Black Women as Self-Defining Leaders: A Narrative Analysis Connecting Controlling Images with Leadership Representation

Dissertation

in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in Leadership

in the Department of Leadership, Technology, and Workforce Development

of the Dewar College of Education and Human Services

Mirakal M. L. Jackson

MPA, Valdosta State University, 2021

BA, Valdosta State University, 2020

Defense Date: April 19th, 2023

This dissertation, "Black Women as Self-Defining Leaders: A Narrative Analysis Connecting Controlling Images with Leadership Representation," by Mirakal M. L. Jackson, is approved by:

Dissertation Committee Chair

M. Denise Lovett

M. Denise Lovett, Ph.D.

Coordinator, Africana Studies

Associate Professor, Psychological Science

Committee Members

Kendric Coleman

Kendric L. Coleman, Ph.D.

Professor, English & Africana Studies

A. J. Ramirez

A. J. Ramirez, Ed.D.

Coordinator, Women's & Gender Studies

Lecturer, Sociology

Associate Provost for Graduate Studies and Research

Becky K. da Cruz

Becky K. da Cruz, Ph.D., J.D.

Professor of Criminal Justice

FAIR USE

DUPLICATION

I authorize the Head of Interlibrary Loan or the Head of Archives at the Odum Library at Valdosta State University to arrange for duplication of this dissertation for educational or scholarly purposes when so requested by a library user. The duplication shall be at the user's expense.

Signature Mirakal Jackson

I refuse permission for this dissertation to be duplicated in whole or in part.

Signature _____

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I acknowledge Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior, for being my source of strength, happiness, and healing. I want to take this opportunity to thank several individuals and organizations who assisted me along my academic journey.

To my Marietta Mentoring for Leadership family, thank you for taking care of me and providing me with the tools needed to succeed in college as an undergraduate: Lynda, Marshall, Linda, Phillip, Marge, Beverly, Joyce, Akella, Emmit, Leigh, Forrestella, Colonel Wilson, Sergeant Smith, Rona, and many others. To Sergeant Smith, as a 14-year old cadet, you always told me that leadership was my calling; I know you wanted me to be an Air Force officer, but I know I still made you proud. Thank you all for believing in me at such an early age.

To my Valdosta State University family, thank you for helping me see myself and providing me with the tools needed to make a positive change in the world. Dr. Lovett, thank you for your scholarly mentorship guidance and granting me the opportunity to join your Black Feminist Thought classes. And of course, Drs. Coleman and Ramirez, thank you both for your timely support and believing in me when I needed you most. Dr. Hanna, thank you for the many ways you helped me as a Graduate Assistant, including giving me the opportunities to teach your classes and innovate academic advising procedures. Thanks to former colleagues, mentors, sponsors, and friends in the Division of Student Affairs (special thanks to Career Opportunities and Volunteer Services, Student Diversity and Inclusion, Student Life, and Housing and Residence Life) and the Office of Strategic Communications and Marketing. I was able to grow not only as a professional, but also as a servant leader.

Directors Sandra Y.G. Jones and Carla C. Jordan, thank you for serving as positive role models of successful Black women administrators. Your unique representation and gritty resilience on campus inspired me in more ways than you both know.

To my undergraduate peers and Homecoming Queen supporters, I'll never forget the many ways we witnessed the campus body come together to have uncomfortable conversations during a peak time of racial tension. There are too many individuals and organizations to name that have helped me grow and inspired me to pursue this doctoral degree, but I'm confident that you know my gratitude extends beyond the words of this page.

DEDICATION

To my Heart, I love and appreciate you for many reasons. There were so many times when I considered giving up, but your kind words empowered me and your thoughtful actions nurtured me with love, peace, and joy. Over 5 years ago, you showed me that romantic happiness is possible…thank you for being a light. Special shoutout to my therapist who also supported me through the mental breakdowns throughout this all-consuming dissertation process.

To my Mom and Godmom, thank you for teaching me how to be strong through prayer. You both told me throughout my childhood that you were proud of me and that my love for learning would take me far. I'll never forget the support and motherhood love you both selflessly gave me. Both of your present-day journeys to find true self-love inspired my dissertation. One day, I hope you will write about your stories filled with miracles and mysteries. I love you.

To my nieces and nephews, thank you for teaching me how to teach you. My dear Allison, I love you oh so much. Watching you grow is a blessing itself. I did this dissertation for you, too. When you look at me, I hope that you can see how far education, reflective discourse, grit, openness, and self-definition can take you.

To my students and former residents, I hope that I can be the representation that you didn't see often: a young Black woman with a doctorate. Thank you for exposing me to the daily challenges that you face in school, at home, and in your community. I'll never forget listening to your stories about your academic experiences in South Georgia.

And of course, to every Black woman and girl who so graciously shared their life stories with me during the course of this dissertation: Thank you for trusting me with your stories. I see you. I value you. I respect you. And I hope I did your stories justice. One day, the world will understand your worth and humanity, too.

Abstract

The purpose of this *narrative inquiry* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016) study was to investigate, document, and illuminate how controlling images influence the perceptions, experiences, opportunities, and/or health of five Black women[1] leaders living in South Georgia by conducting 90-minute in-depth (Seidman, 2019) *life story interviews* (Kim, 2016). *Controlling images* are internalized stereotypes that influence one's self-image, lived experiences, and life opportunities based on prevailing standards, such as physical features, dialect, social status, and behaviors (Collins, 2022; Harris-Perry, 2011). The problem is society has persistently deemed Black women's existence invisible (Crenshaw, 1989; Hart, 1967; hooks, 1981; Langley, 2021) and their concerns negligible (Collins, 1989; Jones et al., 2021), which hinders the resurfacing of their stories. This problem impacted the health, life experiences, leadership opportunities, and perceptions of Black women in America (Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris-Perry, 2011; hooks, 2000; Kirby, 2020; Walker, 1983). Today, contemporary Black women collectively continue to fight for their voices to be heard, their identities and experiences to be accurately represented, and their intersectional narratives to be acknowledged and told *by them* (Collins, 2022; Jones et al., 2021; Porter & Byrd, 2021; Simmons, 2020). The study findings not only added to scholarly research about Black women as intellectual leaders, but also informed implications for future research on identity and media representation; cultural diversity and belonging; learning and transformation; American laws and opportunity; education and home dynamic; and narrative inquiry/analysis. The narrative analysis reported fresh perspectives and new ideas for institutions, policymakers, and organizational leaders.

[1] *Black women* – A keyword used throughout this dissertation to describe the social group collectively and was not meant to generalize the experiences of all Black women. It will be defined in more detail in Chapter 2. Black and African American are known as interchangeable terms.

Table of Contents

Prologue: Black Womanity

I love *all* Black women. But I'd be remiss if I did not confess that I didn't always love my social group. As a teenager, I thought being Black had too many problems attached to it, so I distanced myself from it…until I couldn't anymore. As an adult, I finally learned that Black oppression was intentional by design. So, it is with great burden and relief that I write this dissertation about 'Black womanity' (Harris, 2015, p. 2). Throughout my k-12 education, I never learned of how amazing Black women actually are. I didn't see Black women in high-profile leadership positions until the Obama era. But even before high-profile leaders like Michelle Obama, there were so many other Black women who made monumental contributions to the American economy, politics, and educational institutions. But do we know about their stories? Not really. But we definitely learn about the stories of countless White male leaders.

No Money, Mo' Problems

If I had a dollar for every time I learned about Black women as leaders, I'd be poor. So, when people asked me, "Why write your dissertation about Black women?" I simply responded, "Well, why not?" I was usually met with a variety of responses that were laden with racist, sexist, classist, and/or homophobic beliefs. Those responses ignited a fire in me that birthed this dissertation. Statistically speaking, Black women earn 63 cents for every dollar earned by White men; and even with advanced degrees, they earn 30% less in wages (Roux, 2021).

> Black women are an integral part of the American labor force but have long faced a pay gap due to longstanding inequities in education and the labor market. In addition, they have been disproportionately impacted by the [Covid-19] pandemic. Black women workers are overrepresented in low-paying service sector jobs, which were among the hardest hit, in terms of job losses. (Roux, 2021)

Black women are known for taking care of others with less pay, but who's taking care of us? Ourselves. And that type of pressure of course makes diamonds that sparkle, but it also impacts health. Humans are not meant to be under so much pressure, but when American society has not traditionally viewed Black women as human, we fall through the cracks. This dissertation is meant to highlight the repercussions of such pressures by simply illuminating real stories of Black women from the low- and middle-class. These powerful women were bold enough to share their lived experiences laden with messages of strength, self-worth, and self-definition.

Changing My Narrative

My mom and godmom taught me how to be strong, but I could not help but notice how their experiences exacerbated their maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., addiction; see Long and Ullman, 2013, for more). When I learned of their experiences and observed the impact on their mental, physical, and spiritual health, I made it my duty to break the generational cycle of abuse by using my voice and sharing my story to empower others to speak up too. I believe the past oppressive-focused narratives of Black women can offer context to the present empowerment-focused narratives of modern Black women. As a young Black girl, I needed love and acceptance, but every person or organization to whom I turned could not help me heal.

So, what did I do? I changed my narrative. I refused to be a passive victim of my oppression. I became an active champion who voiced mental, physical, and spiritual health concerns impacting Black girls and women in America. I found healing in becoming everything no one expected me to be. My experiences fueled my desire to empower every Black woman who did not have the chance to share their *individual* story or may not have had the resources to change their narrative. Below is short segment of my individual story within the context of my academic journey.

Academic Journey. After learning about the experiences of African American people in history classes, I found myself uncomfortable with the idea of being part of a group that went through so many struggles less than two generations ago. I wish that I was taught about the achievements and the countless ways that Black women helped progress many social justice movements. I went to college immediately after high school. By senior year of high school, even after becoming Group Commander of the Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFJROTC) program, Student Body Co-President, a varsity Track and Field athlete, and an International Baccalaureate (IB) honors scholar, I still felt completely lost in my identity. The first time that I saw a Black woman principal was during my senior year. Clearly, there was minimal representation of Black women in high-profile leadership positions.

My achievements brought me closer to what I was capable of as a Black girl, but not necessarily who I was. In my teenage mind, I knew I could do anything I put my mind to if I worked hard enough. But I did not understand that as an adult, even if I worked hard enough, I still couldn't obtain certain leadership positions with equal pay. So, I recognized early that I would need the highest level of education to obtain economic freedom.

During my college journey, I witnessed Black women who were underrepresented in faculty, staff, administration, and executive positions. Yet there was an overrepresentation of Black women in the custodial staff. But when you take a closer look at educational institutions, you'll see that Black women were only permitted to lead exclusively at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Chance, 2022, Williams et al., 2022). I never knew why because I was not taught nor introduced to Black women intellectuals who explained this social disparity. Growing up, I saw single Black mothers doing the best they could with the resources that they had, which was the bare minimum. During my master's journey, I took a deeper dive

into the underrepresentation of Black women in high-profile leadership positions, leading to this dissertation. However, just because they were not in those positions did not mean that they did not make valuable contributions. Less than 70 years ago, Black women were not given fair opportunities to change their life and social status.

It was not until college that I began to understand the mental, physical, and spiritual labor of previous generations of Black women. During freshman year in college, I finally began thinking about what it meant to be Black, let alone a woman. My first year at Valdosta State University (VSU) exposed me to a part of America that I did not even know existed. The part where people still believe in showcasing the Confederate flag and reminding Black people of the inhumane treatment (e.g., hate crimes) from White social groups. As a northerner, I was culturally shocked when White students would broadcast that flag on their cars and apparel. I felt very cold toward those individuals because I felt like they were embracing the inhumane actions that the American law once enforced. The moment I saw a gigantic Confederate flag waving in the Southern breeze during my travels to Valdosta was the first moment that I knew I was heading to a racially polarized region.

Although I was not prepared for the racial hostility in Valdosta, the South Georgia region helped me see that the Black struggles for liberation and economic freedom are still works in progress. That is when I knew that it was my purpose to be a voice that discusses the role historical oppression plays in present-day liberation struggles. That is when I understood that the stories of Black women still living in impoverished neighborhoods in South Georgia were important to me. Not only did I begin to understand the collective Black woman experience, but I also understood what it was like to grow up in poverty and in wealth. These social issues that I discuss in my dissertation are very personal to me because living in the intersection of race,

gender, and class helped me understand the impact these constructs can have on personal well-being and democratic opportunities. I knew countless Black women who wanted to make it out of impoverished neighborhoods because of their yearning for a better life, but just were not given the opportunity or resources to change their circumstance because of how others perceived them. It is important for you to know that I resonate with these women because I witnessed their transformative leadership qualities through their intellectual activism.

I remember the changes I went through when I discovered that there were other young Black women like me trying to get in touch with their history and themselves. There were other Black women who critically thought about their social position and others who questioned the relationship between their schooling experiences and their identity. How can we know a history that we were not taught? How can we know the impacts of a circumstance if we do not ask? How can we learn how to change something if we do not critically think or seek knowledge about our circumstance? These are questions that I asked myself during my personal, professional, and academic journey to find belonging within my social group.

I found myself looking for safe places on or near VSU's campus that made me feel like I belonged. I joined and led several student and campus organizations during my efforts to become whole in my identity. I reflected on my life experiences and my identity through poetry and began sharing parts of my life with the student body during live performances. Poetry was my outlet to discuss racial and gender social issues that were important to me, such as how stereotypes influence how people treat others. Around the time when I met my partner, I began dealing with my adverse childhood experiences. I was trying to figure out how and why it happened. I knew it was not my fault, but some part of me wanted to figure out whose fault it was. Obviously, it was the oppressor's fault, but what made him so comfortable with assaulting

me—an underage Black girl—in the first place?

After my poetry performances on campus about adverse experiences, I remember other young Black women disclosing similar stories and how they felt alone in their struggles to become themselves. These women shared how hearing my story inspired them to share their story. We had meaningful conversations about race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation. At the time, I was not aware of Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory, but I remember talking with dozens of other Black women about the interconnecting experiences of Black womanhood. After these conversations, I began reflecting on what healing looked like for me and what transformation meant to me. I believed that in order to become my whole self, I had to change my worldview. I had to believe in transformation and the many benefits of that lifelong learning process, such as greater self-awareness. I revisit my transformative leadership worldview during my discussion about my subjectivity in Chapter 2.

In total, what I learned during my identity crisis was that experiences make us who we are and inevitably influence how we think. For years, I thought that I denied my Blackness because of the past, but I soon learned that I denied it because of the present. The current social status of Black women as "less than" needs to change and that collective status cannot change if conversations are not had about how they found themselves in that social role to begin with. Based on the primary representation that I saw in the media, Black women were categorized as poor, violent, and/or illiterate welfare mothers. I had a problem with those stereotypes because Black women are worth so much more than such belittling assumptions, which is why I found it critical to 'check-in' on Black women leaders in South Georgia by seeking knowledge about their experiences with controlling images.

Chapter 1: Introduction - Why Is This Study Important?

When viewing a half-filled glass, do you perceive it as being half-full or half-empty? Each perspective (e.g., optimism versus pessimism) is based on the experiences of the viewer. Upon first glance, I would perceive the glass as refillable and easily broken until I realized the point of this question was to ask more questions. Who made the glass? How was the glass designed? Why was the glass filled or emptied? What is in the glass? Where was the glass made? These five questions help to clarify the parameters of the whole picture by probing for context. According to theorist Joseph Maxwell (2013), a concept or topic cannot be fully understood without context, which requires asking more questions. Consequently, context is needed to interpret data; hence, context is the foundation of qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

This dissertation includes recommendations from Maxwell's (2013) guidelines for conducting qualitative research, though, some of his recommendations are substituted or combined with other leading scholars and theorists, such as Galvan and Galvan (2017) on literature reviews and Ravitch and Riggan (2017) on conceptual frameworks. Maxwell's interactive model has five components: researcher goals, research questions, conceptual framework, methods, and validity. According to this model, Maxwell recommended that qualitative researchers introduce their personal, intellectual/scholarly, and practical goals to the reader in order to justify why the study was worth doing. My research goals connected to the research problem that motivated the scope of this study and the research questions. The remainder of this introduction will outline the dissertation and conclude with definitions of key terms used throughout the study. Before we go any further, it is important to ask, "How will my worldview and experiences influence how I will read, understand, and interpret this dissertation?"

In Chapter 1, I began with identifying my researcher goals and research problem with the knowledge that the mind (mental), body (physical), and spirit (spiritual) make up the whole person (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Merriam and Baumgartner's robust, in-depth text on adult learning and development helped me build my conceptual framework, which included a theoretical analysis of the narratives, voices, and experiences of Black women collectively. Introducing the concept of the whole person contextualized the mental, physical, and spiritual impacts of interlocking social problems related to Black women's identity, health, experiences, and opportunities (Collins, 2022). Discussing every problem that impacts Black women's leadership representation, health, and experiences was beyond the scope of this study. However, the scope of this study included a historical scholarly discourse with a sociocultural lens about the American legal systems that created and reinforced intersectional structures (see Crenshaw, 1989) that currently impact Black women's well-being. Further details about the social structural constraints that currently marginalize African American women and consequently limit their leadership opportunities will be discussed with a historical, political, and economic lens in the conceptual framework.

In Chapter 2, I introduced three interconnecting theories: *Black feminist thought* (Collins, 1989; Collins, 2022; hooks, 1981) as part of a conceptual framework (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017) that fundamentally interconnects with *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1989) and *transformational/transformative learning theory* (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Mezirow, 1997; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). The theoretical framework section (i.e., existing theory and research; Maxwell, 2013) of the conceptual framework primarily used Collin's Black feminist thought framework as the reason (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017) to investigate the social roles, societal conditions, and opportunities for Black women. Collins emphasized the importance of

using a perspective of empowerment versus deficit-focused perspectives on images and narratives of Black women in America. Ergo, I found it critical to include Berry and Gross's (2020) historical overview of triumphant Black women to understand the complex experiences they overcame based on their race, gender, and class. The overwhelming trends in the literature related to social problems that Black women faced (e.g., "invisibility") as discussed by Langley (2021), primarily within the setting of South Georgia, can best be understood with a critical sociocultural lens. As directed by Maxwell, I shared how my experiential knowledge from feasibility assessments informed my initial understanding of the interconnecting theories and concepts in this dissertation.

In Chapter 3, I explicated the rigor (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017) in the methodology section of this qualitative study. To build a "coherent whole" (Maxwell, 2013) of the topic, I revisited the research questions in relation to prior research and theory, my experiential knowledge, my research goals, and my exploratory research. Most importantly, the life narratives and lived experiences of the participants were framed in a manner that uplifted their voices (Harris, 2015), which empowered them to transform their thinking (Mezirow, 1997; Mezirow & Associates, 2000), resist oppression (Jones et al., 2021), and take social action against structural constraints (e.g., harmful stereotypes) that influence their self-image, life circumstances, and opportunities (Snider, 2018). Also, I detailed how I employed *narrative inquiry*, a storytelling methodology that seeks details about one's life experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016), as the rigor to voice the sociocultural perceptions and experiences of five Black women leaders in South Georgia using Seidman's (2019) in-depth 90-minute life story interview structure.

In Chapter 4, I revealed what was discovered from the interviews with Black women leaders living in South Georgia. Although each participant did not complete the three-part

interview structure due to availability, their interviews were still in-depth enough to offer critical insight into how controlling images not only impact Black women's health and wellness, but also their leadership and democratic opportunities in America. The chapter included their life story profiles (Seidman, 2019) based on what was gathered during the data collection phase. Each participant was given the autonomy to check their profiles and send revisions. Their profiles offered similar perspectives that were mentioned in Collin's (2022) *Black feminist thought*, directly connecting their life experiences with known literature (Abrams et al., 2014; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris-Perry, 2011) about Black women.

In Chapter 5, I discussed what I learned from each participant's profile after contextualizing their experiences with relevant literature. In Chapter 6, I reported how their life stories should inform the direction of future research on Black women as intellectual leaders. I made recommendations for how educational and organizational leaders can support Black women leaders with different backgrounds. The study results supported the lack of representation of Black women in high-profile leadership positions had connections to distorted cultural images broadcasted across America about their intellectual abilities, work ethic, and home environments. Although there are countless successful Black women leaders, there is still not enough. As a social group, Black women must continue to use their voice and intellect to challenge societal norms, narratives, and images that dictate their experiences.

Research Goals: Personal, Intellectual, and Practical

This section breaks down each research goal and its importance before specifying the research problem. My personal goals motivated me to do this study. My intellectual goals revealed what I want to understand about Black women in America, provide insight into what is going on, and explain why it is happening. My practical goals contributed to my

recommendations about what needs to be accomplished to change the situation and meet a perceived social need. Every goal is connected to my conceptual framework, which documented my experiential knowledge, relevant literature and theories, feasibility assessments, and transformative worldview.

Why did I do this study? My first personal goal was to not only seek knowledge about my social group collectively, but also to use that knowledge to understand my own experiences and the participants' individual experiences within our shared identity as Black women. My second personal goal involved the need to add to the representation of young Black women who earn doctoral degrees to advance their employment opportunities. My third personal goal was to improve Black women's experiences in America, especially in South Georgia, by spotlighting the real-life challenges these women face in their workplace, home, schools, and/or community. Based on my experiential knowledge, I noticed how difficult it was for Black women to obtain high-profile leadership positions because of how they were collectively perceived and treated.

There is always more to the story, but we usually do not know the entire story until we muster the courage to ask. Thus, there are a variety of things that I wanted to understand about Black women and their opportunities, though I believe it was difficult to understand their experiences without context (Thomas, 2004). My first intellectual goal was to understand how the American social and legal systems have historically normalized the oppressive structures (e.g., poverty) often associated with African American citizens, particularly women. Hence, I asked the participants about their childhood background, and explored their perceptions about how American social and legal systems influenced their experiences. Accordingly, I sought knowledge from the literature about intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), and how this theoretical framework grounded Black feminist literature (Collins, 2022; hooks, 1981).

My second intellectual goal was to extend the knowledge about how Black women in South Georgia perceived controlling images (i.e., internalized stereotypes; Collins, 2022) and how these cultural tropes contributed to their well-being, experiences, and opportunities while justifying their oppression. I accomplished this second goal by analyzing the participants' understanding of and experiences with racially gendered stereotypes and contextualizing how controlling images impacted their mental, physical, and/or spiritual well-being. Consequently, I found it relevant to focus on origins of controlling images (e.g., the "strong" Black woman) in the conceptual framework. My third intellectual goal was to empower Black women in South Georgia by exploring and illuminating their life stories to counter the dominant, often deficit-focused, one-dimensional cultural view about these women in America (Harris, 2015; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). For this reason, I employed narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016) and narrative analysis (Mishler, 1995) as rigorous methodological approaches.

