationship with her mentor was transformational. Dr. Alicia shared that she sought mentorship externally and relied heavily on former professors from her undergraduate HBCU as a guide. The consensus of the circle is that it was a clear delineation between those that were intentionally mentored and those that were not. Those that were mentored internally had the best graduate assistantships, research opportunities, etc. and those that did not, simply did not. Unfortunately, this is not a unique experience to the Sistas in the circle. The necessity of mentorship is stamped in a Key to Black Student Success, "Mentorship allows Black students to conceptualize their possible success" (Ross et al., 2016, p. 6). PWIs who continue to fail to clearly

conceptualize mentorships for ALL scholars, specifically Black Women, are choosing to perpetuate systemic racism by way of knowing exactly what scholars need to be successful, yet not being equitable in their practices to ensure Black women have what they need to optimally persist in their programs.

Discussion and Implication

This study explored how Black women who received doctorates from predominantly White institutions in the South experienced a sense of belonging and how those experiences influenced their persistence and overall programmatic experience. Seven Black women shared their lived experiences with intersectionality, microaggressions, micro-affirmations, and mentorships, which were the four tenets the primary investigator used in this study to further explore a sense of belonging. After conducting a thorough analysis, the primary investigator identified the trends and concluded that the Black women in this study have shared experiences of a lack of sense of belonging that is deeply rooted in their own personal journey with both intersectionality and microaggressions. These experiences were consistent for all seven Sistas; however, what seemed to vary were their experiences with micro-affirmations and how those that received intentional mentorship were able to persist at a faster rate. Six out of seven of the Sistas reported a lack of representation in their departmental faculty by either ethnicity, gender, or both. As a result, the cultural and historical contextual support that generally fosters a sense of belonging for Black women from departmental faculty members was lacking. The primary investigator concludes that sense of belonging, or the lack thereof, does indeed affect the doctoral persistence and overall programmatic experience of Black women at Southern PWIs.

The findings of this study outline in greater detail the particular pains and suffering of Black doctoral recipients, by way of amplifying the voices and lived experiences of Dr. Alicia, Dr. Jane, Dr. LaToya, Dr. Lisa, Dr. Sarah, Dr. Carla, and I. The purpose is to expand the research that gives a narrative to the numbers, to not only increase the number of Black women doctoral recipients, but also improve persistence and overall programmatic satisfaction through creating a greater sense of belonging at predominately White institutions. The findings from this study can also provide insight for diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in higher education and corporate spaces. This chapter ends with recommendations that outline ways in which the findings can be implicated both theoretically and practically.

It is to be noted that the interlocking nature of oppression as it relates to race, gender, and class, is a recurring theme in many works of Black feminist theorists (Beale, 1970; Davis, 1981; Dill, 1983; Hooks, 1981; Lewis, 1977; Murray, 1970). There is also a myriad of modern research that correlates intersectionality with oppression (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Butterfield, 2003; McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006). In this study, the intersectionality of being both Black and woman, while navigating the social (nonacademic) implications of doctoral studies, without a cultural connection or sense of belonging, to the majority of faculty and peers, was posed as the toughest factor affecting the doctoral persistence and programmatic satisfaction of the Sistas in the study.

Recommendations

Black women continue to take up space and fill rooms that were not designed with them in mind. Multiple studies have regarded Black women as the most educated group in America (Corbin, Smith, & Garcia, 2018; Haynes, Joseph, Patton, Stewart,

Allen, 2020; Hotchkins, 2017), which is a nod to the fact that Black women lead by race and gender in overall college enrollment. Nonetheless, in 2019 it was reported that only 4.4% of the nation's PhDs were earned by Black women, and they only made up 3.2% of the nation's faculty (NCES, 2019). This means that Black Women are forced to navigate the Academy in pursuit of post-secondary, graduate, and terminal degrees without adequate representation in the faculty to render support and foster a true sense of belonging. The Academy must create intentional and sustainable practices that actively recruit Black Women and aid them in finding their seat at the table in the faculty at colleges and universities. The Academy must also provide equitable mentorship opportunities for Black women doctoral students. These recommendations will be addressed individually in the next sections.