Now that my personal and intellectual goals have been identified, the question becomes: What did I want to accomplish? My first practical goal (Maxwell, 2013) of my dissertation was to address the social disparities that produce the racial gendered barriers Black women face, as many of these women reported mental, physical, and spiritual fatigue (Harris-Perry, 2011; Jones et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2022) from daily micro- and macro-aggressions (Sue et al., 2019) related to their intersectional identities (Abrams et al., 2014; Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1989). In other words, I wanted to identify and bring awareness to how lack of equal access to social resources (e.g., money, housing, and education) may influence a participants' health, experiences, and opportunities. Second, I attempted to extend current literature by offering the public with critical insight into the multifaceted experiences that Black women encounter in South Georgia, with a specific focus on women leaders from low- and middle-class status.

The insight into the daily experiences of the selected women brought visibility to social issues that were overlooked by decision makers. Because invisibility was a recurring theme in recent literature (see Kendall, 2020; Langley, 2021), my second practical goal was to place a call to action on policymakers to acknowledge oppression and dedicate specific policies to protect Black women against unjust violence (e.g., sexual assault, microaggressions, domestic misogyny, and poverty). The second practical goal was not meant to support any political agenda but was instead meant to encourage public and private agencies to stand in solidarity with Black women by protecting their humanity. Based on the results of the study, I recommended Black women-centered policies to encourage other leaders, such as mental health professionals and school administrators, to prioritize Black women's wellness by providing social support, acknowledgement, and recognition. All of my research goals were related to addressing one of many social problems, which connected to the research problem.

The Research Problem: 99 Problems But Only Choose 1

To solve any problem, one must first acknowledge it exists. This section begins with a broad overview of social problems often associated with Black women. Then, the section details a clear picture of the specific problem. The problems announced in this section overview Black women's historical invisibility (Dorsey, 2020) and vulnerability to violence in public and private spaces (Berry & Gross, 2020). The specific problem spotlighted the role of *controlling images*, defined as common internalized stereotypes that control Black women's self-image/self-esteem, experiences, life choices, and opportunities (Collins, 2022; Harris, 2015; Harris-Perry, 2011; Jones et al., 2021; Snider, 2018).

Black women tend to conquer adverse circumstances with the "grace of a lady" and the "grit of a warrior" (Abrams et al., 2014). The problem was society has persistently deemed Black

women's existence invisible (Dorsey, 2020; Langley, 2021; Simmons, 2020) and their concerns negligible (Jones et al., 2021). This problem impacted the health, life experiences, opportunities, and perceptions of Black women in America (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris-Perry, 2011; Jones et al., 2022; Kirby, 2020; Williams et al., 2022). Thankfully, there was a minor explosion of scholarly discourse about African American women's experiences related to their history of susceptibility to violence (Langley, 2021; Long & Ullman, 2013) and involuntary labor (e.g., convict leasing), as discussed by Jeffries (2022) due to societal circumstances (Berry & Gross, 2020).

Although these efforts brought visibility to Black women, popular media (e.g., social media, television, news/radio) trumped these efforts by reinforcing the very controlling images (e.g., Sapphire ["angry Black woman"]) that did not empower Black women (Chen et al., 2012; Stanton et al., 2017). Today, Black women in America collectively continue to fight for their voices to be heard, their identities and experiences to be accurately represented, and their intersectional narratives to be acknowledged and told *by them* (Collins, 2022; hooks, 1981; Jones et al., 2021; Porter & Byrd, 2021). Hence, this study illuminated the voices and life stories of five Black women leaders in South Georgia within the frame of their intersectional identities and experiences.

The purpose of this study was to identify and understand how controlling images influence the perceptions, experiences, opportunities, and/or health of five Black women leaders in South Georgia. Controlling images directly dictated the identity development and mental health of African American women (Jones et al., 2021; Vargas et al., 2020) and their ability to maintain a positive self-image and emotional equilibrium (Rogers et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2022). When the mental health of a whole person was jeopardized, the person experienced

poorer physical and spiritual health (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). According to relevant literature, six underlying concepts affecting controlling images of Black women included (1) society deeming stereotypes as normal (Snider, 2018), (2) reinforcing stereotypes through media representation (read Chen et al., 2012 for more), (3) criminalizing Blackness (Collins, 2022; Jeffries, 2022), (4) objectifying Black women's features (Simmons, 2020), (5) appropriating or mocking Black womanhood culture (Berry & Gross, 2020; Harris-Perry, 2011), and (6) publicizing Black women as inferior to dominant White ideologies (Carbado & Gulati, 2013; Walker, 1983). These concepts worked individually and collectively to stagnate the personal, social, and professional progression of Black women in America (Collins, 2022). In the conceptual framework, I addressed these ideas in more detail to contextualize why strength was a common defense mechanism in Black womanhood (Davis & Jones, 2021).

The *Strong Black Woman schema* was one of the most prominent controlling images (Harris, 2015; Harris-Perry, 2011). Harris-Perry posed the question, "What happens when being strong is not enough?" Strength was a "tool for survival" (Jones et al., 2021) that allowed Black women to defend themselves psychologically against oppression; however, the consequences included limited help-seeking, maladaptive coping, and poor mental and physical health (Abrams et al., 2014; Harris-Perry, 2011; Jones et al., 2021). While strength has become the primary defense mechanism embedded in Black womanhood (Abrams et al., 2014), I argued that transformative learning can serve as an effective approach to *self-definition* (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Collins, 2022; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Mezirow, 1997; Okello et al., 2020). By learning and understanding growth was a lifetime journey, an individual was more likely to become an active champion of their own learning versus a passive victim of oppression (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020).

The problem of how Black women's historical invisibility increased their exposure to violence and wellness concerns from controlling images was worth studying because systemic racial and gender *oppression* remains evident in contemporary American society and judicial systems (Crenshaw, 1989; Davis & Jones, 2021; Langley, 2021), especially in South Georgia. Compared to other marginalized ethnic groups, Black women were more likely to be exposed to mistreatment and/or misrepresentation in workplaces (Catalyst, 2001; Catalyst, 2022), academic institutions (Arnold et al., 2016; Okello et al., 2020), media industries (Chen et al., 2012; Stanton et al., 2017), health care systems (Dorsey, 2020; Sears, 2021), legal systems (Crenshaw, 1989; Langley, 2021), households (Collins, 2022; Sears, 2021), and in their communities (Davis & Jones, 2021; Kendall, 2020). These discriminatory practices were a problem that was worth further exploration by first investigating the role of controlling images (Berry & Gross, 2020; Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris-Perry, 2011).

The current literature on Black women in South Georgia was sparse, leaving little to be known about how raced, gendered, and classed experiences impact Black women's mental, physical, and spiritual health (Blackmon et al., 2016; Vargas et al., 2020). Despite the growing literature on Black women's experiences (Harris-Perry, 2011) and their histories of overcoming through resistance and resilience (Berry & Gross, 2020), there was still not enough literature focused on the narratives of Black women in their own words (Jones et al., 2021). Hence, another purpose of my research was to challenge the dominant narrative of Black women by underscoring their voices and lived realities. In order to achieve this, I created research questions that are listed in the subsequent section.

Research Questions: Perception, Experience, and Meaning-Making

The overarching research question investigated Black women's perceptions, experiences,

and meaning-making about controlling images within the context of their intersectional identities. Each sub question addressed a core concept in my study, which helped reveal information about controlling images and how Black women in South Georgia made meaning of their racial gendered identities. The purpose of every question was to illuminate the voices of Black women and allow them to interpret their own experiences and social positions. By asking the participants to frame their experiences in the context of their social identities, it created fresh perspectives and new ideas (Collins, 2022; Maxwell, 2013). These research questions informed the interview questions that will be explained in Chapter 3. After the research questions written below, I listed definitions of key terms in the next section that you need to know in order to better understand this dissertation.

- What can be learned from the life histories, lived experiences, and perceptions of five Black women leaders in South Georgia? Below are three subquestions.
    - How do Black women living in South Georgia perceive, coexist with, or resist controlling images within the context of their intersectional identities?
    - How do controlling images impact their mental, physical, and/or spiritual health?
    - How do Black women make meaning of American social structures that influence their lived experiences?

Definitions of Key Terms

- *Black feminist thought* – A theoretical framework that focuses on critical thought and social action by examining the collective intersectional experiences of Black women through individual narratives documented across history (Collins, 1989; Collins, 2022).
- *Controlling image* – An internalized stereotype that influences one's self-image, lived experiences, and life opportunities based on prevailing standards, such as physical

features, dialect, social status, and behaviors (Collins, 1989; Collins, 2022; Harris, 2015; Harris-Perry, 2011). Controlling images include Jezebel ("hoochie/fast-tailed girl"), Sapphire ("angry Black woman"), and Superwoman ("strong Black woman").

- *Critical theory* – "An interpretive paradigm that examines class relationships of domination and subordination that create inequality in society and raises critical consciousness in people for individual empowerment and social transformation" (Kim, 2016, p. 302).
- *Experience* – A combination of events, knowledge, and beliefs that influence the worldview and beliefs of a whole person (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Experience has two inseparable principles of continuity and interaction in situations (Kim, 2016).
- *Gendered racism* – A concept that women of color face based on "a system of unequal power and privilege where humans are divided into groups or 'races' with social rewards unevenly distributed to groups based on their racial classification. Variations of racism include institutionalized racism, scientific racism, and everyday racism. In the United States, racial segregation constitutes a fundamental principle of how racism is organized" (Collins, 2022, biii).
- *Intersectionality* – An analysis of sociocultural structures, such as race, social class, gender, age, nation, sexuality, and ethnicity, that shape Black women's experiences and opportunities for justice (Crenshaw, 1989).
- *Life story interview* – An interview method of narrative inquiry that asks about lived experiences based on an unstructured, open-ended interview format (Kim, 2016).
- *Lived experience* – Personal knowledge from an experience in the world where an individual lived through the experience instead of just knowing about an experience.

Collins (2022) noted this as a criterion for meaning.

- *Meaning-making* – The process of how individuals make sense of knowledge, experiences, relationships, and the self; including cognition, affection, intentions, and anything else that can be encompassed in a participants' perspective (Ignelzi, 2000; Maxwell, 2013).
- *Narrative inquiry* – A storytelling methodology that seeks detailed accounts of narratives and stories of people's life experiences (Kim, 2016).
- *Oppression* – An unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group equal access to societal resources and capital, such as education and housing (Hart, 1967; hooks, 1981; Walker, 1983).
- *Self-definition* – The power to name one's reality through reflection (Collins, 2022).
- *Story* – A detailed organization of events, arranged in a plot with a beginning, middle, and end. It has a connection of a 'full' description of a lived experience, unlike narrative. A story is a higher category than narrative, as narratives make up a story (Kim, 2016, p. 305).
- *Strong Black Woman schema* – A functional yet problematic defense mechanism taught in Black womanhood to combat oppression and derogate controlling images (Abrams et al. 2014; Davis & Jones, 2021; Dickens et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2022).
- *Transformational/Transformative learning theory* – Learning that transforms one's problematic frames of reference that define their world based on a coherent body of experience. It involves critical reflection on assumptions, beliefs, values, conditioned responses, and feelings (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Mezirow, 1997; Mezirow & Associates, 2000).

Summary: The Need to Learn More About Black Women

In this introduction, I explained why this narrative inquiry study was important. I detailed my personal, intellectual, and practical goals by answering why I wanted to do this study, what I wanted to learn from it, and how the results prompted positive social change. Additionally, I outlined the research problem to give background as to why the topic—controlling images—matters. Further, I listed the research questions that informed the direction of this study. I concluded with a list of definitions of key terms so non-experts can understand the concepts as the dissertation transitions to Chapter 2, which details what is known about Black women and their experiences. The second chapter consists of the conceptual framework, which was designed to connect how my research goals, research problem, and research questions were informed by my experiential knowledge, theoretical framework, and feasibility assessments.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework - What Do We Know?

A conceptual framework has varying definitions circulating among scholars; Ravitch and Riggan's (2017) definition: "A conceptual framework is an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters [the reason], and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous [the rigor]" (p. 5) best fits my research. The purpose of this study was to investigate, document, and report how controlling images influence the perceptions, experiences, opportunities, and/or health of five Black women leaders in South Georgia. I found it relevant to begin this section with my experiential knowledge as a Black woman in order to outline why controlling images matter. Maxwell (2013) emphasized the words of Peshkin (1991), who encouraged qualitative researchers to connect how their identity, subjectivity, and experiences influence the research goals, research questions, and research design. Accordingly, Merriam and Baumgartner (2020) attested personal experience establishes meaning and credibility.

Specifically, sharing said experiences uplifts Black voices, empowers Black women, and illuminates systemic issues that inevitably impact the health of Black women (Collins, 2022; hooks, 1989). Thus, it is appropriate to write in a first-person narrative in qualitative research. My social position and experiences in relation to my identity should be understood before delving into existing theories and research about Black women. I apply a historical and sociocultural lens to justify and contextualize the research topic: controlling images. This second chapter is organized according to Maxwell's guidelines: experiential knowledge, reflective memos, theoretical framework/existing theory and research, and preliminary research. Instead of creating a separate section for reflective memos, I include reflections on my positionality and subjectivity in the subsequent section in effort to strengthen my arguments with experiential knowledge.

Experiential Knowledge: Identity, Experience, and Subjectivity

Long and Ullman (2013) reported due to the Jezebel controlling image (an image centered in sexualizing Black women), Black girls are more at risk for early sexualization and sexual victimization in childhood. Similarly, Kendall (2020, p. 48) cited 40-60% of Black American girls are sexually abused before 18 years old. Kendall explained the reason is adultification: a racist practice of seeing Black girls as significantly older than they are. There is often a code of silence in Black communities when sexual assault events occur, especially when it happens in the family (Dorsey, 2020). When sexual violence happens, Black girls and women are likely to be blamed for the experience for reasons that may include their appearance or what Kendall (2020) referred to as the "fast-tailed girl" image, which is rooted in the Jezebel controlling image (Chapter 4, pp. 47-66).

Kendall explicated the need to stop blaming survivors/victims for the actions of their oppressors/predators: We must use every opportunity to challenge rape culture, a system that positions some bodies as deserving to be attacked, at all levels (p. 54-60). Sexual predators target individuals that society view as unworthy of protection (Kendall, 2020). Kendall argued, "Girls raised in areas of concentrated poverty, amid oppression aided and abetted by a police culture that prioritizes racial profiling and violent constraint over protection, their force has to be survival" (p. 80). To minimize the impact of oppression, African American women socialize their children early in childhood to be strong regardless of the circumstance (Jones et al., 2021). This message of strength is often internalized at an early age, leaving Black girls and women vulnerable to sacrificing their mental health to maintain an image of strength (Abrams et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2021; Kendall, 2020; Long & Ullman, 2013).

Instead of advocating for survivors or at least checking on their well-being, people often avoided conversations about sexual assault altogether (Kendall, 2020). Their avoidance, versus active support (e.g., therapy), made Black girls and women feel invisible, sad, and angry. Today, I frequently hear religious loved ones encourage survivors to "Let go and let God." The results of this study will show the damage that emotional suppression (e.g., feeling isolated after trauma) can do. From my experiences and also pointed out by Harris-Perry (2011), many Black women were firm believers that the Lord was their strength, but it was not their responsibility to be strong on their own. From what I observed, trying to be strong on their own (with no support) resulted in drug abuse, sexual violence, domestic violence, pregnancy, and/or no feelings of self-worth. However, as the study results will show, many Black women found alternate ways to deal with adversity, such as pursuing higher education or executive leadership positions.

It is important to remember to not be a product of one's circumstance, as becoming an active learner can combat the maladaptive coping strategies that seep into narratives of Black women who experienced any form of violence. Long and Ullman (2013) outlined individuals who experience sexual assault are more at risk for developing psychological and emotional problems, substance abuse, and intimate partner violence. The nine Black women in Long and Ullman's study reported physical and mental abuse, which impacted their coping strategies and self-image. Jones et al. (2021) revealed Black women are known to correlate their strength with prayer to combat attacks on their well-being (Harris-Perry, 2011). Although this study does not focus solely on Black women who have experienced or were exposed to some form of sexual violence, it is important to begin with this topic because three of the participants shared how this was a recurring issue in Black girlhood and womanhood.

My identity as a strong Black woman places me at an intersectional crossroads trafficked by dominant structures and systems that dictate my opportunities, experiences, and overall well-being (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks & West, 1991). From my experience, I understood early that I was not in control of my experiences because no matter how hard I tried to prove that I was not a stereotype (e.g., 'vulnerable to early sexualization'), many people still viewed me as one because of my Blackness. I learned that my identity as a Black woman influenced how people treated me. My identity, coupled with my experiences, is like a "garment that cannot be removed" (Peshkin, 1991, p. 286). Hence, my identity and experiences contribute to my subjectivity. As directed by Peshkin, I uncover my biases/subjectivity in the next segment as the research instrument. After exposing my positionality to strengthen this study's validity, I found it important to transition to existing theory and research that contextualized my lived experiences and the history of other Black women who battled gendered and racial oppression (i.e., gendered racism), such as sexual exploitation.

Subjectivity Memo: Social Justice and Transformative Leadership

As the researcher instrument, I explored ways to control my subjective lens. *Subjectivity* is how we make sense of the world around us (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Patton, 2015). I view it as our engrained and irremovable mental model that impacts how we send and receive information (Peshkin, 1991). Although gaining complete control of it is impossible because all human behavior is belief-driven and connected to our emotions (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020), there were ways to minimize my subjectivity during this narrative inquiry study (Maxwell, 2013; Peshkin, 1991). The best way to do this was by learning how to manage my emotions, as my emotions drive my behaviors (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Peshkin, 1991). Ergo, recognizing what topics, subjects, or ideas trigger my emotions (either

positive or negative) was good practice (Peshkin, 1991). Topics, subjects, or ideas that include Black women triggered an emotion because I am a Black woman. Nevertheless, I managed my expression of emotions by practicing a poker face and later reflecting about those emotions.

Being cognizant of how (strong) emotions impact our mental health requires emotional intelligence and critical self-reflection (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Furthermore, Peshkin (1991) affirmed minimizing my subjectivity requires investigating it, as supported by Merriam and Associates (2002). Overall, my subjectivity and cultural lenses influence my research. Hence, Maxwell (2013) tasked qualitative researchers to complete a researcher identity memo, so scholars can be mindful of unconscious influences which Peshkin referred to as subjective "I's." In total, Peshkin identified six subjectivity "I's" that shaped his cultural and subjectivity lenses; however, my subjectivity "I's" focus on my race, gender, class, and worldview: Justice-Seeking I, Community Maintenance I, and Transformative Leadership I.

Justice-Seeking I. My identity is at the intersection of oppression; thus, I strongly value justice and I believe that Black women have dealt with intersectional oppression for too long. I support Black women-centered social movements, such as #SayHerName (i.e., a hashtag created in 2013 to bring awareness to violence against Black women). Similar to Peshkin, I value and feel warm towards people who believe, understand, and support social movements designed to improve my social group's experiences and opportunities in America. As a Black woman, this "Subjective I" (Peshkin, 1991) influences and drives my research because I am treated and judged differently than my White counterparts. In total, social justice, equity, and fairness are important to me because of my life experiences.

Community Maintenance I. A community is a place or a group of people you feel safe, respected, and loved around. I believe humans are wired to seek belonging and social support

(Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020), especially when faced with traumatic experiences (Jones et al., 2022; Long & Ullman, 2013). I expected the selected women for this study to have a strong communal culture because of my experiential and historical knowledge about my social group. Similar to many others, I have positive feelings towards people who share my same values. I feel cold (i.e., have negative feelings) towards people who reject my values. A strong, grounded sense of community is important to me and is relevant because Black women are often viewed as pillars of their community. Overall, community maintenance requires remaining open to opposing views because everyone is different.

Transformative Leadership I. My personal and professional experiences led to my identity as a transformative leader, which I define as someone who loves to help individuals grow, heal, and become the best versions of themselves. I am a firm believer in this approach because that was my pathway to healing and many people resonated with stories about my transformation during my life journey. I love having conversations about social change. Even though diversity-related discussions stimulate powerful feelings (e.g., anger, shame, guilt, and fear), I believe that type of discourse prompts transformative growth in an individual and/or in an organization. Transformative learning occurs through discourse.

To foster transformative learning, effective discourse requires emotional intelligence: being objective, reflective, and open-minded when reviewing the evidence against or for an argument. Emotional intelligence requires social skills that center self-awareness of my emotions and the emotions of others. Setting expectations for these discussions (e.g., being nonjudgmental or not talking over another person) produces productive conversations. Additionally, discourse helps people in marginalized groups be “active champions” that fight ideological mystification, class oppression, and hegemony, versus “passive victims” dominated by external forces

(Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020, p. 302). Real transformation requires critically thinking about the relationship between power, oppression, and knowledge. Five helpful strategies that I use to foster transformative learning include: 1) encouraging self-reflection, 2) initiating conversations, 3) connecting the role of power in thoughts and actions, 4) being open to growth, and 5) conducting research about a topic (e.g., controlling images). In the theoretical framework, I extend the discussion of the importance of a transformative worldview.

Summary: Understanding My Experiences

The experiential knowledge section included reflective memos about my identity, experience, and subjectivity. I began the section with my journey to accepting my identity as a Black woman leader and I shared experiences with controlling images that I encountered during my journey. I summarized my positionality as the research instrument in this study. Now I will transition to existing theories and research that contextualize my lived experiences. The upcoming section will cover more details about the works of landmark Black women intellectuals who conducted research about Black women.

Theoretical Framework: What's Known About Black Women?

This section introduces what is known about the history of Black women, the origins of common controlling images, and how those stereotypes influence their self-image, experiences, opportunities, and overall health. Although it is relevant to provide a comprehensive overview of controlling images, I will primarily focus on three cultural tropes: the sexy Black woman, the angry Black woman, and the strong Black woman. My critical analysis of relevant literature points out the historical connection between these images and extends the conversation about the need to disrupt how these images were reinforced in mainstream media and American society today. The three interconnecting theories that informed my analysis were *Black feminist thought*

(Collins, 2022), *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1989), and *transformative learning theory* (Mezirow, 1997).

A Black Women's History of the United States: Free or Nah?

Black women were and still are the embodiment of *grit*, defined as passion and perseverance toward long-term goals (Abrams et al., 2014; Duckworth et al., 2007). As early as the sixteenth century (yes, *before* 1619), women of African descent arrived in what later became the United States (Berry & Gross, 2020; Hannah-Jones, 2021). The first Black women to arrive in this country were not enslaved; they were free women who traveled as part of expeditions to explore land previously inhabited by native populations since 5000 to 3000 BCE (Berry & Gross, 2020). Although Black women were "sprinkled throughout history of the United States before 1619 in fragmentary documents," one thing was for sure: They were aware of their vulnerability to violence and captivity (p. 11).

For instance, in 1577, when Sir Frances Drake captured Maria, a Black woman, he described her as a "proper negro wench," raped her (possibly with other crewmembers), and deserted her on an island to avoid the responsibility of her pregnancy (Berry & Gross, 2020, p. 17). Did you catch the "proper" before the racial and sexist insult? I interpreted that as Drake's attempt to emphasize her social class status before dehumanizing Maria. I wonder what her story was. How did she cope after that event? Why did none of the crewmembers help her? What was her testimony? I included this untold story because Maria's life was important and she was worth more than how she was treated. For a moment, consider Maria's fragmented story. She was sexually exploited on a crewship by one of the most praised explorers in history, who later became a slave trader at the turn of the transatlantic slave trade.

Although Black women were treated as invaluable and deemed unworthy of love, joy,

and freedom, they did not view themselves as such (Berry & Gross, 2020). In fact, they knew they were being exploited and challenged their oppressors even if that meant brutal corporal punishment (Collins, 2022). Without their mental, physical, and spiritual sacrifices throughout the centuries, the world would not be what it is today (Taylor, 1998). Their labor toward infrastructure created the opportunity for colonialists to create permanent settlements, one of which was the birth of the United States.

Berry and Gross's book about Black women's history in the United States offered a multitude of perspectives. But the overarching theme of the book was that African American women became active champions of their oppression. Despite every effort to silence them, whether subtle or brutal, they continued to petition for their freedom by seeking protection and liberty to live as equal citizens in America. They thought about their circumstance and changed it through activism and resistance (Collins, 2022). When they could not change their narrative, they kept on fighting for the freedom of future generations (Walker, 1983). The next segment notes how contemporary Black women continue to fight for freedom by transforming their consciousness and resisting controlling images.

Black Feminist Thought Framework: Reflection and Action

Patricia Hill Collins (1989; 2022), the fundamental architect of *Black feminist thought*, proposed a detailed analysis of Black women's collective experiences. Her critical analysis (inspired by other intellectual works; read hooks, 1981, for more) of how doors that were closed to previous generations of Black women have opened for modern-day Black women put this dissertation into perspective. When Collins described Black women in the 30th anniversary edition of her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2022), she distinguished Black women as women of African descent across the

diaspora. Although Collins was not the first to define this term, she defined a diaspora as "the experiences of people who, through slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and migration, have been forced to leave their native lands" (p. 38). In other words, the African diaspora framework suggested a dispersal from Africa to societies in the Caribbean, Europe, South America, and North America. She used the term Black women within the context of common challenges experienced transnationally. Meaning, although her analysis centered Black women in the United States, she used that analysis to develop an understanding that the issues Black women faced (regardless of nation) have similarities. Collins affirmed Black women around the world encounter similar social issues (e.g., poverty, susceptibility to violence, and lack of access to societal resources). Based on her explanations, I sided with her reluctance to continually use the term African American to describe other Black women in America who may not identify as such.

Furthermore, Collins authored this book to demonstrate to academic institutions that Black women have agency and their thoughts and actions were not marginal concerns or opinion based. Instead, their intellectual work was grounded based on their collective standpoint across generations to stimulate resistance against intersectional oppression. Collins legitimized her arguments when discussing the challenges Black women have faced since they arrived in America and the limited progression made within their understood social role. I understood her work as she was forced to defend her reasonings for creating space for future generations of Black women intellectuals to continue the discussion about the American experiences of Black women. I wondered why academic institutions attempted to discredit her landmark work and questioned the credibility of her experiential and communal knowledge. They challenged her intellectual work because her thoughts focused on empowering African American women by increasing their consciousness of their social position, which was 'forbidden' in the 20th century.

Collins posited knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment as the foundation of her theory. The primary purpose of including her comprehensive epistemology in this dissertation was to bring awareness to the social injustices that Black women continue to face, which impacted their opportunities. Collins main argument about intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) focused on the intersecting systems of power and one cannot analyze those power systems separately because we as Black women experience them together. Consequently, her book sparked dialogical engagement among Black women in the United States. Hence, I sought to continue the conversation about the well-being and experiences of my social group. In this section, I highlight the distinguishing features and core themes of the theory to acknowledge how the hegemonic societal structure gave Black women less control than other ethnic women over their identities, experiences, and opportunities (Chen et al., 2012; hooks & West, 1991). Then, I transition to define intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), a core theory at the heart of Collin's framework.

The six theoretical features of Black feminist thought included: (a) to connect experiences and ideas, (b) to ignite significant change through knowledge and practice, (c) to embrace and stimulate self-definition as resistance, (d) to resist oppression by means of challenging oppressive practices and ideas that justify it, (e) to remember essential contributions of Black women intellectuals, and (f) to bridge the theory to other social justice projects (e.g., the broader struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and justice). How did I make sense of these six theoretical features? Put simply, Collins spotlighted the importance of conversations about justice for Black women, how Black women can resist oppression by reshaping their thinking about themselves, and why Black women should remember ancestral intellectual efforts about Black women's social status. The features explored power relationships and how knowledge and

consciousness were forms of power.

How did I imagine her six theoretical features in practice? I connected my experiences and ideas in the form of artwork (e.g., poems and paintings). As I wrote poems or painted, I loved listening to the music of Black women during the 1960s through the 1990s. During these times (and even still today), Black women used the media as an outlet to broadcast cultural messages about Black womanhood by sharing stories about coming to terms with their identity in White spaces, and the importance of uplifting and empowering Black women. This collective body of knowledge spoken in different languages and styles all had a similar message, which was doing the internal self-work and rethinking the patriarchal, heteronormative, and hierarchal dominant ideologies of American society and government.

Black women music artists connected their experiences and ideas into songs to ignite significant change through awareness (knowledge) and action (practice). The significant change was another wave of the Black liberation movement, which popularized how coming to terms with Blackness meant resisting policies and systems designed to sustain intersectional oppression. Thus, I found it necessary to lean on Black women who were artists, scholars, theorists, and beyond. Remembering their contributions to the Black feminist movement reminded me of my privilege to have the space to even explore my identity and my ancestral and cultural history. I understood Collins's six theoretical features as a strategy for sharing ideas and getting connected with other Black women to continue the creation of a collective standpoint for solidarity. In total, I viewed the features as strategies to become active in the national cultural movement for sociocultural liberation and financial freedom among Black women in America.

Likewise, Collins listed seven core themes in Black feminist thought: (1) cyclical, intergenerational, and intersectional oppression, (2) sexual politics of Black womanhood, (3)

Black motherhood, (4) Black women's activism, (5) Black women's love relationships, (6) controlling images, and (7) power of self-definition. The first theme was about how Black women's historical invisibility created an intersectional and intergenerational cycle of oppression. Because of major events like slavery (plantation experiences), convict leasing (prison experiences), and desegregation (social experiences), Black women were historically known to be exploited for their involuntary physical labor, which put them at an economic disadvantage because of American laws. Their labor reinforced stereotypes about their strength and submissiveness. Black women's physical labor included involuntary sexual labor, which created a widespread cultural ideology that they did not own their bodies. In mainstream media, Black women's bodies were policed despite their efforts to reclaim authority over their bodies.

High-profile Black women (e.g., Michelle Obama) and scholars led their social group to collectively stand in solidarity by challenging or embracing controlling images of Black women. The controlling images involved strength, anger, and sexual status. There were debates in Black womanhood about what it meant to be a Black woman, which ignited a personal wellness movement that prioritized overall health and self-image. Additionally, because of their increased exposure to sexual violence, many contemporary Black women used social media platforms to bring awareness to injustices against Black women. This form of activism, though not the only approach, created opportunities for Black women to have conversations about how they fit in with their collective social group as individuals. Stanton et al. (2017) understood activism as "collective action that enhances wellbeing" (p. 468). The journey of self-love, self-worth, and self-reflection were often inspired by Black mothers who participated in habitual self-sacrifice, whether that sacrifice be for their family, marriage, and/or community. From my experiential knowledge, multiple generations of Black women had conversations about Collins's seven

themes to improve Black women's experiences collectively.

Collins (1989; 2022) proclaimed Black feminist thought was a critical social theory that informed scholarly discourse about the lived experiences and perceptions of Black women. Collins (2022) noted a lived experience as a criterion for meaning based on personal knowledge from an experience in the world where an individual lived through the experience instead of just knowing about an experience. She spotlighted the reality that differential group treatment based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status persists in American society. Specifically, Black women as a group remain oppressed within a context characterized by raced, gendered, and classed injustice. Oppression is an unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group equal access to quality societal resources, such as housing, money, and education (Hart, 1967; hooks, 1981). What would your life look like if laws prevented you from having equal access to quality housing, money, and education? Would you blame yourself or the system that limited your access? Collins questioned the American society itself in order to create a scholarly foundation on the social context of many Black women's experiences.

Oppression can serve as a sociocultural lens for understanding the current social position of Black women (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989), especially those living in poverty-stricken housing communities. There was an overrepresentation of Black women in low-income communities (read Kendall, 2020, for more), which was a social issue that I sought to address by asking these women how their circumstances influenced their well-being. In other words, how were the Black women leaders in predominantly Black neighborhoods doing and why were they still living there? The multifaceted legacies of struggle in Black womanhood kept them vulnerable to a variety of social issues, such as institutionalized racism, domestic misogyny,

verbal assaults, poverty, and unequal access to formal education, among other sociocultural constraints (Collins, 2022; Hannah-Jones, 2021; Harris, 2015; Harris-Perry, 2011; Kirby, 2020).

A deeper understanding of how social issues impacted Black women gave vocal power to historically marginalized and silenced groups (Linton & McLean, 2017), ignited social change (Jones et al., 2021), and offered solutions to combat a social problem (Harris, 2015; Kirby, 2020; Okello et al., 2020). Accordingly, Black feminist thought promoted the representation and visibility of Black women as intellectuals, an alternate image to derogate controlling images (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989). Consequently, an intellectual entailed one having the ability to analyze and communicate their own social positions to transform their individual consciousness. Shifting the perspective to Black women as intellectuals empowered individuals within the group. It is important to note that Collins pinpointed no Black woman's experience could be generalized as normal or authentic; only collective standpoints exist. However, the individual narratives of these women generated more understanding about the group; ergo, I proposed to use narrative inquiry as the methodology for this study.

Overall, Black feminist thought was a dynamic interaction between thought and action. Collin's theoretical framework echoed the words of Maxwell (2013) in reference to interactive qualitative research designs and interconnectedness between ideas and experience. Hence, this theory was most appropriate to study Black women. However, this was not the only theory that explained and contextualized the experiences of Black women. As aforementioned, Crenshaw's theory was the heart of Collin's framework, which was why I used intersectionality as another framework to investigate the intersection of race, gender, and class.

Intersectionality Theory: Race, Gender, and Class

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality when critical race theorists

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), Black feminist theorists (Collins, 1989; hooks, 1981; hooks, 1989; Walker, 1983), and transformative learning theorists (Mezirow, 1997; Mezirow & Associates, 2000) ignited new scholarly discourse in the 1980s and 1990s. Intersectionality is an analysis of sociocultural power structures, such as race, social class, gender, age, nation, sexuality, and ethnicity, that shaped Black women's experiences and opportunities for justice (Crenshaw, 1989). Similar to Collins, Crenshaw theorized about the simultaneity of oppression and how sociocultural characteristics, such as race, gender, and class, could not be analyzed as separate constructs. Instead, Crenshaw defended that it was urgent to center Black women in the intersectionality framework because of the multidimensional nature of their experiences. Her main contributions explained how Black women were marginalized in feminist theory (hooks, 1989; hooks, 2000) and in antiracist politics (hooks, 1981; hooks & West, 1991), which impacted how they were able to get justice in courts (Langley, 2021). The theoretical goals of Collins and Crenshaw mirrored the goal of critical theory: A commitment to justice for one's own group and for other groups (Collins, 2022; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Similar to Collins and Crenshaw, I am committed to justice for Black women.

In Crenshaw's Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, she asserted intersectionality as the primary analysis to "sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (1989; p. 140). Her analysis of court rulings that discredited the stories of Black women reminded me of the law enforcement officers, healthcare employees, and family members who attempted to discredit my adverse experiences. Crenshaw cited how past Black women intellectuals (e.g., Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper) also challenged sexist imagery and brought awareness to unjust high rates of sexual violence against Black women. Per Crenshaw, the pervasive problem of sexual violence was characterized by rape law, which

reflected the White male control over Black female bodies (Simmons, 2020). Therefore, rape was used as a weapon of racial terror and dominance (Dorsey, 2020). Interestingly, Crenshaw included the narrative of Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, a 19th-century Black feminist voice from the South, who used an intersectionality framework to demonstrate the significance of race, class, and gender on Black women and called out Black men who only spoke for the race, but not for Black women. Consequently, Crenshaw placed a call to action for more researchers to use intersectionality as a theoretical framework to further understand the complex lived experiences of Black women.

The intersectionality framework guided my work because it explained the intersectional oppression of Black women. Crenshaw's landmark term was a lens to see the ways that social power dynamics interlock and work together. Contemporary conversations around Black women frame the group's oppression in a way that blames them for their circumstance. On the contrary, this theoretical framework spotlighted how the American legal system excluded and discriminated against Black women, which impacted their socioeconomic opportunities. The theory was created to account for Black women's experiences and acknowledge their complex social position. Intersectionality explained Black women's historical invisibility in America based on controlling images that framed them as subhuman or superhuman.

Existing Research: Black Women's Invisibility

The use of intersectionality theory in the literature grounded Crenshaw's theoretical arguments and created insightful research findings about Black women's perceptions, experiences, and opportunities. Since the release of Crenshaw's landmark study, countless scholars and researchers have used intersectionality as a theoretical framework throughout the 21st century to bring awareness to Black women's invisibility (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017;

Dorsey, 2020; Hobbel & Chapman, 2009; Johnson, 2021; Jones et al., 2022; Kirby, 2020; Langley, 2021; Rogers et al., 2021; Snider, 2018; Stanley, 2009; Williams et al., 2022). The concept of invisibility stemmed from the overwhelming history of Black women being silenced, left out of the dominant narrative, and/or excluded from high-profile leadership positions (Catalyst, 2001; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Dorsey, 2020; Harts, 2019; Simmons, 2020). For example, Langley discussed how conversations about police brutality focused on Black men with little regard for the police brutality that Black women faced, especially in domestic violence situations (Sears, 2021). Recently, Simmons (2020) published a report about how Black women's legal invisibility connected to the "angry and aggressive" stereotype, with a particular focus on how their invisibility began with colonialists' desire to control Black women's lives and bodies through stereotypes and violence. Overall, Crenshaw's reflective thoughts helped researchers learn from and build upon critical insights about African American women by illuminating fresh contemporary perspectives learned from different historical circumstances (Brah & Phoenix, 2004).

Further, Langley argued communal discourse around employment discrimination and anti-Black police brutality rarely included Black women, which erased them from the narrative. In accordance with Crenshaw's theory, Langley emphasized there is less accountability for violence against Black women when no one recognizes their unique experiences. Consequently, Langley proposed the problem of Black women's invisibility was birthed from dually rooted violence, which included sexual assault and exploitative labor due to "false narratives created and protected by laws, tropes, and stereotypes" (p. 16). In other words, the law helped the oppressors by justifying the labor-ridden dehumanization (Jeffries, 2022) and sexually violent humiliation (Long & Ullman, 2013) of Black women throughout the centuries. During colonial

times, White people (yes, including women) viewed Black women as sexual animals that could not be raped and property that could birth more property (Langley, 2021; Smith, 2021). Furthermore, Black women were prohibited from testifying in court, which silenced their voices and framed them as invisible (Langley, 2021).

Past oppressive social structures that impacted Black women still bled into their lived experiences in modern times (Berry & Gross, 2020; Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris-Perry, 2011). Today, Collins (2022) and others exclaimed Black women still battle the residual effects of the Jezebel stereotype (viewed as sexually promiscuous) which "justified" their sexual oppression (Harris- Perry, 2011; Langley, 2021; Long & Ullman, 2013), and the Sapphire stereotype (viewed as angry and aggressive) which "erased" their domestic violence experiences (Sears, 2021; Simmons, 2020; Snider, 2018). Overwhelming literature confirmed the history of oppression has led to the future of empowerment (Chen et al., 2012; Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Dorsey, 2020; Halliday & Brown, 2018; Harris-Perry, 2011; Simmons, 2020; Snider, 2018). For this reason, the conversation shifts to three major socially constructed images associated with Black women: Jezebel, Sapphire, and Superwoman. Controlling images contributed to Black women's (in)visibility and health (Collins, 2022; Harris-Perry, 2011; Langley, 2021; Snider, 2018); ergo, I connected these images to related social problems.

Origins of Controlling Images

This section explains the documented origins of controlling images and why they were worth further exploration. Cultural stereotypes drastically impacted the mental health, self-perceptions, and vocal resistance of Black women (Hobbel & Chapman, 2009; Jones et al., 2022; Motro et al., 2022). Hobbel and Chapman conducted identity projects with over 300 high school students for 6 years (1999-2004) by analyzing autobiographical pieces about how knowledge

was constructed in schools and media outlets about race, gender, and class. They used Crenshaw's intersectional framework to code for political, structural, and representational intersectionality. In the study, Hobbel and Chapman found despite the various backgrounds of each student, most individuals were:

> heavily impacted by media images of men and women, political discourses that centered on poverty and teenage sexuality, religious rhetoric to guide and suppress behavior, capitalist agendas surrounding wealth and material consumption, and societal discourses that reinforced the myths of meritocracy and democracy in the United States. (p. 80)

Although the participants were not exclusively Black women, the authors provided unique insight into intersectionality by including a young Black girl's understanding of Black womanhood. In the excerpt, the Black girl offered a "counterstory that refute[d] [W]hite American tropes of Black womanhood: the welfare mother, the drop-out, and the drug addict" through her emphasis of Black women's strength, love, and sacrifice (p. 81). Hobbel and Chapman reported Black girls identified with mainstream media images of themselves through "stereotyped, narrow constructions of who they are or who they can become" (p. 78). Although every social group was fed stereotypical images of their groups in the media, Black teen welfare mothers were the focal point of this study because of their intersectional oppression. During discourse about representational intersectionality, Hobbel and Chapman noted the relationship between the self and public representations.

Comparably, Jones et al. (2022) investigated the strong Black woman cultural stereotype by asking 220 Black college women (78.2% self-identified as Christian) in Eastern regions of the United States about their perceptions of strength in Black womanhood. Most participants reported they viewed a strong Black woman as resilient, nurturing, independent, hard-working,

emotionally contained, and confident in her gendered-racial pride. These 220 Black women frequently noted strong Black women were stereotyped as “aggressive” and “angry,” which tied that cultural stereotype to the angry Black woman trope. Interestingly, Motro et al. (2022) combined two studies to look at 555 individuals’ perceptions of Black women in the workplace to hint at why Black women remain underrepresented in leadership positions. Motro et al. found that Black women were penalized in employment opportunities for expressing anger at work. One of the ways was by their peers framing Black women as loud, tough, and strong, while White women were framed as sensitive, independent, and family-oriented. In the article, Motro et al. voiced that although anger is an emotion often “stemming from a perceived injustice,” Black women were the primary social group characterized by that emotion (p. 150).

Further, Chen et al. (2012) conducted in-depth interviews with 36 Black women and found media portrayals of Black women strongly affected their self-image. Specifically, mainstream media images impacted how they felt about their bodies, social groups, and experiences. Stanley (2009) reminded the public that American history has engrained stereotypical images of Black women in subservient roles versus positions of power. For this reason, when mainstream media outlets reinforced stereotypical images of Black women as “bad-b*tches, baby-mamas, and THOTs (that whore/ho over there),” those images became central to how Black women were perceived and treated by those within and outside of their social group (Snider, 2018, p. 13). Snider brought up a story about Recy Taylor, a young married Black mother who was beaten by six White men after they gang-raped her on her way to church in 1944. This untold story shed light on how controlling images influenced Black women’s experiences and well-being in American society.

Therefore, many Black women (at least the hundreds represented in the studies)

attempted to maintain their self-image through self-definition (Collins, 2022; Kirby, 2020; Okello et al., 2020), despite dealing with assaults or false narratives that tainted their character (Harris-Perry, 2011; Snider, 2018). Self-definition means one has the power to name their own destiny through critical reflection (Collins, 2022). Collins's framework emphasized thought and action create activism. Self-definition is a form of activism. I understood self-definition as a strategy to be who you want to be regardless of who people think you are. This mindset has helped Black women survive in a society that justified the social group's mistreatment by posing them as too revealing (Jezebel controlling image), too hostile (Sapphire controlling image), and too independent (Superwoman controlling image).

Why are controlling images important? The portrayal of Black women as stereotypical jezebels, matriarchs, criminals, and welfare recipients, among other controlling images, has helped justify Black women's intersectional oppression (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris-Perry, 2011; Snider, 2018). These images were created to justify Black women's collective intersectional oppression and normalized mistreatment by framing them as solely responsible for their experiences, with no recognition of the role that laws played in legalizing their oppression. Hence, many Black women embodied strength (i.e., Strong Black Woman schema) to combat the distorted images of who they should be and were forced to tread through intersectional waters flooded with violent restrictions (Abrams et al., 2014; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris-Perry, 2011).

Harris-Perry theorized mythical stereotypes about Black women made it difficult for them to "stand upright in a room made crooked by the stereotypes about [B]lack women as a group" (pp.34-35). Consequently, controlling images increased Black women's likelihood to experience: psychological distress (e.g., depression) as noted by Hall et al. (2021) and Watson-Singleton (2017); state-sanctioned violence (e.g., police brutality) as described by Abrams et al.

(2014) and Hannah-Jones (2021); physical injuries (e.g., sexual assault and domestic violence) as expounded by Hall et al. (2021) and Jones et al. (2022); verbal assaults (e.g., micro- and macro-aggressions) as reported by Sue et al. (2019) and Vargas et al. (2020); and the *concrete ceiling* (i.e., underrepresentation in high-profile leadership; Allen, 2020; Apugo, 2021; Catalyst, 2022; Chance, 2022; Motro et al., 2022).