Increasing Sense of Belonging through Representation

It has become a common practice for corporate spaces to utilize Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts in their recruitment and hiring practices due to the fact that higher education professionals and faculty do not reflect the overall population of students or the shifting demographics in the United States (Whitford, 2020). Addressing the systemic issue of diversity, begins with intentionally recruiting an array of differences, including but not limited to gender, ethnicity, age, religion, ability, sexual orientation (Holvino, et al., 2004). Equity refers to the conscious effort to ensure that all parties have the same access to opportunities, while honoring and addressing the disparities that may exist (Roberson, 2006). Inclusion is the intentional effort to ensure that all people are given the opportunity to participate, develop, and belong, ultimately ensuring that the diversity does not just linger in the lower levels of the organization, but

also throughout higher level leadership (Shore et al., 2011). These efforts are not only used to diversify staff but increase their retention through intentionally creating a sense of belonging (Nishii & Özbilgin; 2007). Some Academic spaces, primarily Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), heavily utilize DEI practices to recruit URM to their faculty (Deville & Chapman, 2014; Chapman, Hwang, & Deville, 2013; West & Nguyen, 2016). Their specific studies show that by intentionally recruiting underrepresented minority students and staff, these departments increase the number of minority professionals in that specific field. Though these studies primarily outline increasing minority staff and students due to reports that people of color were receiving less than desirable medical services from non-minority medical staff (Chapman, et al., 2013), there is a strong correlation between the experiences of the patrons in those studies, and the Sistas that represent Black women in this study. Both shared feelings of being marginalized and the findings suggest that having support from staff of similar backgrounds could enhance their overall experience. Research suggests that institutions that serve Black and Brown students, but are predominately White should begin to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

Increasing Sense of Belonging through Robust Mentorship

The Sistas in this study agreed that intentional mentorship was a necessary but often missing component of their doctoral experience. Though some Sistas sought mentorship externally, it was a clear difference between those that received intentional mentorship internally and those that did not. There are a myriad of studies that suggest that mentorship is important in the academic persistence of doctoral students, specifically Black women (Clark & Corcoran, 1986; Johnson, 2001; Lucas & Murry, 2007). A

common misconception is that academic advising and mentoring are synonymous. Though many programs are designed with doctoral advisors serving in a dual role as mentors, best practices suggest that organic mentorship alleviates feelings of isolation and enhances the programmatic experiences (Stanley, 2006; Tillman, 2011). Academic advisors have the responsibility of guiding their student advisees through an institutions' academic program, are appointed to their role, and the students do not have a choice with whom they work (Ramirez, 2012). The academic advisor role is not one that directly translates into mentorship, and this is where many of the Sistas noticed a breakdown when actively seeking or expecting mentorship. A mentor is someone who has a significant investment in the students' personal development which reaches beyond their academic requirements (Ramirez, 2012). When seeking mentorship, the Sistas faced many challenges such as a lack of support and community, limited access to mentorship due to a lack of representation within their departments, coupled with a lack of empowerment (Shuler et al, 2021). Due to the lack of representation in the Academy, it may be advantageous for universities to explore partnerships with alumni and other organizations who can provide mentorship opportunities, guidance, and support for Black women.

Conclusion

This final chapter further discusses the findings of this study, outlines its implications for practice, and recommendations. What is to be noted from this study is that the particular pains and sufferings of Black women are shared experiences that are uniquely nuanced by their intersectionality of being both Black and woman. Subsequently, this intersection is exacerbated in the Academy. Two ways that were

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identified to support Black women in their journey to and through their doctoral studies is

by 1) increasing faculty representation and 2) through intentional, robust mentorship.

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Research Integrity

The University of Southern Mississippi (USM)
118 College Drive
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001

INTERVIEW INFORMED CONSENT

Project Title	Particular Pains, Particular Sufferings: Using Sista Circle to Explore Belongingness as a Factor Affecting the Academic Persistence of Black Women Doctoral Recipients at Predominantly White Institutions in South		
Principal Investigator	Jasmine Thornton College of Education and Human Sciences School of Education		
Capstone Faculty Advisor	Dr. Holly Foster (Holly.Foster@usm.edu)		
Email	Jasmine.Gibbons@usm.edu	**Phone Number**	(601) 325-6525

WHAT IS INFORMED CONSENT?