One of the most dangerous controlling images was the common stereotype of Black women as sexually immoral and promiscuous, which was rooted in Southern slaveholding societies where they were subjected to forced nudity, further reinforced through the media (Collins, 2022; Harris-Perry, 2011; Simmons, 2020). In order to navigate through this controlling image, Harris-Perry declared Black women must call out any oppression that jeopardizes their mental, physical, and/or spiritual health. Eliminating harmful stereotypes, however, can be challenging because the American social structure was originally designed to reinforce mistreatment against Black women (Berry & Gross, 2020; Harris-Perry, 2011; Smith, 2021; Walker, 1983). When Black women spoke up against oppression or attempted to defend themselves, they were characterized as "angry," "argumentative," or "bad" (Motro et al., 2022; van Breen & Barreto, 2022). All in all, controlling images associated with Black women were and still are reinforced in mainstream media, which complicates the possibility of dismantling cultural stereotypes and how people perceive and treat Black women. The conversation now shifts to the importance of dismantling controlling images in mainstream media.

The Role of Mainstream Media: Seeing as Becoming

Jones et al. (2021), as a result of surveying 237 Black women about mental health and social support, placed a call to action on parents, clinicians, teachers, peers, legislators, media industries, and future researchers to help change the representation of Black women to resolve,

or at least minimize, the problem of controlling images by reducing the stereotypical images of Black women in media platforms. Subsequently, Simmons (2020) spotlighted the "angry Black woman" stereotype was popularized through the 1951 "Amos 'N' Andy Show," where the character Sapphire, a Black woman, was characterized as having a bad attitude. The Sapphire trope was further exaggerated and reinforced in recent popular media when Black men (e.g., Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Tyler Perry) mockingly portrayed Black women through characters (e.g., Rasputia, Big Momma, and Madea) by acting loud, combative/aggressive, and ghetto (see Chen et al., 2012; Simmons, 2020; Snider, 2018). The Sapphire ideology, fundamentally rooted in the Strong Black Woman schema, was further "morphed into a crude joke" when television shows (e.g., VH1's *Love & Hip-Hop*, Bravo's *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, and Oxygen's *Bad Girls Club*) depicted Black women in a stereotypical fashion bombarded with in-group fighting, public arguments, and physical altercations (Simmons, 2020, p. 51). Because the media was controlled and owned by White Americans and designed for their eyes (i.e., the "White gaze" as named by Simmons [2020]), when White Americans thought about and interacted with Black women, their cognition centered these harmful media images of Black women (Carbado & Gulati, 2013; Snider, 2018).

As a result, generations of Black women reverted to strength to deal with derogative stereotypes reinforced in popular media that complicated their personal, professional, and social opportunities (Simmons, 2020). Hence, Kirby (2020) recommended self-discovery, the first step in the self-definition process, as an effective strategy. Black feminist thought centered self-definition as an approach for Black women to define their reality through critical thought and social action (Collins, 2022; Mezirow, 1997). As a form of resistance and unyielding strength, African American women began the process of self-definition through petitions for freedom,

recognition, and acknowledgement (Berry & Gross, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989; Taylor, 1998; Walker, 1983). Recently, numerous scholars and theorists have continued to explore how controlling images, such as the Strong Black Woman schema, impacted the mental health, coping strategies, opportunities, and lived experiences of Black women (Davis & Jones, 2021; Jones et al., 2021; Long & Ullman, 2013; Okello et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2017; Vargas et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2022).

Strength as Resistance: The Strong Black Woman

What is the strong Black woman image? An early pioneer of the Black feminist and intersectionality movement, Sojourner Truth, was one of the earliest Black women to ignite conversations about unyielding strength, assumption of multiple roles, and self-sacrifice in Black womanhood (Abrams et al., 2014; Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989). Consequently, the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema was an ideology and cultural trait that served as both functional and problematic (Abrams et al., 2014; Davis & Jones, 2021; Jones et al., 2021). Its functionality stemmed from its effectiveness (e.g., through the #BlackGirlMagic image, which is also problematic) (Dorsey, 2020; Halliday & Brown, 2018; Williams et al., 2022), while its problematic nature often resulted in limited help-seeking, further jeopardizing mental, physical, and/or spiritual health (Jones et al., 2022; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020).

Although the SBW schema had several psychological benefits, Black women who held an SBW image may have exhibited negative social judgment, shame, emotional disclosure concerns, and embarrassment (Hall et al., 2021; Harris-Perry, 2011). Hall et al. affirmed the SBW ideology was an intergenerational strategy Black matriarchs used to socialize their children to overcome oppressive structures, such as systemic racism and sexism. Dickens et al. (2022) aimed to develop and validate the Identity Shifting for Black Women Scale (ISBWS), which

connected to the SBW schema. A tenet of the SBW schema claimed the responsibility should not be on Black women to survive in a society filled with inequitable cultural norms and oppressive structures (Jones et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2022; Kirby, 2020). Rather, the responsibility should be collaborative, meaning Black women need social support from allies to survive those inequitable structures. Accordingly, Davis and Jones (2021) explained strength looks different for every Black woman, as supported by Watson-Singleton (2017).

Davis and Jones suggested Black women should pivot from a survival mindset to a thriving mindset as a first step toward self-definition. Meaning, instead of focusing on survival, Black women should also prioritize their wellness as a way to link strength with wellness. In order to transform one's mindset (which improves wellness), Mezirow (1997) presented the whole person needed to understand the meaning of their experience in order to change their thoughts and actions by critically reflecting on their assumptions, biases, beliefs, and values (especially those taught during childhood and schooling, as explained by Collins [2022]; Mezirow & Associates [2000]). The next section gives more information about transformative learning as a strategy to help Black women improve their prioritization of mental, physical, and spiritual wellness.

Transformative Learning as Self-Definition

How does the whole person self-define themselves under a transformational lens? The whole person is made up of the mind, body, and spirit (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Critical thought and reflection engage the mental, while action and experience engage the physical (Mezirow, 1997; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). The spiritual realm of the whole person enabled individuals to make meaning of their mental, physical, and spiritual experiences (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Consequently, transformative learning theory is a landmark explanation

about how learning transforms one's problematic frames of reference that define their world based on a coherent body of experience (Mezirow, 1997). It was understood in three concepts: life experience, critical reflection, and the connection between adult development and transformative learning (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Mezirow, 1997; Mezirow & Associates, 2000).

The key tenets or principles of the theory involved reflective discourse, action, critical reflection, and experience. Each tenet/principle echoed the principles of Black feminist thought. Specifically, transformative learning theory and its tenets closely aligned with Collin's segment about self-definition: Black women's form of resistance against systemic oppression based on race, class, and gender. Self-definition required critical reflection about one's worth and self-image to determine their reality (Collins, 2022; Okello et al., 2020). Hence, self-definition was an effective approach to balancing one's self-image and transforming one's life story (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Snider, 2018). I planned to use this self-definition approach to increase the individual consciousness of the participants with the fundamental goal of inspiring them to redefine themselves and their circumstances.

Feasibility Assessments: Interviews & Conversations

This feasibility research section is included to provide background to the formal data collection process. Before I conducted interviews with the selected five Black women leaders, I first conducted feasibility informal interviews with random Black women leaders across South Georgia. In my social life, I made it a practice to strike conversations with complete strangers about American society and norms. In my professional life, I worked full-time as a Mobility Services Manager for nearly 1 year for AT&T. In my traveling leadership role for AT&T, I had the unique opportunity to travel across the South Georgia region and visit roughly 5-10

households and businesses per day. The individuals I spoke to at these households and organizations did not expect my visit, which was why their willingness to open up to me about their perceptions and experiences was notable.

During my visits to low-, middle-, and high-income communities, I built connections with customers through casual conversations. I spent a good bit of time talking with people about race, gender, and American culture. Over the last year, these connections and conversations led me to over 25 Black women who shared a desire to tell their stories related to the impact that controlling images have on personal well-being and democratic opportunities. This section outlines feasibility interviews and conversations with some of these women before the formal in-depth interviews were conducted.

In January 2022, I presented a TEDxValdosta State public speech about the importance of self-definition and transformation for personal well-being. That speech was essentially my "coming out to the world" as a young Black woman pursuing a doctorate. After I shared some of my personal experiences with identity loss from cultural stereotypes, Black women of all flavors contacted me to express interest in sharing their life story with me for my research. My social and professional experiences presented me with opportunities to build relationships with people who I already knew fit the criteria for my study: a Black woman leader, at least 18 years old, lived in South Georgia (south of Cordele), and willing to share her life story openly and honestly. As I discuss in the methodology section, I reached out to the selected women for whom I already had contact information and asked them if they would like to officially volunteer to be a participant/collaborator in my study.

During my feasibility assessments, I learned that I could not wholly distance myself from the research because the participant was not an "object" of the study, but rather a "subject"

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016). This realization taught me how to be more responsive and interactive, rather than authoritative, during interviews with participants (Kim, 2016). I recognized that my researcher status intimidated some participants when they would look to me for guidance about interview questions and seek my affirmation of their answers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Seidman, 2019). In an effort to foster a safe space, I reminded participants that they were in control of the conversation, as my priority was to listen to their detailed accounts of their experiences. Subsequently, informal communal conversations with Black women resulted in a multitude of in-depth, deep conversations about how controlling images influence the identity, experiences, and opportunities of Black women in America.

During informal interviews, I was mindful to not shape the results of the study by "guiding" participants (Kim, 2016; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2019). This was a critical lesson learned from feasibility interviews when I asked about strength (see Appendix A for an example conversation). At the end of the conversation, notice how I asked the participant if there was anything else she wanted to add about her life story. I used a similar strategy during the formal in-depth interviews. Ergo, I only used the interview guides if needed after allowing the participant to take charge of the conversation. Furthermore, I knew that I had enough data to credibly answer each research question when there were no more follow-up questions to ask each participant—*data saturation* (Kim, 2016; Maxwell, 2013). However, there will always be new things that unfold because humans are organic and unique—a key study limitation (Kim, 2016; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

While conducting feasibility assessments with Black women, I discovered that I was not the only Black woman who encountered differential treatment based on my intersectional identity. My skills as a conversational interviewer prompted Black women in South Georgia to

feel comfortable enough to share parts of their life stories with me. My readings about the recurring theme of strength and cultural stereotypes in the literature (e.g., Collins, 2022) informed my feasibility assessments. For example, I walked up to a group of Black women in an impoverished community and asked about their experiences with the angry Black woman trope. These women reported their increased exposure to violence during interactions with law enforcement because of that stereotype, whereas Black women in gated communities and mansions often explained their interactions with that stereotype at their jobs. Despite their varying social and economic status, all of these women voiced the need to be strong and hoped for more democratic opportunities. Patton defined my conversations with these women as *informal conversational interviews*, which are more surfaced; so I used Seidman's approach of collecting context to statements. Seidman affirmed that three open-ended, semi-structured, and in-depth interviews with each participant can yield richer data.

Consequently, Seidman expounded four steps can be taken to ensure reliability and validity: (1) data collection by knowledgeable individuals, (2) utilization of surveys to screen participants, (3) preliminary testing of the interview guide, and (4) triangulation. Black women were the knowledgeable individuals in this case, but because there was a wide variety of Black women, I targeted Black women living in South Georgia. Instead of using a survey, I screened the participants by asking them before the first informal conversational interview to disclose certain demographics that included their age, leadership position, social class, religious affiliation, educational attainment, relationship status, and motherhood status. Plus, I conducted preliminary tests of the interview guide (see Appendix B) (Seidman, 2019) by asking groups of Black women in South Georgia sample questions. These women gave insightful answers about stereotypical images.

Triangulation is “collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 128). Maxwell (2013), Merriam and Associates (2002), and Patton (2015) highlighted triangulation is a validity-testing strategy in qualitative research. My experience of having conversations with so many Black women from so many different backgrounds in so many different places is a form of triangulation. The underlying theme of oppression in their stories angered me because I remembered a similar narrative of Black women in Massachusetts, where I was born. All of this led to my topic of controlling images and my passion to voice the narratives of Black women leaders from different backgrounds because of my experiential knowledge.

At the beginning of each feasibility assessment, I explained the purpose and format of the interview to the interviewees in accordance with Patton’s expressed need for strong, open-ended interview questions and responses to keep the interview insightful and informative. The seventh chapter in Patton’s textbook (dedicated to qualitative interviewing) offered new ideas and approaches to keep the interview focused on the research topic: controlling images. Patton urged researchers to prioritize the interview structure, while being attentive to the content. All things considered, Patton, Maxwell, and Seidman influenced my decisions about the best approach and preparation for conducting qualitative interviews.

After completing the feasibility assessments, I noticed an improvement in my active listening skills when sensitive topics were brought up. I believe my interviews were successful because I prepared for them and learned from them. I conducted these interviews with an open mind and let the interviewee drive the conversation, instead of interrupting them (Seidman, 2019). Though, it was quite difficult to navigate how to get the participant to get back on topic without interrupting their thought flow. At the end of one of the preliminary interviews about

controlling images, I asked an interviewee, a 49-year old Black woman, to give me feedback and critique my interview skills. She had no complaints and felt honored to share her life experiences and perspectives. She loved sharing her story so much, she requested another interview for future research on controlling images, strength/grit, transformational learning, and mental health. Altogether, Patton confirmed I conducted qualitative interview studies. Overall, the feasibility assessments informed the formal interviews and interview guides (see Appendix B) for this dissertation.

Summary: The Need for In-Depth Interviews

In this conceptual framework, I explained the origins of controlling images and addressed how popular media plays a critical role in the identity development of Black girls and women by reinforcing stereotypical images. The representation of Black women as "sexy," "angry," and "strong" can impact their mental, physical, and spiritual health (Collins, 2022). Therefore, based on the scholarly discourse by aforementioned leading theorists and researchers (e.g., Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Mezirow, 1997), it was relevant to explore how Black women in South Georgia resist or coexist with controlling images based on their intersectional identities. This exploration was most effectively conducted by seeking additional knowledge from five Black women leaders who live in South Georgia (including, but not limited to, those who live in poverty) within a series of individual 90-minute semi-structured, private, and in-depth interviews (Kim, 2016; Seidman, 2019).

In summary, existing theory and research confirmed there are still oppressive systems and structures that target Black women today (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris-Perry, 2011)—an issue I believe can be combatted through transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), a process closely related to self-definition (Kirby, 2020; Okello et al., 2020). Blackmon et al.

(2016) and Stanton et al. (2017) posed future qualitative inquiries could continue to explore how controlling images, even those intended to be positive, impact the mental health and coping strategies of Black women. Notably, Porter and Byrd (2021) recommended qualitative researchers to investigate how controlling images influence Black women's personal, intellectual, social, and career development, and how extending that knowledge may be beneficial for Black women and those that interact with them. Stanton et al. (2017) surveyed 412 Black women online to seek knowledge about the role of social media and they reported controlling images (i.e., the strong Black woman) could be detrimental to Black women's well-being.

Although social media were found to heavily influence 412 Black women, Stanton et al. critically asserted social media, podcasts, films, and music could also be used for good by using those platforms to share counternarratives of marginalized groups and expose unjust violence. For example, Demby (2022), the host of the National Public Radio's *Code Switch* podcast, interviewed Gabrielle Union, a successful Black woman actress who disclosed how she embodied strength and self-definition as resistance to controlling images. Union also shared a sexual assault experience in early adulthood and how that experience shaped her self-image and life choices. Similarly, Harden (2014-present), a licensed psychologist who hosts the *Therapy for Black Girls* podcast, advocated for the need to collect Black women's stories and discuss how social issues (e.g., controlling images) influence their mental health, personal development, and self-definition efforts. For this reason, I employed narrative inquiry as a rigorous method to explore how five Black women living in low- and middle-income neighborhoods in South Georgia experienced and resisted controlling images.

The media has the power to control the narrative (Harris-Perry, 2011; Snider, 2018).

Media outlets include newspapers, music, podcasts, television shows, films, and a variety of other platforms. Thus, I believe it is critical to explore the counternarratives, narratives told by a marginalized group that opposes a dominant cultural narrative, of a special population of Black women (Collins, 2022). Too often, the narratives of Black women are told by non-Black women (Collins, 2022; Harris-Perry, 2011). For instance, the infamous Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I A Woman?" speech was originally titled "Ar'n't I A Woman?" in her upper New York Dutch accent (Berry & Gross, 2020; Crash Course, 2021; Taylor, 1998). Yet, the dominant narrative publicized across history was her speech in a stereotypical Southern accent. Subsequently, I found it essential to collect the life story narratives of five Black women in South Georgia in their own words because it empowered them to actively partake in the study as an intellectual leader.

To a large extent, Black women collectively remain vulnerable to assaults at home (Sears, 2021), in the workplace (Catalyst, 2001; Harts, 2019), in their communities (Langley, 2021), and in media representations (Snider, 2018), which connects to Black women's historical legacy of struggle (Berry & Gross, 2020; Harris-Perry, 2011). Further, American societal structures restrict Black women to inferior neighborhoods, schools, jobs, housing, and public treatment (Kendall, 2020), which directly impacts their mental and physical health (Davis & Jones, 2021). In order to answer the research questions that follow, narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016), transformative worldview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Mezirow, 1997), and Black feminist thought (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989) have been combined to achieve the purpose of the qualitative study. Kim's (2016) *Understanding Narrative Inquiry* book, inspired by Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) *Narrative Inquiry* landmark book, about narrative inquiry is the guide I chose on how to employ this

methodology. Narratives and observations are effective ways humans learn and remember, but the most effective way a human learns is through reflection (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Therefore, conducting 90-minute in-depth interviews (Seidman, 2019) with Black women leaders in South Georgia further extended the knowledge about how they made meaning of their life histories, lived experiences, and perceptions related to controlling images (Collins, 2022; Harris-Perry, 2011), intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1989), and societal conditions (Collins, 2022; Snider, 2018).

- What can be learned from the life histories, lived experiences, and perceptions of five Black women leaders in South Georgia? Below are three subquestions.
    - How do Black women living in South Georgia perceive, coexist with, or resist controlling images within the context of their intersectional identities?
    - How do controlling images impact their mental, physical, and/or spiritual health?
    - How do Black women make meaning of American social structures that influence their lived experiences?

Chapter 3: Methodology - How Can We Learn More?

I proposed to use qualitative methods to answer the aforementioned research question(s). Maxwell (2013) clarified the methods section of a qualitative interactive design has four main components: research relationships, selection (sample and setting), data collection (e.g., interviews and field notes), and data analysis. These four aspects influenced the value and validity of conclusions drawn from the research (Maxwell, 2013). In this third chapter, I define learning to introduce the importance of narrative inquiry and narrative analysis. Then, I explain how storytelling was essential to understanding the participants' lived experiences during the in-depth, semi-structured 90-minute (Seidman, 2019) life story interviews.

I used life story interviews to solicit stories that were transcribed, analyzed, and slightly reassembled with a beginning, middle, and end. Moreover, I frame narrative inquiry as an empowering methodology to build trustful research relationships and purposefully select a group of open and honest Black women leaders in South Georgia. I describe how purposeful sampling yielded rich data. Further, I connect how historical events included in the conceptual framework relate to why South Georgia was selected as the setting for this study. Most importantly, I conclude with how my interpretations might be wrong by highlighting common validity threats that must be addressed to execute a valid and ethical narrative research study. After addressing the basic research design, I provide details about data collection, data analysis, and data presentation strategies.

Introducing Narrative Inquiry: Storytelling as Learning

How does the whole person learn? Learning is defined as a social process that is "understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to future action" (Mezirow &

Associates, 2000, p. 5). As explained in the conceptual framework section, people can learn through a narrative, a component of a story that gives a spoken, written, or visual account of connected events (Kim, 2016; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). They might read, listen to, or watch a narrative. Hence, narrative inquiry is much deeper than just detailed storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016); it is the foundation of learning about the participants' life histories, lived experiences, and perceptions associated with controlling images.

Consequently, I proposed to use narrative inquiry as the storytelling methodology to answer the overarching research question: What can be learned from the life histories, lived experiences, and perceptions of five Black women leaders in South Georgia? This question was best answered through three subquestions: How do Black women living in South Georgia perceive, coexist with, or resist controlling images within the context of their intersectional identities? How do controlling images impact their mental, physical, and/or spiritual health? How do Black women make meaning of American social structures that influence their lived experiences? The research questions were answered by conducting in-depth, semi-structured 90-minute interviews (Seidman, 2019) with five Black women leaders living in South Georgia who were likely to have experienced raced, gendered, and/or classed oppression based on controlling images. Based on my experiential knowledge and relevant literature (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989) outlined in the conceptual framework about Black women, it was safe to assume that Black women in South Georgia experienced oppression based on their Blackness, womanhood, employment occupation, and/or income. I determined their relation to controlling images based off Collin's Black feminist theoretical framework, which reaffirmed that majority of Black women experience oppression in America and beyond. Accordingly, I remained curious about their stories with controlling images throughout the study.

Storytelling is one of the oldest methods used to teach, communicate, and understand a topic or phenomenon (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Collins, 2022; Kim, 2016; Merriam & Associates, 2002). Education is rooted in storytelling. Religion has roots in storytelling. Transformational learning shares roots in storytelling. Effective leadership techniques include storytelling. Motivational speeches often include a story. In total, learning from storytelling informs positive social change (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). For example, three scholars pinpointed the Civil Rights movement could not have been as successful if Black women did not share their stories and lived experiences related to differential treatment (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Taylor, 1998). The list goes on about how important narratives are to everyday learning and societal changes. Thus, narrative inquiry was the most appropriate methodology for this study because it often results in transformative learning experiences (Kim, 2016; Mezirow & Associates, 2000), which I hoped to inspire as a result of this study in alignment with Collins's (2022) empowerment-focused research recommendations.

Research Design: Narrative Inquiry as Empowerment

Narrative inquiry creates a collaborative (re)construction of a participant's life story, which makes the methodology strongly biographical (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016). As supported by Clandinin and Connelly, pioneer narrative inquiry scholars, Kim called for narrative researchers to be empathetic, honest, attentive, and active listeners during interviews. With these skills, researchers illuminated the participants' stories through narrative smoothing, cohesively connecting different events of a participant's story (Kim, 2016). Clandinin and Connelly affirmed narrative inquiry requires an exploration of dimensions, such as time, place, and personal and social interactions, which directly connected the theoretical tenets of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989). Offering African American women in South

Georgia a platform (i.e., in-depth life story interviews) not only empowers Black women collectively, but also allows them to individually share their lived experiences and perceptions related to controlling images (i.e., common stereotypes that influence differential treatment; Harris-Perry, 2011; Snider, 2018).

As expounded in the conceptual framework, leading Black feminist-womanist scholars reported controlling images contribute to Black women's historical invisibility (Collins, 2022; Langley, 2021) and mistreatment (Kendall, 2020; Snider, 2018), which impacted their opportunities and mental, physical, and spiritual health (Abrams et al., 2014; Harris-Perry, 2011; Jones et al., 2021). Based on this knowledge, I found it relevant to use narrative inquiry as the rigor to collect information about how Black women encounter and resist controlling images, and in turn, how those stereotypical images influence how others perceive, treat, and understand their social group collectively. Thus, narrative inquiry empowered the participants by providing a scholarly platform to share how they perceive, experience, and/or resist controlling images within the context of their intersectional identities and setting (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Kendall, 2020; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Associates, 2002). Framing this dissertation in a manner that illuminated the voices and stories of five Black women leaders improved the research relationships with participants and the relationships with other social groups in South Georgia communities.

Research Relationships: Trust and Rapport

Good research relationships allow researchers to gain accurate information from participants to answer the research questions (Maxwell, 2013). Kim (2016) wrote about how the evolving and open-ended nature of narrative inquiry allows narrative inquirers to recruit participants as collaborators (i.e., co-storytellers, co-narrators, co-researchers, and co-

constructors). Therefore, the dynamic researcher-participant collaboration of narrative inquiry inevitably made the methodology a vulnerable genre, which jeopardized the respectability of the methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016). Due to the relational nature of narrative inquiry, it was important for me to build a positive and collaborative rapport with Black women by being open and honest about my research purpose: to explore, document, and illuminate the lived experiences and perceptions of Black women leaders in South Georgia within the context of controlling images. Through feasibility assessments and narrative research literature, I learned transparency and honesty not only create positive researcher relationships, but also bolster the ethicalness and trustworthiness of this narrative research study (Kim, 2016; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Associates, 2002).

Overall, Kim advised that trust and rapport with participants create meaningful, rich data. Consequently, I expected my shared identity as a Black woman to strengthen the trustworthiness of this study because participants felt more open to disclosing the role of controlling images in their experiences, opportunities, and overall health. Correspondingly, I believe it was my duty as the researcher to clarify the implicit and explicit terms of the study to maintain good relationships with the participants while collecting reliable and valid research data (Kim, 2016; Maxwell, 2013). Transparency, positive rapport, active listening, and trust-building efforts were critical components that helped engage the target population during the selection and data collection process.

Selection: Five Black Women Leaders in South Georgia

Overwhelming literature has warned researchers to watch out for samples that are not representative of the population of interest (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2013; Mishler, 1995; Patton, 2015; Roberts & Hyatt, 2018). For this reason, I recruited Black women leaders

living in South Georgia who were exposed to racial, gendered, and/or classed oppression due to historical events in America. Again, I knew the selected women were exposed based on my initial feasibility assessments with them when I inquired about their understanding of Black women's experiences in America. Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommended qualitative researchers use purposeful sampling, a technique used to inform the validity and reliability of a study by recruiting and selecting participants who represent the population or phenomenon (Kim, 2016; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Roberts & Hyatt, 2018). That said, this sampling technique was most appropriate for this study, which involved recruiting (see Appendix C) for the participant recruitment letter) and interviewing five Black women (18+ years old) leaders living in South Georgia (south of Cordele).

To represent Black women from different walks of life, I diversified my selections by seeking Black women leaders in different professions to connect my dissertation to leadership. It is important to note that just because I sought participation from Black women living in impoverished communities did not mean that they were not leaders. It was interesting to observe how these women conceptualized their understanding of leadership within the context of their personal, professional, and social lives. Although I had a strong interest in only recruiting women living in poverty-stricken neighborhoods, I found it more important to represent Black women in different tax brackets and professions.

Notably, due to the spark of Black feminist thought, intersectionality, and transformative learning literature in the 1980s and 1990s, I preferred to interview five Black women who were born in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Accordingly, 80% of them (4 of 5 participants; 1 born in the 1960s) were born during the peak time when the relevant scholarly discourse occurred. Further, based on the literature review, I was inclined to include non-religious Black adult

women because the Strong Black Woman schema had origins in Christianity, as many Black women reverted to a higher power for strength (Abrams et al., 2014; Davis & Jones, 2021; Harris-Perry, 2011; Jones et al., 2021). I thought exploring how they coped with adversity would be beneficial for the public; however, it was difficult for me to find at least one non-religious Black woman leader in South Georgia. My intentionality in participant selection stemmed from a desire to represent Black women from different backgrounds. In order to answer the research questions, I selected participants who met the criteria for the study: a Black adult woman leader, lived in South Georgia, and willing to honestly and openly share their lived experiences related to their intersectional identities.

The collection of different perspectives of contemporary Black women across generations yielded rich results based on gaps highlighted in the literature (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Davis & Jones, 2021; Snider, 2018). In summary, the accessible and most appropriate population for my study sample was five Black women leaders living in South Georgia. Specifically, I was interested in interviewing Black women who live(d) in impoverished neighborhoods because they were more likely to experience intersectional oppression based on their race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1989; Kendall, 2020). Though, I recognized that one did not have to live in poverty to offer critical insight into the experiences, perceptions, and opportunities of Black women; this was why I intentionally recruited Black women who did not live in poverty-stricken communities. As stated in the feasibility assessments section of the conceptual framework, I purposefully selected five adult Black women leaders who previously expressed interest in officially participating in my dissertation research by giving me their contact information. During in-person visits to low-, middle-, and upper-class neighborhoods and households across the South Georgia region, many of these women expressed their experiences and frustrations

with controlling images during casual conversations. Before I provide a detailed explanation of the research protocols for data collection, I found it relevant to give historical background about the selected setting: South Georgia.

South Georgia is not so "peachy." In fact, the region is laden with horrific hate crimes fueled by White privilege (see McIntosh, 1989, for more). Over 100 years later, Southern communities are still engulfed in racist traditions, beliefs, and behaviors (Berry & Gross, 2020; Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris-Perry, 2011). Consequently, based on the historical racial climate of South Georgia, this was an appropriate setting to learn about the lived experiences of five Black women leaders in South Georgia based on their intersectional identities. As explained in the conceptual framework, controlling images were rooted in Southern slaveholding societies and were further reinforced through mainstream media (Collins, 2022; Langley, 2021; Simmons, 2020). These controlling images exposed African American women to more violence (Dorsey, 2020; Kendall, 2020), which jeopardized their health (Jones et al., 2021; Snider, 2018). For example, during feasibility assessments, I learned of the horror story of Mary Turner, a 19-year-old pregnant Black woman who was burned alive and lynched by White mobs in 1918 in South Georgia, with no protection nor justice from the law (Nielsen, 2015). Based on conversations with Black women in South Georgia during feasibility assessments, I learned racism in the South branded fear in older generations of Black citizens who witnessed racist violent actions in their early childhood and/or adulthood.

In total, the historical context of the South Georgia communal setting was needed to understand the preferred private interview setting. Consequently, I conducted the interviews in a comfortable, secluded private space with plenty of separation and privacy from others. Such settings included a secluded portion of the participant's home or a private room in another space,

such as a local library and community center. The participants picked the interview location based on their comfort levels. The settings were private to complete the interviews with minimal to no distractions. During the interview sessions, participants were given the option to decide if they would like the door closed/locked for the duration of the interview to limit possible distractions and maintain privacy. Now that the selected setting and population have been explained, it is appropriate to transition to how the data in this study were collected.

Data Collection: In-Depth Interviews, Observations, and Reflective Memos

As stated by Maxwell and other leading qualitative theorists (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the primary methods to collect data in qualitative research were reflective memos, observations (simulation and naturalistic), and in-depth interviews (structured, semi- structured, or unstructured). Hence, participants and the researcher were the primary instruments for data collection. The researcher was trained by Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program modules, as required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). In these trainings, the researcher learned how to conduct an ethical study and how to protect participants' identity and the data. I employed a narrative inquiry study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016).

Accordingly, I planned to conduct three separate 90-minute life story interviews (Seidman, 2019) with five adult Black women about their experiences with and understanding of controlling images. I did not use the term 'controlling images' in the interview questions, but I did investigate signs of or connections to controlling images during the analytic process. A life story interview is a method of narrative inquiry that asks about lived experiences based on an open-ended interview format (Kim, 2016). Correspondingly, my emergent design allowed for the nature of the interview questions to evolve in accordance with new themes and patterns. Therefore, each participant's life story was structured in chronological order to show how each

interview conversation shifted naturally.

The overarching research question was: What can be learned from the life histories, lived experiences, and perceptions of five Black women leaders in South Georgia? To answer this question, I asked questions (see interview guide) (Appendix B) directed at personal, educational, professional, familial, and communal experiences with controlling images and how those experiences shaped their life and self-image. Further, during the interviews, I maintained an attitude of supportive curiosity and respectful interest. Equally important, I was attentive and sensitive to the participant's emotional state before, during, and after the interview.

Hence, only two participants were not able to complete more than one interview. Four of five participants responded to follow-up communication and were willing to complete all three interviews. However, due to health or personal concerns, every participant was not able to complete all three interviews. Regardless, each participant offered enough details about their life experiences to understand who they are, how they became who they are, what they think about themselves, and how they take action against oppression in their lives. Moreover, each participant's formal interview(s) added different perspectives throughout data collection.

Interview Protocol

As instructed by Seidman (2019), the first interview focused on their life history (e.g., childhood background and upbringing), consisting of experiences up until their current leadership position. The first interview structure was designed to contextualize their lived experiences (Seidman, 2019) and inform the interview questions for interview two. My opening question (i.e., How would you describe yourself to someone who does not know you?) in interview one partially structured the interview data and prompted the participant to share more about her identity and life story. In the second interview, I asked for concrete details about the

participants' lived experiences related to the study setting, their leadership position, domestic life, daily activities, and social interactions. The second interview structure was created to collect the detailed accounts of the participants' stories within the scope of the study.

My opening question in interview two included verbiage that asked the participant to share a story about her experiences, with the intent to explore how she reconstructed her narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. In the third interview, I inquired about how they made meaning of their experiences shared during interview one and interview two. This, in turn, not only prompted meaningful conversations but also empowered the participant to conceptualize and analyze her own life. The total time per participant in this project was expected to be 4.5 hours.

On average, conversations with each participant exceeded the 4.5-hour time frame, with the exception of only one participant. Below is the script for the phone call that I made to five women who were later selected after an in-person visit to add different perspectives to my research. Depending on if they initially agreed or not, I continued moving down the list until I reached five women who agreed to participate and were available to meet. Again, these women already knew me, gave me their contact information, and said they wanted me to tell their story. "Hey <name>. This is Mirakal Jackson. We spoke a little while back about my research interests and I just wanted to follow-up with you to see if you are interested in officially participating. As a refresher, I am a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. I am conducting a research study interviewing Black women leaders living in South Georgia about their experiences with controlling images, which can be understood as stereotypes that control how one is perceived and treated by others. I'd love to learn more about you and your experiences Are you interested in sharing your life story with me?"

As required by the IRB, I protected participants by using pseudonyms instead of their real names to ensure participants' stories were not individually identifiable (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016; Patton, 2015). The IRB also required me to inform participants that their decision to participate in this research project was entirely voluntary to ensure my study was ethical. I reassured them that their decision not to participate at all or to stop participating at any time in the future would not have any effect on any rights they had, any services they received, or the research relationship. I explained that they could skip any interview questions that they did not feel comfortable answering. I explicated that if they decided to withdraw from the study, they could decide if they wanted their information deleted from the database and not included in the research results. The participant was given the opportunity to ask questions throughout the duration of the study. Depending on if they agreed during the initial call, participants were given 48 hours to reflect and decide whether they wished to participate in the research before I followed up with them (with their permission) via phone call.

If the potential participant agreed to participate, I prescreened them at the beginning of interview one since it was about getting to know the participant. With this approach, it felt more relational than statistical. Further, during the recruitment process, I asked the individual for her preferred contact method (text, email, or call). After receiving IRB approval, I began scheduling dates, times, and locations with the participants to conduct the 90-minute in-person interviews (Seidman, 2019) per participant. I used their preferred method to follow-up and ask them to review their story profile once complete. Before departing from the participant, I always thanked them for their time and willingness to be open and honest with me about their life story.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) highlighted that it was critical to inform participants of the purpose and procedures of my study. The IRB research statement for recorded interview (was

read at the beginning of each interview; see Appendix D) stated the objective of the study and included information concerning confidentiality, maintaining the security of all recordings and documents, and being respectful towards the participant's emotions, nonverbal body cues, and experiences throughout the interview. I invited them to ask me questions and share comments or concerns to make sure that they understood the study purpose and interview protocol. Most importantly, I verbally reviewed the purpose of each interview with the participant in effort to keep it focused within the scope and structure of the study. Additionally, I reminded them that they would be my teacher to empower them to take charge of the interviews as intellectuals.

To maintain confidentiality, they were not required to sign anything to give consent rather their consent was recorded along with each interview. Participation relied on their verbal consent at the beginning of the first recorded interview and consent to record was recorded at the beginning of each interview. To prevent data loss, interviews were recorded on two digital recorders that were locked in a safe. The audio files were transferred to my biometric fingerprint-protected laptop computer immediately after the interview (before I left the site) and were saved in an encrypted folder on my laptop computer. Just in case my laptop crashed, the interview audio files were also immediately uploaded to MAXQDA (a qualitative software program that will be explained in the data analysis section). All interview audio files were deleted at the conclusion of the study. Only the researcher and supervisors had access to the transcribed interviews; only the researcher had access to the audio files.

Interviews were conducted simultaneously instead of completing all three interviews with each participant before moving on to other participants. I made strong efforts to allow at least 24 hours between interviews to allow me time to reflect on one interview and prepare for the other. Interview scheduling was organized based on the participant's availability. I preferred to

complete the three interviews within a span of 3-4 weeks, though I remained flexible for them to exceed this time frame. Roughly 4 weeks allowed participants to have about 24 to 48 hours to reflect on the previous interview and keep it in the forefront of their minds. This method offered more cohesive narratives.

During the interviews, I asked questions that targeted the context, details, and/or power dynamic of their life story. Exploring those social, structural, and critical constructs helped me during the data analysis stage. The best type of interview for my study was semi-structured, open-ended interviews with an interview guide per interview to standardize and frame the data (Kim, 2016; Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2019). Although there was an interview guide (see Appendix B), I did not ask every question on it due to the semi-structured (Seidman, 2019) and emergent, open-ended nature of life story interviews (Kim, 2016). I wanted the participant to take charge of the conversation. Because of this empowerment-based effort, the interview questions varied per participant based on the previous interview.

Interviewing required essential skills to answer the research questions, such as narrative competence of listening, the two-sentence format technique, and asking the right questions (e.g., open-ended, descriptive, and contrast questions; Kim, 2016). Narrative competence of listening involved actively listening to the participants' responses during the interviews. I enforced this skill by allowing the participant to take charge of the conversation and asking specific follow up questions as needed. I asked the right questions by seeking clarification on ambiguous answers. For example, in a feasibility assessment (see Appendix A), I asked the participant to explain what she meant by "bad things" when she said her grandmother's husband did bad things to her. An example of me implementing the two-sentence format technique was: "You mentioned your grandmother's husband did bad things to her (statement). What do you mean by bad things

(question)?" This is an example of me asking the right question because I asked for clarification about a critical detail of her story. The same approaches were taken with official interviews (see Appendix E, for another example response).

Depending on how the participant led the conversation, interview questions included topics in the conceptual framework in an effort to answer the research questions: demographic characteristics and socioeconomic status; educational attainment and sociocultural experiences; social support and self-care; sacrifice and strength; childhood upbringing and adult choices; media representations and stereotypes; and self-definition and transformational learning. These binary topics were discussed when the participant mentioned one or more of them during the interview(s). I encouraged participants to ask questions to any language or term that they did not understand. To create the interview guide, I used Michelle Obama's (2019) *Becoming* book packed with open-ended journal questions as inspiration for at least 10 interview questions (Kim, 2016; Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2019). Obama asked questions about identity development and lived experiences; therefore, it was appropriate to cite her book as the inspiration to my revised interview questions in the interview guide.

The research questions informed the interview questions (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017), which was framed within Seidman's interview process in order to ask the most appropriate questions. Instead of only using Seidman's three-part interview approach, I combined it with Kim's life story/biographical interview approach to accomplish my research goals and answer the research questions. Kim pinpointed narrative researchers must engage in narrative thinking, a method of creating a story out of experience through a heuristic process requiring judgment, experience, and skill. In layman's terms, how did I create a story based on the participant's experience? One way to do this was by treating the participants as collaborators

because in order for me to organize their story, it was necessary to understand their experience (from their perspective) by framing the question structures in ways that prompted a story (e.g., "Share a story about—"). With this phrasing, participants were able to share stories with a beginning, middle, and end.

Similar to Black feminist thought (Collins, 2022) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997; Mezirow & Associates, 2000), narrative thinking involved prior knowledge and experience, cognitive strategies, and the storyteller's (the participant's) narrative schema (Kim, 2016; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). A great example of narrative thinking was asking the participant to share her childhood upbringing and memorable experiences in interview one, and then asking her in interview two to elaborate on how those experiences made her who she is as a leader present day. By the end of the study, participants were asked to check their stories to not only ensure accuracy, but also to make sure their identity was not compromised (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Maxwell, 2013). I conducted a follow-up interview after they read their narrative. The interview structure and protocol outlined in this section helped me construct profiles of the collaborators' identity and lived experiences in their *own* words, a fundamental goal of life story interviewing in narrative research.

Kim's Life Story Interviewing: A Narrative of Becoming

Life story interviews or biographical interviews are best for studies that explore the lived experiences of people who may have been alienated or marginalized, which hinders the (re)surfacing of their stories (Kim, 2016). Life interviews are a social construct of social reality and experiential knowledge because they are used to investigate the influence of race, gender, class, and culture (Kim, 2016). Life story interviews focus on important events, experiences, and feelings that a participant chooses to tell (Kim, 2016). Notwithstanding, it was beneficial to

request participants to create a life map (see Appendix F) (Hobbel & Chapman, 2009) or word map of their experiences (Kim, 2016) in attempt to visualize their life on a sheet of 8.5" by 11" paper. Reproducing data in a visual form offered unique insights into how participants organize and make meaning of their experiences (Kim 2016). Overall, narrative inquiry was a "problem-centered" methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016), further strengthening my defense for its use in my dissertation. Hence, I began the data collection phase after receiving IRB approval for the interview protocol (see IRB approval and exemption form; Appendix G).

Data Analysis: Making Sense of It All

Popular data analysis procedures in narrative inquiry studies include narrative coding (Saldaña, 2021), categorizing and connecting strategies (Maxwell, 2013; Maxwell & Miller, 2008; Saldaña, 2021), and narrative analysis (Kim, 2016; Merriam & Associates, 2002). Saldaña (2021) presented a first cycle coding method, affective coding, that investigated emotions, values, conflicts, and judgments. After the first cycle of coding, visual representations (i.e., code mapping and code landscaping) helped reorganize and holistically understand the data (Saldaña, 2021). Alongside Saldaña's coding strategies, I used Mishler's (1995) life narrative analysis approach, included in Kim's book. Mishler's analysis procedure was most appropriate to answer the research questions because it aligned with Seidman's (2019) in-depth interview approach. Seidman's interview method focused on the participant's life history, lived experiences, and their meaning of those experiences. Mishler's approach aligned to it because it contextualized those same components. In the rest of this section, I will identify the specific steps (i.e., memo, code, categorize codes, memo and reorganize codes visually, analyze story chunks, etc.) that I followed during the data analysis stage.

After each interview, I immediately created a voice memo that documented my initial

analysis to bracket my biases. Specifically, I reflected on any topics or stories that sparked positive or negative feelings. For example, if a participant discussed any experiences with mistreatment, I was mindful of my subjective views on justice. Another example was if a participant mentioned any experiences with feeling marginalized or isolated, I wrote a memo on my subjective views on community. Because I did not take notes in a traditional sense (with a pen and paper in front of me) during interviews, it was important to immediately capture any recollections about the environment, the emotional state (if relevant) of the participant, and any moments where the participant stated something that overlapped with the research (without me guiding them). For example, some participants mentioned stories about strength and self-definition when asked about who they are or how they would describe themselves to a stranger. In the post-interview voice memo, I included reflections about their voice tone and something specifically the participant said that connected back to the literature (e.g., the Strong Black Woman [SBW] schema—a controlling image).

After creating the first voice memo, I immediately listened to the recorded interview to reflect on anything the collaborator said that I had a question about but did not want to interrupt the participant while they were talking. I found it more important to allow the participant to take control of the conversation with minimal interruptions, except when further clarification was needed about a story. Subsequently, I left 24 to 72 hours between each interview to give the participant time to process the prior interview and give myself time to makes notes of follow-up questions for the next interview during transcription. After listening to the recorded interview, during the time between interviews, I immediately uploaded the audio files (interview and post-interview voice memo) into MAXQDA (a world-leading all-in-one qualitative data analysis software package) to prepare for transcription and first cycle memoing.

Saldaña (2021) and Maxwell (2013) both supported the use for MAXQDA software, which specialized in categorizing (e.g., coding) and connecting (e.g., color coding with memos) tools. Maxwell and Miller (2008) positioned categorizing strategies center analytical strategies that focus on relationships of similarity, while connecting strategies involve the context of time and space (i.e., contiguity relationships [actual connections]). Hence, MAXQDA helped me make the most out of the interview data, while also saving me time during the analysis process by offering helpful features (e.g., embedded in vivo memo coding tools). In vivo coding was another first cycle coding method that "uses words or short phrases from the participant's own language in the data record as codes" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 365). This coding approach emphasized and honored the participant's voice, which was achieved by using direct quotes from the transcript to build their story profiles (Seidman, 2019) in their own words.

Specifically, I split up the transcripts by narrative in MAXQDA to prepare for a compare and contrast memo phase, which helped me discover the core narratives and their relation to the overall narrative. During the transcription process, I searched for language that seemed like the beginning of a narrative, i.e. "I remember when—." Correspondingly, I prepared an initial analysis on my understanding of the beginning, middle, and end of each story. It was helpful to use the goal of a story (what did the participant seek to do?) as the beginning, the lesson of a story what did the participant accomplish/learn?) as the middle, and the outcome of a story (what was the function of the story?) as the end. Contextual details of the story included the time, place, people, feelings/emotions, situation, and other relevant components that contextualized and connected to their life story.