The purpose of informed consent is to give you the information needed to help you decide whether you would like to participate in this study. Please read the information on this form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what you will be asked you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a participant, and anything else about the study or the information on this form that is not clear. When the Principal Investigator has answered all your questions, you can decide if you would like to participate. This process of asking questions and receiving clarification is called "informed consent**." At the conclusion of the informed consent process, you will be emailed a signed copy of this document. Please retain it for your personal records.**

SUMMARY OF STUDY

The purpose of this research study is to examine how Black women who have received doctoral degrees at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) experienced belongingness, or the lack thereof. It seeks to determine if those experiences are factors which affected their academic persistence during their doctoral studies. You may qualify to take part in this research study if you are over 18 years old, self-identify as a woman, and as Black or African American, and have a doctoral degree from a predominately White institution (PWI). This study consists of one audio- and video-recorded 90 to 120-minute group interviews with the Principal Investigator, and a final 20–30-minute one-on-one exit interview, to ensure the data collection integrity by the Principal Investigator. During the group interview, participants will be asked to share their thoughts about their experiences obtaining a doctorate from a PWI, the concepts of belongingness, and Black women as members of the professoriate, why or why not.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

This study is being done to better understand belongingness as a factor that affects the academic persistence of Black women who obtain PhDs at predominantly White institutions, particularly those located in the South. This study will increase the research and knowledge surrounding Black women who hold doctorates and their experiences in the academy. In attempt to inform the work that must be done to provide greater access into the professoriate, this study seeks to give practitioners who look to increase the diversity, equity and inclusion practices in their organizations for underrepresented minorities.

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WHY ONLY BLACK WOMEN WITH Ph.D.'s FROM PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS?

Black women who hold doctoral degrees, are a small percentage of the total population of PhD recipients. Additionally, many of the Black women who have received a doctoral degree have done so from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), not PWIs.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY?

Participation in this study includes one 90 to 120-minute group interview (Sista Circle) and a final 20–30-minute one-on-one exit interview. The group interview and the exit interview must be recorded, and recording **is mandatory** to accurately record the information provided and will be used for transcription purposes only. During the Sista Circle, the researcher will ask each participant a group questions about their experiences with belongingness as it relates to academic persistence and about the concept of Black women in the professoriate. During the exit interview, the Principal Investigator will recap with each participant their contribution to the Sista Circle, in attempt to ensure that their perspective is being properly represented and transcribed.

WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT CAN I EXPECT FROM PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

- Due to all the information being confidential, all documentation of the research will use pseudonyms and there are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study. Each participant has the autonomy to opt out of answering any question that make them uncomfortable and can ultimately opt out of participating in the study at any time. The Principal Investigator names that a foreseeable stressor is that the nature of the conversation within the Sista Circle, may stir up feelings of past trauma that may be triggering.

WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

- An opportunity to share and learn from fellow Black women with PhDs
- Potential to influence further research on this topic
- Potential to influence factors affecting belongingness at PWIs for underrepresented minorities
- An opportunity to add to a relatively new qualitative methodology, Sista Circle

WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

There will be no incentives for participating in this study.

WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS?

The study is over once each participant has completed their final one-on-one exit interview. Every participant has the right to choose not to participate in the study activities and may withdraw from the study at any point without penalty.

HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?

There can never be an absolute guarantee that your confidentiality will be protected. However, Principal Investigator will take the following measures to minimize the risk of a breach in confidentiality:

- Participants will be given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym (i.e., a fake name). If the participant does not choose a pseudonym, one will be assigned to them by the Principal Investigator at the beginning of the study.
- All digital data, including (but not limited to) Informed Consent Letters (PDF), audio recordings, and interview transcriptions will be stored on the Principal Investigator's personal, password protected laptop computer.

- All hard-copies and physical materials and/or documents will be stored in a locked file cabinet at the Principal Investigator's personal residence.
- There will be one (1) participant master list with real names and associated pseudonyms. Only the Principal Investigator will have access to this list, and it will be stored on Principal Investigator's personal, password protected laptop computer.

HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?

Results from this study will be used to make recommendations around improving factors that affect Black women's sense of belongingness in predominately White spaces.

WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

This research study and this consent form have been reviewed by USM's Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research studies involving human subjects follow federal regulations.