MAXQDA helped the researchers conduct categorizing and connecting strategies. This software, in tandem with Microsoft OneNote, supported creating codes and then assigning the

code(s) a color attached to in vivo text from the transcript. The program boosted my workflow because it gave the option to deepen my analysis by reorganizing my thinking through visual representations of my analysis. Meaning, whatever memos and codes that I created, this software showed the colors associated with those codes to compare, contrast, and connect different parts of each participant's story. For example, if I assigned red to be the color for participant one and some of her words overlapped with the words of other participants, then the software displayed the color-coded connections based on my data searches and memos. MAXQDA also assisted with documenting and organizing code matrices to simplify cross-comparisons between interview data and the participants' demographics. With this in mind, MAXQDA also supported narrative coding, which was about incorporating "literary terms as codes to discover the structural properties of participants' stories" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 185). Ergo, I created codes based on key terms or phrases from the literature toward the end of the analysis to explore any connections between the participant's individual story and the known experiences of Black women collectively.

After I transcribed the audio files using Microsoft OneNote and MAXQDA, I simultaneously read through each interview transcription while listening to the audio recording again to ensure the transcription was accurate. After transcription, I created memos based on affective coding and began the first cycle affective coding method to note emotions, values, beliefs, and observations. Saldaña clarified affective coding methods "investigate subjective qualities of human experience by directly acknowledging and naming those experiences" (p. 159). During this initial coding process, I reflected deeply on the content in the data by labeling any feelings (e.g., anger, sadness, or happiness) participants mentioned in tandem with assessing their integrated beliefs, values, and attitudes about Black women. Additionally, affective coding

also investigated power dynamics in participants' lives (i.e., versus coding) and how they made judgments about government programs and policies (i.e., evaluation coding). In total, the affective coding methods (emotion, values, versus, and evaluation) worked independently and collectively to help me conduct my initial analysis of the interview data.

Emotion codes were important to evaluating the wellness/health (a critical study goal) of the participants. Emotion codes "label the emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participant, or inferred by the researcher about the participant" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 160). Acknowledgement of emotions provided rich insight into the participants' perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions because emotions are embedded in human behavior. Emotion coding also shed light on the impact of controlling images. In MAXQDA, I created memos about emotions during the analysis process in the software.

Similarly, values coding focused on the participant's "integrated system" of attitudes, values, and beliefs (Saldaña, 2021, p. 167). Saldaña defined attitudes as "the way we think and feel about ourselves, another person, thing, or idea" (p. 168). Comparably, a value was defined as "the importance we attribute to ourselves, another person, thing, or idea" (p. 168). On the other hand, a belief was "part of a system that includes our values and attitudes, plus our personal knowledge, experiences, opinions, assumptions, biases, prejudices, morals, and other interpretive perceptions of the social world" (p. 168). Saldaña affirmed values coding was important for qualitative studies that "explore cultural values and belief systems, identity, intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions" (p. 168). These two coding procedures were often applied to studies that explored interpersonal and intrapersonal participant experiences and actions in matters of identity, reasoning, social relationships, decision-making, risk-taking, and judgment (Saldaña, 2021).

Moreover, Saldaña stated versus coding was best for qualitative data sets that "suggest strong conflicts, microaggressions, polarization, or competing goals within, among, and between participants" (p. 174). Consequently, I used this coding approach to investigate the relationships between stories, concepts, and/or connections with the literature. It was helpful to explore laws or policies that influenced and affected (connected to) their lives as well. Versus coding identified "dichotomous or binary terms of individuals, groups, social systems, organizations, phenomena, processes, concepts, etc., in direct conflict with each other" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 174). For example, codes included stories about standing out versus fitting in and feeling happy versus feeling depressed. In total, this coding technique was great for comparing, contrasting, and connecting the data during analysis. Evaluation coding was about searching for solutions (e.g., advocating for legislation that supports and protects Black women) based on the analysis. Saldaña affirmed this coding process as the last step because it investigated social, legislative, and organizational action.

After coding, I simultaneously listened to the interview audio and read the interview transcript again. Then, I categorized the codes/memos by colors and created a reflective memo on their collective meaning within the context of the study scope and collaborators' stories. During this post-coding and pre-writing phase, I used MAXQDA to select codes with their respective narrative text chunks for my analysis and then worked with the selected codes and story chunks to determine their place in my dissertation. Each participant's story profile was associated with a specific color in the document files MAXQDA database. I attached different meanings to each color and created code symbols (i.e., emojis). The visualization tools in MAXQDA software showed me data connections in comprehensive ways, which prepared me for deepening my analysis. During the visualization stage, I remained open to reorganizing codes into other

emergent categories (e.g., key terms from the literature) and analyzed the connections between the participant's verbatim narrative story chunks.

How did the participant construct her own narrative and why was it important to share? The benefits of MAXQDA helped me deepen my analysis when applying the third typology of Mishler's narrative analysis approach, which spotlighted the function of the story. MAXQDA supported advanced searches, meaning it assisted me with cross-comparing the stories of participants across all interviews. I made notes about the power and social dynamics in the participant's narrative during my search for the beginning, middle, and end of her life story. I expected the structure of Seidman's interview series to assist me with determining the beginning, middle, and end of the participant's story profile. I separated stories based on the story function.

For instance, one participant shared one story about becoming a mother and another about not being promoted at work. Thus, I combined these stories in one memo about the participant's profile, yet separated the experiences based on how each one impacted the participant (story function). Comparing and contrasting stories via coded memos exposed each story from different perspectives to determine its importance. A story was considered important if it shed light on the participant's identity, a perceived social problem, leadership challenges, and/or anything else that offered critical insight to answering the research questions.

Narrative Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves four basic elements: categories, patterns, themes, and codes (Kim, 2016; Saldaña, 2021). The analytical steps in the previous section about coding, categorizing, and connecting the data prepared me for the narrative analysis process, which focused on the story. Narrative analysis is when data are "configured or emplotted to a whole story that consists of actions and events, in order to sustain the metaphoric richness of a story"

(Kim, 2016, p. 303). Consequently, Maxwell supported the use of connecting strategies as a means to understand data in context, which made the data analysis process more holistic. Hence, narrative analysis focused on particular and special characteristics of human action in a specific setting (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016; Merriam & Associates, 2002). Ergo, Mishler (1995) proposed three key models of narrative analysis: narrative functions (contexts and consequences), textual coherence and structure (narrative strategies), and temporal and reference order (the "telling and the "told") (Kim, 2016). This study focused on the narrative functions model. Kim cited Mishler's typology centered on making meaning of experiences and events through telling and retelling stories for different genres and contexts.

Mishler's Typology: Category 3

While each model was appropriate to use, the narrative functions model was used for data analysis because it focused on social, psychological, and cultural contexts and functions of a story (Kim, 2016; Mishler, 1995). My literature review was framed within sociocultural and historical lenses in order to offer a more holistic framework needed to conduct the study. These lenses nearly mirrored category three of Mishler's typology. These methods of data analysis drove the analysis procedures of my study because they analyzed the social power structures and narratives of participants' lives, which directly related to scholarly discourse in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. Collins (1989; 2022) discussed these procedures within the context of Black feminist thought. Ergo, it was appropriate to use this data analysis procedure to analyze the life stories of each participant. Kim illustrated category three of Mishler's typology, which included four methods of data analysis:

- politics of narrative (e.g., conflict, resistance, and power);
- storytelling in institutional and interactional contexts;

- culture and narrative (e.g., rituals, performance, and myths);
- and narrativization of experience (e.g., self, memory, and cognition).

Kim emphasized that Mishler's third category could be explored based on my theoretical framework and life story narrative inquiry approach. Similarly, Mishler explained the third typology focused "on the 'work' stories do, on the settings in which they are produced, and on the effects they have" (p. 107). In other words, what was the purpose of the story and did it function for the storyteller (participant), the researcher, or the public at large? How did I make sense of these four methods? For the first method, my analysis explored the sociopolitical context of the story. For example, I investigated patterns of submission and domination within the dominant narrative (Collins, 2022). Mishler instructed researchers to investigate experiences and perceptions of underrepresented social groups who likely have a counternarrative that exposes societal conflict, resistance, and power structures. The second method emphasized "socially situated features and effects of stories" (Mishler, 1995, p. 112). I interpreted this as the right to tell a story to someone else or an institution, which connected to my work because these women had a right to share their version of the American experience.

During feasibility assessments, some Black women shared their understanding of the racial cultural climate in South Georgia, which sparked conversations about how the Confederate flag should be banned because it represented slavery. Although what they shared may be true, the fact is that it was true *to them*. For the third method, Mishler questioned the concept of "truth" through his argument of the cultural role of narrative. For example, the dominant cultural narrative of America centered slavery, but depending on the person telling the story, one person may say there was inhumane treatment while the other may argue that the treatment of enslaved individuals was legal. Both perspectives contain truth, but the first perspective focused on the

cultural rituals during that time while the other contextualized the narrative. Neither perspective was wrong or right because it was the person's truth. But that did not mean that their truth could not be analyzed based on their understanding of the cultural narrative. Lastly, the fourth method spotlighted the individual: How did they narrate how they became who they are today based on their identity and experiences? Overall, each method helped me analyze the data because each one used context as the foundation of the method.

Overall, narrative analysis was the best data analysis procedure for understanding how participants constructed their own life stories through a narrative. After transcribing each interview, I analyzed the data through this procedure. Though, I also combined categorizing and connecting strategies in an effort to understand the connections between different experiences shared in the interviews. Although MAXQDA and Microsoft programs helped save time, I still used time-consuming traditional methods via whiteboards, chalkboards, and sticky note walls. All in all, Mishler's third typology of narrative analysis allowed me to see the role of different social structures that influence the perceptions, lived experiences, opportunities, and health of five Black women leaders in South Georgia. With this approach, I limited the ways my interpretations of participants' stories might be wrong because I bracketed my subjective "I's" to limit my biases from influencing the data (Kim, 2016; Maxwell, 2013; Mishler, 1995).

Validity: How Might I Be Wrong?

There is a separate section about validity to identify the most serious validity threats or alternative explanations concerned with qualitative research. Validity can be measured through trustworthiness (confirmability, dependability, credibility, and transferability) and understanding (theoretical validity, descriptive validity, interpretive validity, and evaluative validity; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Maxwell noted two primary validity threats, why they were important to

recognize, and best practices to limit these threats. The key validity threats to qualitative research include researcher (or observer) bias, reactivity (experimenter or observer effect), and subject-expectancy effects. To limit these threats, I reflected on my subjectivity in the conceptual framework. The explicit incorporation of my experience, identity, and acknowledgment of my subjectivity/bias (Peshkin, 1991) strengthened the validity of my dissertation (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

Controlling the interview setting, thorough preparation, and detailed field notes that included reflective memos also helped limit validity threats (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). Additionally, I ensured my research was not a self-fulfilling prophecy by acknowledging that I searched for (and included) discrepant data and the examination of competing explanations (Maxwell, 2013). Hence, I remained open to having my prior beliefs and assumptions about Black women in South Georgia overturned. In total, qualitative researchers can improve validity by executing member checks, establishing coherence to minimize internal threats, and enforcing structural corroboration (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

Hence, I used their own words in profiles, maintained persistent observation, encouraged peer debriefing, and participated for a longer duration on-site. Consequently, researchers can practice triangulation and reflexivity, take good notes, and overlap methods. Triangulation was implemented by using various methods and credible sources of information. Reflexivity is the researcher's subjectivity that involved critical reflection about factors that may influence the research planning and findings, including the role of the researcher (Kim, 2016). It was helpful to ask myself questions such as, "Is the environment distracting? Are the responses consistent? In what ways are the questions unbiased/neutral?" In sum, because context is the foundation of qualitative research, I ensured my interpretations accurately created a coherent narrative of the

participants' experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016; Maxwell, 2013).

Summary: What Now?

In this methodology chapter of my dissertation, I introduced narrative inquiry as a storytelling methodology that helped me learn more about how controlling images influence the perceptions, experiences, opportunities, and health of Black women leaders in South Georgia. I explicated how narrative inquiry was an empowering research design that served as a platform to empower the participants as intellectuals. Then, I described how I formed positive research relationships to improve the validity of this study. Additionally, I elucidated the selection procedures for this study, with a specific focus on Black women leaders as the sample population and South Georgia as the cultural setting. Furthermore, I mentioned the different forms of data collection that helped answer the research questions, with a specific focus on the interview procedures. With this research protocol in mind, I clarified the data analysis procedures and how Mishler's third typology was the best approach. Throughout this dissertation so far, I outlined my experiential knowledge to expose my biases and how this mindful approach helped strengthen the validity of this dissertation. Overall, the introduction, conceptual framework, and methodology sections all worked together to prepare to learn more about each participant and how their life stories contributed to the study results.

Chapter 4: Participant Profile Results

This chapter includes the results of the study based on interviews conducted with five Black women leaders in South Georgia. The chapter introduces each participant followed by their life story from the in-depth interview(s) in their own words (i.e., their profile in italics) (Seidman, 2019). Each introduction outlines a summary of the interview and how the participant pseudonym was selected. This chapter prepares the reader for Chapter 5, which discusses a comparative and deductive analysis of different segments of each life story. The transcript verbatim segments are accurate. Again, although interview guides were prepared, each participant was given the autonomy to take control of the interview, which surprisingly resulted in stories that aligned with the literature related to the relationship between violence, resilience, and social challenges associated with Black womanhood.

As recommended by Kim (2016) and Seidman (2019) for narrative smoothing, the profiles exclude speech phrases such as "um," "you know," "and stuff," "kind of," and "pretty much." Although these phrases showed evidence of the participant's active thinking process, the removal of such phrases connects with narrative smoothing. Each life story is *italicized* to visibly show the story in the participant's own words. Additionally, as supported by Seidman, in the life story interviews, any words that I inserted to smooth out the story are in brackets (i.e. […]). Life story interviews are presented in the order that they were collected. As aforementioned, this chapter transitions the dissertation to discuss the study results in detail about what was learned from these brave, intellectual, and powerful leaders.

Participant Life Story Profiles: Backgrounds, Experiences, and Lessons

To empower each participant, they were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonym, even if they did not complete all three interviews. Each pseudonym represents the

participant's personality and their story. Again, I took careful precautions to ensure the confidentiality of each woman; minor details (e.g., family names or specific locations) were changed or removed to maintain confidentiality. The life story profiles are structured in chronological order, i.e. from interview one through three. Preparing the profiles were very labor-intensive; I scoured through nearly 1,000 pages of transcript content to reduce each profile to 15 pages or less. Each profile includes various social dynamics in the participants' lives, including their reflections on schooling, media influences, home life, leadership philosophies, politics, social status, and overall worldview. Each woman checked their profile and were given the opportunity to make corrections to not only strengthen the validity of the study, but to also improve its ethicalness.

Meet Grace: A Nurse and Store Manager

Grace is a 55-year old Black woman who was born and raised in South Georgia. When I first met her, she had a beautiful smile sprinkled with gold additions. Her style was youthful and her hair varied throughout my different interactions with her. Grace appeared to be welcoming and accepting, as she is the co-owner of a retail and finances store. She also works as a nurse because she loves taking care of others. During my first visit to her store (originally for business purposes), we had a heart-warming conversation that sent chills down my body. The ability for Grace to communicate her life story along with her desire for true self-love inspired me to stay in contact with her for research purposes.

Grace knew I was a doctoral student even though I was working for AT&T at the time. Grace shared how someone was interested in her life story, but never followed up with her. She was happy that I did, but neither of us knew that she was not emotionally prepared to revisit her childhood and early adulthood memories. Unfortunately, after interview two, Grace requested to

withdraw from the study and shared her initiation of enrolling in counseling services to process her life and eventually write her own book. Below is an overview of Grace followed by her life story in her own words.

Grace went through an abusive childhood that taught her a distorted version of love tainted with manipulation, molestation, and neglect. The lack of resources available to Grace during her adverse experiences limited her ability to learn in school. She shared how no one cared to ask why she was acting out. Instead, school administrators placed her in special needs classes, which made her feel isolated and embarrassed. She knew she could learn, but she wanted the attention and love that she did not receive at home. She thought her "bad" behavior would make others care to help her, but they only saw it as a deficit to her intelligence.

Today, she combats her struggles with low self-esteem and limited social opportunities by teaching younger women how to begin loving themselves early and not settling for abusive relationships, especially when kids are involved. She lost her oldest son who wanted to escape watching her stay in an abusive relationship during her third marriage. After his death, she divorced the narcissistic husband after a 20-year marriage when she realized and accepted that he would not change, no matter how much she was willing to change for him. Grace grew from a deficit-focused mindset into an empowerment-focused mindset by sharing her story online with other women that she knew were staying in abusive relationships because of fear. Her testimony helped countless women become entrepreneurs, seek education, and contribute to organizations that help mold young Black women into leaders. Her bravery to share private moments of her adverse life journey inspired her pseudonym selection: Grace. Below is her life story about accepting abuse for love; domestic violence and molestation were themes.

I'm [Grace] and I'm 55 years old. I'm a very caring and kind person that has

been through a lot. Right now in this stage of life, I'm at peace. It took a long time for me to get here, but I'm [finally] at peace. I'm a nurses aid…I love taking care of the elderly…I grew up in [South Georgia]. I'm the only girl…I have four brothers. [During my childhood], I didn't grow up in the home with my parents. As I can remember from the age of 8, I was living with my godparents and I stayed there with them until…about 11. Living with my godparents was pretty rough because they were older people and they were...I guess back then you could say it's just the way they disciplined, [but] they were very hard on me. The lady that raised me was...mean…in a sense where, I couldn't tell [her] if something was going on with me…During the age of 8-9, her niece would come back with [her] husband and for some reason they would never let me go anywhere they went. If they [went] shopping or anywhere, they [would] always make me stay home with him. But during the time of staying home with him, he was molesting me. This went on for oh-8-9-10 and I can remember the last time I was 11, and that's when I started my menstrual period after the incident.

I had started being very rebellious [by] acting out in school really bad. They put me in special classes because of the way that I was acting in school. I had so much going on, [so] I was just dysfunctional. I [ended] up [running away] to my mother's house…Before I went to my mom's house, I knew that was my mom, but I could never visit [her even though she] lived…3 or 4 houses up the street. If I [went] to the store, I would have to walk past my mother's house. I couldn't stop and I never knew why…I had an older sister, which is my dad's oldest child (not my mother's daughter), [but] she would be there and I just got to

sit and look up the street and just see them…Nobody interacted with me…I stayed with my mom for a little while…the next door neighbors helped watch me because my mother worked all the time and my father was an alcoholic.

I feel like my mother thought that she was doing best by letting somebody that she knew raise me because I was an only girl…I stayed there for a little while. Then, my father's sister lived in Ohio…When I went to Ohio, I was hoping that things would be better. My aunt was older and her son felt like she needed to let [him] and his wife raise me because they already had 2 kids...It was a disaster. The wife really didn't accept me, but she had to portray like she did. She was so mean to me, just like the incident that I had came out of. She was really mean to me [and] always put all the housework on me. We lived in a real big, nice house, but I was the one that had to clean the stairs, the stairways, and just do so much. I had a tendency of talking back and she would beat me. It didn't matter where…But they didn't understand the sickness that I already had went through. So then when I come in being, as they say, "disrespectful"…it was hard…because one parent accepted [me] and one parent didn't. But [they]…[made] it [seem] like everything [was] happy. I don't remember doing anything as a teenager as far as [extracurricular activities]. All [I] did was [go] to church, came home, [and] cleaned up.

I had friends in school that I wanted to interact with, but I never could…My friends would bring me shoes and clothes so that I [could] fit in with the other kids…I was in special classes and just rebellious, really bad, [and] always fighting…Now that I'm older, I see out of myself that kids seek

attention…Nobody ever just got me and [said], "Okay, we're going to evaluate her, sit down, and just see what's going on." I can learn <emphasis>, but it wasn't on me…they already placed me in those special classes...It [was] embarrassing. I act[ed] bad, so that it [wouldn't] be on me. That [was] part of my thinking, like everybody's laughing at me... [so] I'm [going to] act out. I went through that for a long time. They used to send me back and forth every summer to visit my mother and that's when I began to spend time with my mom. But I used to always beg her to not send me back, but they would always make me go back…I did graduate though [on] June 6th, 1985. June 7th, I was on a plane back to Georgia and that's when...destruction hit me because I was wild. I had been confined. So at that time, I <pause> got on drugs…I spent a little time in [South Georgia] and then I decided to move to Miami with my family. I ran into a childhood friend that introduced me to crack cocaine. And then from there, I got on drugs [and] stayed on it for 15 years.

I don't remember no good childhood ...period. If we had family gatherings like for Christmas, my aunt and all would come over (they [were] middle class rich people), so they would buy gifts, [but] I would always have the [least amount of] gifts. I [would] always be told, "Your Mama don't love you" because nobody sent me [anything]. Nobody called me. I was always singled out and with my other family that lived in Ohio that tried to reach out and help with me being there with them, if they brought me gifts and didn't bring the other children gifts, it [was] a big family blow up…When I left in 1985, I never went back, so if [there were] happy moments and they raised me, I would have went back because I

would [have] appreciated what they did, but they [only] hurt me.

[During my early adulthood], it was hard because I tried to get into the work ethics…trying to be normal like everybody…God was with me every step of the way. I really didn't know how to fill out [job] applications, but…I would go to other people that would help me. Once I [got] on the job, I put my mind to it [telling myself], "I can do it." But it was really hard…I didn't know anything about being in the streets. I didn't know anything about working…So, I was wild [and] lost…[Eventually], I did work, but I was really weak for [being] a follower…And it led me into destruction. [My earliest memory of transitioning from a follower into a leader was] in my 30s. I was 32. At that time, I had settled down [because] I got pregnant when I was 26. I was being family oriented…I started working [and] attending church more…I was always out in the community…I started feeling good about myself…I was freeing my mind through my work of taking care of my patients. That gave me joy to be able to help somebody…At the same time, I was needing help [and] love too. In my 30s, I started to mature up and lead, but [there] was still destruction around. It's sad to say, but <pause> I [was] just getting my life together at the age of 53…I had been on drugs even though I was with my family. I was the type that would hide, stay in the house, and beat myself down. I've been clean for going on 2 years now. Crack cocaine was my first drug, but cocaine snorting was the other one that I could hide…but it was killing me. I tried…not thinking about my son's death, losing my marriage, losing everything that God blessed me with…I lost everything.

At the age of 53, I prayed [and] called out to God…God delivered me from drugs August 14th, 2020 and I [haven't] looked back…I feel so good about myself. I feel like a leader now, [though] I was always a leader. People always looked up to me. I've always encouraged and talked to people. Now, my self-esteem is built up. My character is built up. Everybody is reaching out to me and it [makes] me feel so good because [peers] always patterned their life behind me. They didn't know what I was going through…but I was always a stand up person [that was] doing good, riding good, [and had] a good job…but they don't know the battles that I was going through, [but] God was [with] me. In spite of all that I…went through, I still tried to lead other people in the right way [and] do positive things, like go to church and encourage [others]. I know that I was a positive role model because everybody tells me…I'm a leader. [A leader in my childhood was] my cousin [who] was a nurse [and] she [took] care of people.

[I coped with my childhood adverse experiences through] my behavior (fighting) [because] gosh, it was hard…I coped with it through my actions of being rebellious [and] skipping school…I had on a mask in school…I wasn't who I was acting out to be, but…the things that I was going [through at home], that's the way I was coping with it [by] trying to hide what I was going through. Everything was a shadow, but no one tried to get help [for] me, even at home. It was just beatings for everything. [I never told anybody] other than my mother when I started having communication with her, but my mother is illiterate. That's why I…felt sorry for her [even though] she didn't try to reach out and see what was going on with me. She never called me [nor] sent me anything for

Christmas…but at the end of the day, that was my mom. I knew as a little child that my momma needed help [because] she was very poor and all she did was work 40 years at the hospital [doing] the same job. My dad [had] DTs [alcoholic delirium tremens and used to] break out all the windows [and] run out the house with his clothes off [while] we [tried] to get him back…All I can remember is sadness.

[As far as happiness], I just found it. I'm just beginning to be happy [despite] what I went through [like] no mom, no, dad. Everything I did in life, I did it how I thought it should be done, even in my relationships…entangling with the wrong people because I had never seen that mother and father type love…It took me a long time <short pause> to just find myself…It's really sad that I'm 55 [and] just now beginning to love myself. [For example], somebody [could] say, "Ooh, that wig [you're] wearing [doesn't] look good." I [used to] immediately go and try to find something else. That's how low my self-esteem was...It's getting better because I am who God created, so I got to love me. If my forehead is big, it's mine. This is how God created me [and] I have to tell myself that. But I have been so beat down to [where] I didn't love myself. I didn't even like to look at myself in the mirror.

So, I got into a relationship with [a] guy [from a] well-off family, but he was on crack. We did end up getting married. [When] I was 21, he bought my house and bought me a car…He had his own business, but I was young. He was [about] 35, [but] we both [were] on drugs. [Eventually], I left him and got with another guy that was [also]well-off. His family had lots of property, but he was

[also] on crack. This is what I was attracting. I was with him for a while [and] we got married…I end[ed] up getting pregnant on him, [but] he accepted the baby, [so] I named the baby after him. I still was cheating with the outside guy. Everything was corrupt, [so] I ended up leaving him after I led him to the church (he's a minister now)…I left the church [and] left him [because] I wanted to be with the baby daddy, but he was married. He left his wife [for me but he] ended up going back to the wife. I'm back on crack now with a baby and it [has] been up and down ever since then…I was attracting addicts, so when I got in this last relationship, he was younger than me by 11 years, but he didn't do drugs. He smoked weed, but [not] heavy drugs. I had been on crack off and on for so long 'til when I met him.

[I] was like, "Oh my God, I finally met somebody that's not on crack" that helped me because I knew that I couldn't smoke crack and be with him, so that help[ed] me to stop smoking crack, which I immediately did. But I picked up another habit that he was okay with [which] was snorting cocaine. So I went from smoking it to snorting it… until a couple of years ago… I really liked him…we got married…At that time, I [was] settling down…I've always had my own place. I always liked the nice things, but my mind was beginning to get a little focused…I thought that he was right, you know? But he came in and turned my life upside down.

He was very abusive, very controlling, very cocky [and] loud. He was a narcissist. [He needed] the attention. Everything he [did], he blamed you for it. [For example], he had [this] kind of mind control: If you see a man, drop your

head... It was rough... It was really bad. But … I was beginning to accept the treatment like, "Oh… you just love me so much that you don't want nobody else to talk to me…[or] be around me" (that's what I was telling myself). I accepted it…for 20 years...I'm so traumatized…20 years of that treatment was bad. Then on top of that, my son [was] growing up... He [was] smoking around my son (he was 10) when I [wasn't] around… smoking weed with my baby... he caused a lot of problems with me and my child because my child [saw] me go through a lot of abuse, a lot of beatings. I can remember times [when] we [ran] in the room and [my son said], "Mama, just knock the air conditioner out the window, let's just get through the window Mama." ...Him and my [ex]husband (when [my son] got older), they got into fights…It was bad.

My son…jumped on him…beat him pretty bad that first time. But it was the anger that my child had built up in him [as] a child…My son [ended up going] to jail…I was sitting in the room one night [and] my [ex]husband had jumped on me and went out. I was sitting in the room laying on the bed getting high snorting. My son knocked at the door and…stood up against the wall and he said, "Mom...I'm tired of seeing you hurt… Mama I want to see you happy again."…To him, being happy again [meant] money, nice cars, and jewelry …He said, "Ma, you all I got."…his father wasn't [allowed to be] in his life…I [said], "I know [son's name]. I love you… I'm ok…I'm going to be ok."

He started crying [so] I said, "Don't worry about me. I'm going to be ok."…I knew [there] was something special about him, [but] my [ex]husband used to always get mad…[One] night, before I went to bed, I got on my knees [to]

pray and said, "God…don't let nothing happen to my son…please protect him [and] watch over him…take him off the streets."…When I said take him off the streets, I was referring to [him not] going to jail because he had a warrant for his arrest…About 11-11:30, the phone rang and it was my son…[After smoking synthetic weed with family], they said he took off running toward my Mama's house where he fell dead [of] a massive heart attack…in 2016…In 2018, I [lost] a 20 year marriage. My only child that I have left wouldn't go with me…I had to endure so much and I try to just block it out my mind…trying to be a better person.

I know God is real. For me to be able to bear [that] and for people to look at me, even in my mess, [and] say, "You're the reason why I'm doing what I'm doing today."…[I helped start] businesses [for] girls looking [to get] boss status…In one of my [Facebook live] videos, I sent a shout out to some girls that I [saw] in the hood with me [growing up]…these [were] younger girls…I see them living a positive life now like having their own businesses… I acknowledge them on Facebook. The feedback that they give me is, "You're the reason why I'm doing what I'm doing because you [were] a boss." When people look at you [like that] and you don't even look at yourself, it [changes you]…it made me feel better [about myself].

I kept [praying] that God was going to change [my life for the] better. Every year, [my ex- husband] would always tell me [that] he was going to get his life right with God and …be a minister [like my other ex-husband]. I really believe[ed] that he [was] going to change [which is] why I stayed so long looking

for that change, [but] it was getting worse…the beatings, the mental abuse, [the] verbal abuse…It just never stopped. We had all that money [half a million dollars], but he just ran through it. [It was so bad that] I [had] to take blood pressure medicine… I always felt like my mouth was the problem. If I wouldn't have said this, then I would be treated like this, [but it was all] just mind manipulation.

*I'm very spiritual…[Toward the end of our marriage], God came to me and told me of a situation when my [ex]husband had [left me] before … He was only 19 when I got with him. I was in my 30s…God remind[ed] me of the time [my ex-husband] came and told me about the girl that he was dating (his first girlfriend)…[and] he left me…So I said, "[ex-husband name], God just showed me of a time when you left me before [for your] first girlfriend." [He said], "I don't need you."…I left the next day. I decided that I [was] tired…God was preparing me for what I was getting ready to go through… I gave it my all. I did everything a woman could possibly do…I even had clubs. He wouldn't help me, [but] he was always with the women in the club…I did everything I thought I could possibly do to please him and it just didn't work…I think God was getting fed up with me choosing him as my God…He used to make me get on my knees [in front of everybody] whenever I did something that he didn't like …If I [was] at the club, he [would] beat me [and] say, "Get on your f*cking knees b*tch."…I would do that, but believe me, every time I was going down, I was praying [for] God [to] forgive me…I just went through so much and I really don't understand why he treated me like that. I was a good woman. I worked. 15 years into my marriage,*

he never gave me nothing.

He peeped that I was a little slow or whatever, and I think he just manipulated it and ran straight through my life [to] destroy me. I was hoping for better days, [but] I couldn't walk away…I really did love him and wanted him to just love me…It was hard when I walked away. I almost lost my mind. I got back on drugs. I stayed at the motel and snort[ed] cocaine and pop[ped] Xanax all day…I lost my son, [then] I [went] through [that]. [I thought], "Am I crazy? Is it me?"…I did that in Florida for a while and I remember calling him [to] tell him that I needed my blood pressure medicine… he told me [to] get on the road and die…he [wouldn't] give me my blood pressure [medicine]…But I still, to this day, help him. I don't know [why because] he hurt me, but in my heart, I forgive him. That's who my son is with. They've been homeless and [even though] I don't have much, I'll take my money and give it to them [to] help them find somewhere to stay. Or if they go on the road and don't have nothing to eat, I try to get up and still be nice. He [doesn't] understand.

But it's just that God in me because I know I did nothing wrong to be treated like [that] for 20 years…he literally almost broke my neck…he had me scared. When you [are] in a relationship like that, you [are] scared to leave because you think you're going to [get] kill[ed]…I knew that once I walked out that door, I couldn't go back because he would have beat me so bad for leaving. [I used to say], "I was just trying to get away because I'm tired of you hurting me." [He would say], "I'm gonna wait 'til you put your hands [down]…so [I] can slap [you]."…I endured it…it wasn't me that walked away (God came in)…I didn't do

anything but work. I was too scared to look a man in his eyes. I always drop[ped] my head…[When people] gave me a hug [in public]…He beat me right then. I used to …jump in peoples' vehicles so that I [could] get away from it. [One of my close friends] actually slapped him in the face with her shoe and spit in his face because she was really tired of the way he was treating me in front of people…God has completely took him out of my heart. He always says he's sorry [and that] he wished he [could] turn back the hands of time [to] treat me better…I never [will] give him a chance now to show me that he's better because [he] left me with nothing to believe that [he] would treat me better.

From 1999 to 2018, [I stayed because] I couldn't stand the thought of another woman having him, even though he was mistreating me. I had invested so much in this dude. I knew he didn't have [any]thing [when I first met him], but I was on crack. For me to get affiliated with somebody else that [was] not on hard drugs, [I thought] my life [could] change. [But] the abuse and the control [were] so overwhelming…His mom put him out at the age of 16 [and] never let him come back home. I was settled (older lady). I had my nice place and cars. I worked. Even though I was on drugs, you couldn't look at me and tell because I always did [it] at home. I was beating myself down alone. I thought maybe he would appreciate me because I helped him…we made money together…I helped build him up. And when I tell you once I built his self-esteem up, there it went. Now he's on top and in control telling me what I [could] and [could not] do. "I'm the man. You're going to do what I say," [he used to tell me]. I just learned about a narcissist. He's really a narcissist. He destroyed my character, my self-esteem, my

everything. My oldest son's father couldn't come and visit my son [because] if he [caught] my oldest son's father coming over to get him with his wife, he [would] beat me. I did everything I could to possibly keep showing this man that I loved him.

[The whole time he was literally] playing with my mind. [When I found out], I asked him, "Well, who would you tie my hair behind this picture?" And he [blamed] my son. He had been playing [dark magic] on my mind for years, [but] God was with me and knew that I couldn't go [any]where. [He used to say], "You're going to learn," [but that was] just manipulation [from my school experiences]…one day, my [only] son [will] come back [to] me because I am the breadwinner. He destroyed my son [by telling him to] drop out of school. He dropped out of school…he thought by him having my son, he was going to bring me back, [but even though I love my son], I never [went] back…I gave him $1000 to get [them] somewhere to stay. He lost [the money]…I [couldn't] stand to see my son looking dingy and dirty. I just thank God [because my son is finally] coming back home to me. [I'm] going to get [him] a job [and] try to [help him] get a GED because [my son] is very smart, [but] he just wasn't applying himself. Everything is [finally] working out, but he destroyed my whole family (me and both of my boys).

[Today, love looks like] someone [who] is patient, understanding, [and] lets me have a voice. I went to Africa and remarried. [My new husband] treats me really nice. I can be [myself]. I can take my [wig] off and be [Grace]. He makes me feel good about myself… he [doesn't] want me doing anything that's going to

bother my health. I really don't know what love is, [but] I know how I want to be loved. I don't want to have to teach nobody else how to love me and then they don't. I like the attention that he's giving me…I'm toxic. I don't trust [any]thing, so that causes problems [for] me…I just want my mind to be calm, but I've been hurt so bad so I don't trust nothing…When you say stereotype, I think it comes from my ancestors…the things that our grandparents all went through…with [their] husbands…But as far as stereotypes, I've always been made out to be a bad person. But get to know me and listen to me [and you'll understand that] I'm not a bad person. I have to tell myself that I'm not crazy [because] people look at me now like I'm crazy [for sharing my story] on [Facebook] live.

But I'm trying to help somebody heal [and] tell them, "You don't have to endure [abuse for love]. We don't have to go through that. It's not of God." And only by the grace of God, I'm still here [because] I [was] supposed to be dead... [My dad used to tell my mom], "I'm gonna get you somewhere to stay," but every time [he tried] to fill out the application to help her get her house, it wouldn't go through. So, he ended up [buying a property and] building it into a 2-story, very nice, 4 bedroom, 3 bath home. So the change did come [for my parents] and see, that's what I was thinking would happen with me and my [ex]husband. Even though I was in the relationship for the 20 years, I thought I was in the bad part and then it was going to get better, but it never did.

[As a child, others perceived me as the] little grown girl wanting to curse and fight, [but] that stage passed me by. I think people look at me [now] as hurt [because]…[molestation and domestic violence] happens in the Black community

real bad, [even] with family. You're not going to hear it [because] it's thrown up under the rug. [I see strength in Black womanhood.] A Black woman is strong [and] powerful. We've been through a lot, not just me … [But] we can stand up against whatever…even though we might get [knocked] down… A Black woman has a lot of strength to endure, [but it doesn't mean that we have to]. We're strong women. We're strong minded [because] God [gave] us that strength.

[Today], God [is] controlling me [and] lead[ing] me through life [because] He knows that I need help. I ain't been educated, so I know that it's God [who] is with me…I appreciate you listening [because] I've never sat down and talked to [any]body about things that I have actually went through, not even my mother…My mother is there, [but] I don't have a relationship with her. I'm in a bubble. It's just me against the world. I love my Mama, but we never had a girl talk. I've never told her how I felt about [any]thing that has happened to me in my life…She's not the type of mother that wants to hear it, so I just have to accept the love that she gives me…[I] had to grow in the streets and learn [from] others…it can get hard, girl. There [are] so many sick women out here…and they say that the church is a hospital, but sometimes it damages you just as bad…[but the grace of God protects me and leads my path].

Meet Rose: A Restaurant Manager

Rose is a 42-year old Black woman who was born and raised in South Georgia. When I first met her, she greeted me with a hug and smile. She looked younger with two beautiful Afro-puffs in her head. I met Rose during my first conversation with Grace. She was so excited to be able to share her life story with someone. We had a heart-warming conversation about how she

survived every adversity, including being shot. The ability for Rose to communicate her life story in tandem with her search for true self-love inspired me to stay in contact with her for research purposes. Rose also knew I was a doctoral student, even though I was working for AT&T at the time. Rose shared how she always wrote in her journals to document major life experiences, but she never reflected on how those memories impacted becoming the woman she is today. Unfortunately, after interview one, Rose withdrew from the study by not responding to follow-up communication. Below is my initial comprehensive understanding of Rose followed by her life story in her own words.

Rose went through a different type of abusive childhood; she emphasized how the abuse was mental, not physical. She was active in school activities, yet never got the attention she craved from her mother. She shared how all she wanted was to be celebrated for her accomplishments and hard work, but instead everyone judged her. A few years ago, she discovered the family secret: Her mom slept with her sister's husband. So, Rose is the result of that affair; hence, her mom often mistreated and ignored her. She expressed how her mom kicked her out by 12 years old, forcing her to live with her frequently-absent aunt and Rose raised her kids. In search for love and attention, she ended up pregnant by 16 years old.

She stayed with the child's father for years until they separated. Then, she got into a relationship with a toxic woman "stud" who shot her in the face and kidnapped her child. Despite her consistent efforts to seek assistance from government agencies and judicial systems, no one cared to help her. Today, she combats her struggles with low self-esteem and limited social opportunities by teaching younger women how to talk about uncomfortable family secrets. Rose also grew from a deficit-focused mindset into an empowerment-focused mindset by sharing her story online with other women that she knew were depressed or felt unworthy of love. Her

testimony helped countless women share their stories and seek education about healthier coping strategies. Her courage to share private moments of her life journey gave me additional insight into the impact of mental abuse in childhood. Below is her life story about accepting abuse as love; violence and familial rejection were themes.

> *My name is [Rose]. I was born and raised in [South Georgia]. I'm a child of four. I'm the oldest. I have two sisters and one brother... My parents (I have a stepdad) are married. [As a kid], everything that I [said or did was] pushed out…I got things that I needed like clothes [and] food…But mentally I feel like I didn't get [supported]…I have a pretty big family. We [were] all close at one time, [but] when my grandma passed, everybody just fell apart…My grandma always stayed … in the house with us…My grandma always defended me. [which helped] my mental…[When she passed], I [felt] down [and] need[ed] to talk to somebody and I need[ed] somebody to protect me…[My mom] put me out when I was 12 [for] being rebellious towards my stepfather. I was sent to my auntie to let her raise me, but she was still young. So I had to watch her 4 kids; [there] wasn't any balance. I [was] raising myself [and] raising her kids [because] she [was always] out and gone. I got pregnant while I was living on her.*
>
> *I was 16 when I first got pregnant. I stopped going to school…because I [didn't] have [any] support…Nobody [helped me by watching] my baby…I got pregnant again [with] my second child and I was with my baby daddy [who] always sold drugs. [He was a] big dog [in the streets], so I got into that lifestyle of selling drugs and just following the leader. I was trying to figure out what I supposed to be doing as a woman…I knew I [was] supposed to be strong*

enough…[But my mom] didn't show me how to 'buckle down,' meaning I had to look at the things that she didn't show me and figure out how I was going to do it [on my own]…[When my family] hurt me, I [couldn't] talk… I had to bury everything on the inside [and] swallow everything…If I [went] to jail, nobody came to get me out…I know if [a] man slapped me right now today, [none of my family would] come to my defense…I had to teach my son [on my own]…It's just so much [that] I [have] been through…My mom [and I] have [a] relationship, [but] then again, we don't…I always want[ed] to be the girl that came home showing around [school]work. I always want[ed] to be the one that [said], "Mom, look what I'm doing" [because] I liked to dance…I just want[ed] her to see me, [but] she never [saw] me.

[As an adult], I figured out why she never [loved me like her other kids]. She [was] angry at me because of what [she] did to me [and my identity]…When she cook[ed], I was the last one to go eat. [My siblings could] go in the kitchen [and] get what they want[ed], [but] I always [had] to wash [the] dishes after everybody [was] finished eating…[My mom] tortured me mentally [by putting them] first [and me] last…I ain't gonna say it was all bad. I was spoiled, but not by her; I had this god-daddy [who] was trying to take me from my momma for years and years…[Again], I was clothed [and] fed, but nobody [heard] me. [My concerns were] pushed to the side and I just didn't get that mental [love and support]…I work[ed]…from job to job…[but] I [didn't] want to follow like how my momma did…I want[ed] to be up. I want[ed] to be stable. I want[ed] one job…I did management [at] restaurants…leading and management… I tend to

cling to people because I feel their pain… I just think everybody [is] against me…[My family gave me] 'love,' but [it was] not love…I just feel like everybody attack[ed] me because of the things that [my mom] did [and] said, [but] I never knew [why]…[Then I discovered and said to myself], "You're doing this because my daddy is your older sister's husband [and] I'm his child." It was a family secret for so long…[Everyone knew but me that] he [was] my dad. The whole time, I've been calling [my dad] 'Uncle.'…[It is] still a process to this day because now I ain't got no daddy…they're dead to me…[because they isolated me at family gatherings.]…I'll be 42 [soon]. I'm [getting] old.

[As far as what love looks like to me, it looks like] hell, straight hell [because people] once told me they love[d] me and they still went behind my back [and] manipulated me…I went to jail [for] sell[ing] drugs…[When] I got out of jail, I got [my kids] back…[I feel like everyone was] waiting on me to fail so they [could] attack me mentally…I was strong. I never [broke] down. The people [who] I thought that love[d] me genuinely, care[d] for me, and had my best interest still came back around and took my children from me three times, [but] I got them back…I always kept a clean house…I don't want my children to ever feel like I don't love them [or] I don't care for them; I want them to feel my love. I might talk hard to them because they're boys, [but] I [would] give them anything. I [wouldn't] treat them [any] different…because I had to fight [for love] for no reason…My own family, my blood … Why I got to fight y'all? I never did anything [but say], "Yes, ma'am. No, ma'am." I [was] never disrespect[ful], never talked back. Whatever [they said to] do…I did.

[I was never] rewarded for what I did … I always got the back end backlashes of everything…[As far as what love looks like today], I feel love from God and my children…I always want[ed] to be heard and seen and appreciated and reward[ed] for things that I did…Growing up, I was just that girl; I popped…My last time going to jail, I ran somebody over [who was actively trying to shoot me]…[Even though it was self-defense], they tried to charge me with attempt to murder, but they [didn't] have the murder [charge in the] state of Georgia, so they charged me with the highest thing [of] aggravated [assault]…God was still on my side [because the judge] dropped it to a misdemeanor [after I explained the situation]…[My ex-girlfriend] shot me [after we broke up] …I was in a relationship with her [for] 9 years off and on. She was a stud…She [kidnapped] my 11 year old [years ago]…[I am still] stand[ing] by the grace of God [because] her mom manipulated me too…So, I don't trust people; [I keep] my guard up…I went to the judge, I went to the police, I put out a kidnapping, I did everything…to get my baby [back], [but they forged] paperwork to keep my baby…I don't know if you know about witchcraft…[but] they [are] trying to work on me now because they can't hurt me…I try to stay so strong and not think about it, [but] it hurts me every day…[They discredited me as a mother by filing] an abandonment charge…I'm still paying child support.