Should you have any questions or concerns regarding the research or your role as a participant in this study, please contact Jasmine Thornton through email, Jasmine.Gibbons@usm.edu or by phone at (601)325-6525. If at any time you have comments or concerns regarding the conduct of the research or questions about your rights as a research subject, you should contact The University of Southern Mississippi, Institutional Review Board. The phone number for the IRB is (601) 266-5997, or you can write to the IRB at 118 College Drive #5125, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY

I hereby consent to participate in this research study. All research procedures and their purpose were explained to me, and I had the opportunity to ask questions about both the procedures and their purpose. I received information about all expected benefits, risks, inconveniences, or discomforts, and I had ample opportunity to ask questions about them. I understand that my participation in the project is completely voluntary and that I may withdraw from the project at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. I understand that the researcher may withdraw me from the study at their professional discretion. I understand the extent to which my personal information will be kept confidential, and that de-identifiable data may be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research without additional informed consent from me. As the research proceeds, I understand that any new information that emerges and that might be relevant to my willingness to continue my participation will be provided to me.

AUTHORIZATION OF THE USE OF AUDIO RECORDING

I understand that I will be audio recorded during the interview. I understand that recordings will be used for data analysis, conference presentations, and other educational purposes. I understand that audio recording is a mandatory part of this research study however, if I decide that I do not wish to be recorded at any point, I will no longer be able to participate in the research study.

  ☐ **YES**, I authorize the use of audio recording as described.

  ☐ **NO**, I do not authorize the use of audio recording as described.

AUTHORIZATION OF THE USE OF DIRECT QUOTES

I understand that the interview will be recorded and transcribed. I understand that the researcher may use my words, direct quotes, or other excerpts made by me in this study to be included in presentations, publications, other academic outlets related to this research. I understand that any interview content will be de-identified however, confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed and that I may be able to be re-associated with the data at

a later time. I understand that I will be sent notes, transcripts, or other data collected during the research pertaining to my participation to review for accuracy.

☐ **YES**, I authorize the researcher to use excerpts such as direct quotes from the interview in their research.

☐ **NO**, I do not authorize the researcher to use excerpts such as direct quotes from the interview in their research.

Participant's Name (Print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty.

Interview Guide

The Principal Investigator will guide the Sista Circle, as a participant, to address their experiences with the four areas of belongingness that have been identified for the purpose of this study.

Intersectionality.
The way in which multiple forms of inequality or oppression (such as racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism and more) can compound and create different modes of discrimination or disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989).

- Think back to the earliest experience in your doctoral program, where the intersectionality of being both black and woman, became apparent for you.
  - Tell us about this time.

- Did your experiences with intersectionality affect your ability to persist in any way?

Microaggressions.
The subtle, daily, and unintentional racial slights committed against people of color because they are members of a racialized group (Sue et al., 2007).

- Is there a particular microaggression that you experienced during your doctoral studies that sticks out to you?
  - If so, tell us about it. Why is this the one that comes top of mind above the rest?
- Do you think there is a way to protect yourself from microaggressions? If so, how?
- How did microaggressions affect your ability to persist?

Micro-affirmations.
Small acts that foster inclusion, listening, comfort, and support for people who may feel isolated or invisible in an environment (Rowe, 2008).

- Name a time in your doctoral studies that you felt seen, through micro-affirmations.
  - How did it make you feel? Who did the micro-affirmation(s) come from?
- Did the micro-affirmations impact your ability to persist?

Mentorship.
A relationship involving guiding, nurturing, and teaching (both formally and informally) between individuals with differing degrees of experience (Adams, 1998).

- Did you receive mentorship in your doctoral program?
- Did you seek it?
  - Internally?
  - Externally?
- How did this mentorship or lack thereof influence your ability to persist through your program?

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APPENDIX C –IRB Approval Letter

Office *of* Research Integrity

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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident submission on InfoEd IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER:	22-263
PROJECT TITLE:	Particular Pains, Particular Sufferings: Using Sista Circle to Explore Belongingness as a Factor Affecting the Academic Persistence of Black Women Doctoral Recipients from Southern Predominantly White Institutions
SCHOOL/PROGRAM	School of Education
RESEARCHERS:	PI: Jasmine Thornton Investigators: Thornton, Jasmine~Foster, Holly~
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION:	Approved
CATEGORY:	Expedited Category
PERIOD OF APPROVAL:	27-Apr-2022 to 26-Apr-2023

Donald Sacco Jr.

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

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