I [was] lost because I didn't understand [how the system took her side after her trying to shoot me twice]...But I pray[ed] and God told me to be still [and] it's going to be okay. He told me [to] keep fighting…[so] the only thing I can do is fight…I don't know what love feels like [because] everybody I trusted,

look what they did to me…took my child, [a] part of me…[I remember when my] first baby daddy slapped me…I was [a] feisty one, [so] he paid for it the next morning [after] I burned his skin off with an iron; he [never slapped me again]…[I started experiencing a lot of violence] when I got [with] that girl. I [have] only been in three relationships my whole life…because I love so hard. I don't like going from person to person… [I will] do everything I can for you…She was [my] second relationship and it was just like the devil. We fought everyday…I kept telling my dad [that] I kept going back to [her] because they [my family] weren't showing me no love…that girl put every scar on my face except [the one from when I got slapped by him that one time]…[I'm] still trying to pick myself back up…I got shot in my face <showed body scars>… I talked down on myself…I just feel like I'm not healed all the way …[My family accused me of] sleeping with my daddy (he told me himself) [so] I went to shelters… [My] thinking [was messed up because of family].

[So], the same person [who] shot me in my arm and face, [I thought she] still love[d] me…I thought it was love…[the person that I'm with now], I don't want him…It's a true statement, "After you get out of one relationship, don't rush into another one."…Give yourself time to heal because I'm still not healed properly…I don't want to be around [any]body. I just want to get [Rose] together, build myself back up…I'm very smart, intelligent, funny, [and] everything…I've been with [my current partner for] 6 years off and on…I just got to wait [on] God [to show] me [what love is] and quit looking for it because every time I wind up getting hurt… [There is a] 10- 12 years difference [between me and my

boyfriend]…[He tries to] get to me [and say] hurtful things like, "Oh, you still young [you don't know what love is]" …[I tell him], "Don't say stuff like that to me when you can't get to me [because] you can't break me down... You still laying beside me."… I just want friends [to] have fun [with] and just live life. That's all I want [for] my children [too…to live life]…God [has] been keeping me though. Mentally sometimes [I] feel like I'm about to lose my mind, but I just pray [because Jesus rose and wore thorns for me]…[I just] do the best that I can [because my life is not always a bed of roses].

Meet Passion: A Public Educator

Passion is a 43-year old Black woman who was born and raised in South Georgia. She chose a study pseudonym at the conclusion of the third interview. She is a k-12 public educator who has been teaching for over 15 years. She earned her master's degree to increase her salary, however, she also has a part-time job because her teacher's salary is not enough to pay her sons' way through college. She takes care of her mom, two sons (one biological and one adopted), and numerous godchildren. She knew that she wanted to be a teacher since second grade. She had a great childhood filled with love, acceptance, belonging, and family. She cherished her stepdad and how he took care of her family with selfless love. Her life story was the complete opposite of the participant profiles shared thus far. In fact, her life story contained advice for women who endure abuse for/as love because they have not found healing in their life yet.

Passion's greatest joy in life is her biological son because she raised him as a single mom with support from her family when needed. Since I first met Passion, I have never been able to see her full face. Her mother is a survivor of breast cancer, so she prioritized her mother's safety by always masking indoors and outdoors. That did not impact the study results nor interview

process at all. For years, Passion has collaborated with other Black women to spread messages about self-love and knowing one's worth. She also has hosted mentoring groups for family members and youth in the community for years, which she has found to be critical to a young Black girl's childhood experiences. Overall, she offered critical insight about motherhood, self-love, educational success, and economic freedom. She was the first participant to complete all three interviews. Below is her life story profile about rejecting abuse as love; self-worth and educational success were themes.

> *I am the proud mother of 2 outstanding young African American men that are 19, both are in college [in their] sophomore year. One [son] plays football [and] one plays intermural [basketball]. I am the daughter of [mom's name] and the late [dad's name]. My stepdad [name] raised me, [so] I give him credit. I am the youngest sibling of 2 kids from my mom and 1 from my dad … We were not raised by my dad at all. I am the aunt of 7 amazing nieces and nephews (lost one, so it makes 6, but he's still here). I am the godmother of plethora of children, [with] my youngest being 3. I am a teacher for [a public] school system. I am a good friend to a lot of people… Right now, [I am the primary] care provider for my mom, [who] has a touch of dementia…I am the baby, but the big sister. That's who I am in a nutshell.*
>
> *[As a child], I was "bad," mischievous, outgoing, [and] outspoken … I was raised by my mom [and] my stepdad, which I don't think they were too much older (I wouldn't say I was raised by [an] old couple). My brother went into the military when I was really young, so it was just me and my sister … my stepdad was the love of our life…[We] hung out with our friends, but [still] had to be back*

[by a certain] time…We had a decent childhood. We didn't always get everything we wanted, but we got what we needed to survive. [Because] it was just me and my sister, quite naturally, since she's the oldest, I tagged along [with] her until I found my own identity [and] became who I am today, which is me.

My son is named after my stepdad [to help me cope with when he] had passed away. I never had a relationship with my biological father, but it didn't change who I was as a person because I had a father that came in and stepped up and never called me a stepdaughter, but called me his daughter…We were his [and] we got all the benefits that his real kids got. [He] never treated us any different. He came in and was there 'til the day he passed away…Being the woman I am today, [I] understand that everybody is not going to be for you or be willing to be there in your life, even though they're supposed to be…[God may] provide somebody that will be there, and that person might even take you higher than the person that was supposed to be there…You can't tell me who I am or define who I am going to be with or without you…God [taught] me that early on…it didn't really matter that [my biological dad] wasn't there when I was growing up. Of course, you want your dad to be in your life, no matter if you do have somebody special [but] it made me a better person [because] I am able to let go and let people walk out of my life when it's time (when their season is up in my life) …it might hurt, but it [doesn't] put me in a depression state where I can't come back [from] it…When you have people in your life and they walk away, sometimes we do go into [a depression] because I guess [the] change [and] separation. It's hard[er] for Black people because we've had to endure all our

lives…[When my stepdad died], I did find myself going into depression, but I came out of it a year or 2 later [when I found out I was] pregnant.

I [have always] let [people] show me what [or] who [they] are and address[ed] [them] accordingly…I observe [people] and [their] reactions and how [they] carry [their]self when [they]'re not with me…I've been hurt before, so I know how to not allow myself to get back in that situation. I know that God only puts us in an area for a reason, a season, and a purpose…[When I grew] up and became [Passion], all of [the] values that [my] parents instilled in [me], no matter how much [I] hated it as a child, [I kept them]… [For example], as an adult…I [still] go to church…[because my stepdad]…took us to church. It got to the point where… it became a family thing because…my mom got to the position where…she didn't work on Sundays [anymore]…I [will] never forget it… you could see the holes in the [church] floor…It was an older church...we used to go to my mom's home church…[Today], I pray to God, I ask God for forgiveness, [and] to protect me and my family…Where I come from in the church, I don't know if [it's all] church[es], but, [in] Black churches, [when] you get pregnant [out of wedlock], you endure a lot…in a Black household, you don't talk about sex…[but] I don't regret anything [from] my childhood…I'm glad my Mama and Daddy did everything they could to make sure we had what we needed and we were successful. Her three kids are very successful.

My brother [was] in the military [Air Force] and [he] retired [after] 20 years…probably made about 7 figures [with] two kids…in college… When [my] mom [got] sick, I took on the role as being the mom for my siblings because I was

*always with my mom…When my mom was well, every summer [she] stayed with my brother for a month. That was his time to cater her…he would hire his little chefs [because] he has money to do that…I've been teaching for over 15 years in the school system, but [I have] been in education since I was 18 years old… My sister, brother, [and] I, we are all very successful. We are very close knitted family … I do have 2 kids…by the time [my adopted son] got out of high school, [he] got mixed up with this crowd and wanted to do things that I wasn't accepting like …smoking weed…I know kids do it. I don't have a problem with it, but…I don't let it come in my household. So you ain't coming to my house smelling like weed without me punching you…I can remove myself from a situation and not have a problem with it. I did that with that [child]. I raised him for 3 years [after his mom died], but [he was] not mine…I got [him] in college (I'm paying out of pocket)…[even though] many days I wanted to say, "Pack your stuff and get your sh*t up out of my house because…I'm trying not to put my hands on you and go to jail."…I'm a young parent, but I'm not one of [those] parents [that] says something, [and doesn't] mean [it]… I think [my family is] successful [because] we all grew up in the church. Everybody goes their own separate ways, [but] when it comes to the religion part, we all know who to count on.*

My mom got diagnosed with breast cancer…[As her main caretaker, sometimes] I do need a break…[She taught me how] to respect [others'] decisions no matter if I don't like it [because] it's my opinion…about [their] life…[When it's] not your life, you got to accept [their decision]...[With that approach], we all get along very well and work through things together…I don't

want [people] telling me how to run my life, so I [don't] tell [others] how to run [their life]... I [am] just there to support you and … that's pretty much what [I] do.

I knew I wanted to be a teacher when I was in 2nd grade [because] there was something about my 2nd grade teacher…[Even though] I was off the chain… (just sassy)…[and] I got old enough to smell myself…my 2nd grade teacher, Miss [name], inspired me to want to be a teacher. I liked the way she moved, the things she did, the way she took up time with us, [and] the way she explained stuff. I used to go home and write on the back of my door. My mom would always give me chalk. I would have my team of teddy bears lined up and I would be teaching them…Just modeling what I saw her do in class. She would give me extra books and I would just go home and teach them. [As far as discipline], I would get whipped if I did something wrong…[My son acted out in school during his early years too], so I reaped what I sowed early…I [had] to correct the behavior [through whoopings]…I used to beat his butt… [I'm glad] that didn't come between our relationship. We have a great relationship. We talk about everything. The things I didn't talk about with my mom, [my son and I] talk about it [like protective sex and college debt management].

I know the world that we're in…In the school system, I do see different kids and I see how they go [through things]…When kids don't have their parents, it's a lot. But thank God, [my son] does have me…[the] kids that are here today [are] like, "Oh yeah, go shoot somebody up" [even though they know] that's something bad…I don't want my kid to be that type of kid. I wanted him to know

[that he] can always come to me for anything, even the uncomfortable stuff…I believe it takes a village to raise children…[During his] senior year, that's [when] my son's dad died…I was not one of the people that pushed [him to dislike his dad despite our differences]…I think women think they [need] a man to survive with kids, [but] I don't [agree]… [I raised my son to be] a better man than [his] dad. I want [him] to be a better individual than I am. I want [him] to be the best that [he] can be as a [Black man], as a teacher, as a father, a husband, a boyfriend, whatever [he] desires, I just want [him] to be the best…in order for [him] to be the best, I have to [teach him]…and be honest…I [can't] get married right now because I cannot let a man come in and destroy who I have built in my son…I [had] to turn my life over to be a mom. I [made] sure [that] my kids [saw] the things that I wanted to see, [but] couldn't. I [have] to make sure that… most importantly, [my son] knows who he is as a person and knows his worth.

I [have] to [continue to] build that confidence in him [by telling him], "You are who you are. You answer to the name I gave you and nothing less. You are a human being and you deserve to be treated like one, and you don't accept anything else." I had to give up being me to be that mom. Did I still have life? Of course [because] my parents always [kept] my baby [when I needed a break]…But I had to know that as a mother, [I asked my parents to] take a step back [because they already made] sure [their] kids [were] where they need to be spiritually, mentally, physically, [and] emotionally…[My son] has his moments but it's more or less because he's lost three amazing people in his life, which would be his dad, his best friend, and my nephew…I teach him that just because

somebody's not in my life, that [doesn't] mean [he has to remove them] out of [his] life [if] they haven't done anything to [him]…[I teach him to] love people for who they are…because [he wouldn't] want [any]body to judge [him]…[I tell him], "Treat people accordingly to how they treat you. If they give you negative energy, you can get negative [too]. But if they don't, you don't."… My son [and I], we're total opposites because he'll keep you around, [but] I'll push you away.

[I teach him] to pray. [I tell him], "You are old enough to pray. God [doesn't] want my prayers. He wants yours. Of course I'm going to pray for you, but you are 19. You can pray to God to heal you, give you strength [and] understanding"… Sometimes I feel like we, as Black people, don't teach our kids as much on praying because we are so built on "Big Mama, pray for me."… I [found it critical] to teach [him] to pray because what if I get down and I can't pray for [him] no more? … I'm trying to [continue to] mold him while he's in college…[I teach my son how] to learn how to channel [his] energy to walk away [when needed]…[My son and nephew] taught me how to be the mother I am today…[I believe] if you trust in family, if you love family like you say you do, then you must be able to come together and help each other…I am proud of the product that I produced because he doesn't let anybody tear him down for his self-esteem…I [taught him] to apologize for [his] actions, but…[at the same time] not be a pushover…My life is centered around family, [but I] learn[ed] how to say no [when needed].

I know when [to] sit down…As a Black woman, I feel like we have to keep pushing because we have so many things thrown [at] us. Why do I have to stop

just because I [had] a baby? Why do I have to settle for anything [that] nobody else settles for, so why should I settle? … I got to keep pushing…where I am right now is not [where I will] be in 5 years. I'm going to try to elevate myself high[er] [than] here. If I am [still] here, what did I do to keep myself here? Why couldn't I advance?...I had to pay for [my sons] to go to college so…if I'm still in the same place in 5 years, it's because [it] took him 5 years to finish school. So 5 years, I got to stay still because I [have] to not only be stable, [but also] help him as well.

I was born in '79 in [South Georgia]. [I grew up off] the Cosby Show, the Jeffersons, Bugs Bunny, Fat Albert, 227, Good Times, [and other] family-oriented [shows]. [Plus], the music we hear now, we didn't hear back then. We had the 2Pac [and] Biggie, but it was stuff that related to the [times]; it was real. [Now it's all about] shooting guns and snorting up powder. That music …didn't raise us. We didn't play video games [except the] Nintendo game, but we knew about being outside…We didn't grow up in our parents' mouth. You didn't sit in the living room; [you] better be out[side]…we knew that when an adult said something, [don't] say something back. But [we had] a village…We don't have a village anymore. You can't say nothing to my child and I can't say nothing to you…That's [how] we grew up…[now], it's a different cultural shock of what we allow our kids to see now versus what our parents allowed. We [had] bedtimes, we ate at the table, we had no peer pressure…I [can] go back so far to if somebody was gay in your family, you didn't know…One of my students' mom and her girlfriend got married…these kids come into something different [now].

[My mom] didn't raise my kid. Now did she help me? Yes. But…I moved

out of my mom's house to give [my son] a house so [he] could know the difference between [his] grandma's house and [his] mama's house. Not because I wanted to move out, just because the person that [my mom] had molded me to be as a woman, I knew it was time to go [even though my mom] wasn't ready…It's just a different generation now… Why are Black women just staying in the projects?...Because why shouldn't they?...They [are] going to get more food stamps if they don't work versus if they work….Why are they settling? They're getting everything. They get their bills paid. They live in a nice house in a nice neighborhood…What is there for [them] to go out and get a job for? Maybe that's why some of our Black women [settle]…Everything is given to [them] until [the assistance] stop[s], and then what [are they] going to do when all that's gone? Because [they're] taking away from the old people…They're just happy with not moving forward…[They have] Medicaid for [their] children and [their]self. [They] can go to the doctor anytime. [They] ain't paying nothing. [They] get a check for this [child and] call [them] a little slow [for] extra money. [They tell themselves], "I ain't gonna work and get my check and my food stamps cut [off] because if I go get a job, if I make this much over, my stamps [are] gonna get cut off."… You can buy more food with stamps than you can with money.

The crazy thing about it, it's sad to say, but true: Y'all teaching y'all boys and y'all girls to be the same exact way. [There is] not a difference anymore… just because you're a man, [it doesn't] mean you want to go out there and work. You want to sit there and get the same benefits that [the] lady is getting. [And] that's the problem for me. That's why I said I wanted my son to know [his]

value…[Today's kids] don't care about their education because somebody has told them in the back of their mind, [they] don't need one to be successful…And it ain't being successful, it's you depending on the government, but what if the government just takes all their money away? What's going to happen to y'all? Because y'all ain't got the education, y'all [can't] work [with no good pay].

[As a teacher], [I] never wanted to walk away from the children, [but] I have wanted to walk away from the building…I am a strict teacher…When you are a true parent, you give up your life as being a human being to be a mother…everything you do is centered around your kids…[My son understood as] he was growing up [that] Mama [needs to] go out and do this. [He used to say], "Mama, go hang with your friends."…When he [said] that, that's when I started celebrating my birthday again…Every year I do something big…the whole weekend. I [did] something big from the day he started 9th grade year. I have celebrated my birthday every year; I [even] went to Vegas [to] celebrate…This year, [we did a] photo shoot, the winery, axe throwing, painting, breakfast…All my friends, everybody got up and went to church with me…It was amazing…I let [my kids] choose their own path…because my path might not be right for [them]…[Once] I got my masters [to boost my salary], I [left the Florida public school system and] came back to Georgia [to teach].

[Leadership is not] about a big I and little i. [Based on some of my teaching experiences and the lessons that my students learn from me, I] help them become better adults by being willing to put in the effort… [I have a] big heart. [As far as a story about students that really appreciated my teaching efforts, I tell

my students], "What[ever] it is that you want to do in life, it does not have to stop you because [of you being labeled as special needs]: accommodations just give you extra time and extra support. It doesn't take away from you being able to [understand] what everybody else gets. You're still going to graduate with a regular diploma because you're still the same person. You just have some accommodations and modifications in place to help you get to that place where you need to be successful." [After those types of talks, I remember one student who] made [a] 100 on [their] test, but [at first they] were willing to take a 60. I was willing to let [them] get [the lower grade] because [they] didn't do the required steps that I had already told [them] to do before [they] ever started the test. So [that is] just [one of many] success stories…[Educational leadership is about] you being self-aware [too].

[As a teacher], you want to celebrate those type of experiences [and] the downfalls as well. Because when…nothing good comes out of what you've done, then it helps you [learn] as an educator [and] a person…As a teacher, [sometimes you] need to go back to the drawing board because if nobody can explain it, then maybe it's not the students, it's… you [and] your delivery. I've learned [that] you can only reach the ones that actually want to be reached. You can't make anybody want to have the education or want to earn the education. You can only help those that actually have the mindset [to] want to learn or [to] want to change…At the end of the day, you still got to present them with what [they] need, so they can be successful [even if you]… never make the connection [with the student] and you're going to have that in the education…some

[students]… will forever stick in your heart and in your spirit [and] you will accept 10 years down the line on your Facebook page…I think [lack of engagement or connection] has a lot to do with our students' home. If [they] are always being fed negativity about school because [their] Mama …hated school… they start thinking and believing what they hear. [Then], they forget to believe in themselves…[I tell my students], the path that your Mama traveled doesn't mean… you have to travel [it]…we [need to] instill in our kids, "I don't want you to be like me. I don't want you to even do the things that I've done. I want you to be better than me. I want you to experience things that I never would have [had the] chance to." When we don't feed our kids positivity, our kids start thinking [and doing] what they hear, what we feed them…We are our kids' role models…I'm more of a nurturing kind of person. I am a teacher, but I am a mother first…children have a voice too and they can use their voice to speak, but [they] have to do it in the right manner …[When parents critique my teaching style], I'm going to defend me [because] I [go to work] to educate.

We as people need to understand that every story has 3 sides… your side, their side, and God's side. Only God's side [will] have all the dynamics in it. But we have parents that build up a wall because their kids have been in trouble so many years and in so many different environments in the school system that they don't trust any teacher …[some parents] don't even get a chance to meet the teacher that [their] child is actually getting ready to be with because [of that] wall… it's not because the teacher has done anything wrong. It's because [their] child has some behavior issues that [they]'re not addressing. So [they're] mad at

everybody else because [they're] always getting a call and… it's never anything positive, but when it's always negative, we can't start with the positive 'til we can correct the negative.

[Over the years, I learned that] some of us will not apologize when we are wrong as Black people. That's bad because we got to teach our kids when you do wrong and you know you're wrong, it's not a bad thing to apologize. It's actually a great thing because it makes you feel better inside knowing that you did wrong, but you corrected yourself. God said you can't come before me saying you're sorry and you won't go to your fellow [peer] and say that you're sorry…I just want [every] kid to be successful. That's my main goal… If I allow everything that goes on in my life on a day-to-day basis get in the way of what I actually come [to work] for, then I wouldn't be able to do my job. So [leaders] can't allow what [they] got going on in [their] life to affect how [they] come and treat other people. We all have things going on in our lives and my only goal is to make sure [my students are] successful. The way I have to do that is I have to make sure that [students] understand that when I say something, [they] have to do it…[because] I run a structured classroom…we have to teach kids structure in order for them to be successful because when no structure is there, [they're] going to fall apart.

[As far as] behavior protocol, [educators] can't bend the rules…the first time I talk with the student, that's [their] warning. The second time, …[I'm] going to call [their] parents to talk…the third [time], [the student and I are] going to talk again. I'm going to teacher exchange [them] the fourth time…[I can't tolerate bad behavior because] I'm trying to prepare [them] for [their] next level

… [When educators do not help students], are we helping or hindering? And if we are Black male moms, we're actually hindering because they already got two strikes on [their] life anyways when they [are] entering into this world, [because] they [are] Black males. I'm just speaking facts from society, so I'm not going to let my son think that he can do anything that he wants to do. [He's] in school and [knows] there are consequences for [his] actions… I set the foundation for [him, but if he decides to go another] way, it won't be because [he] didn't know, it would be because [he] chose. I'd rather for [him] to make that choice than to really not know…if [he] didn't learn it, then I can't blame [him]. [So], if you were taught it and you just didn't live by it, [then] that was the choice you made.

It's a good thing that students want to do better because everybody [doesn't] always want to do better …[As far as home environments], that's touchy because you don't want to get too personally involved in a [student's] home life because we are mandated reporters …[I remember one student's mom was] living in a housing … for battered women and she [was] under some stipulation…[she] went through some stuff…She was on drugs and [was] trying to get herself rehabilitated. And that was [the child's] home life [and reasoning for] throwing the pencil [in class]…I am a single mother [too]…but I didn't go to the school and show out on my son's teachers when they called. I responded accordingly.

[I used to tell my son as a child], "I'm here to help you. I'm your Mama. I'm gonna fight for you."…We're never going to break the cycle [if we don't] change [our] way of thinking. I had to stop being so quick to anger and lash[ing] out and realize I gotta step back, assess the situation, and treat it

accordingly…when I'm not alone…I got to learn how to walk away even when I don't want to. I gotta walk away because that teaches my [child] to walk away when encounter[ing] something that [he does] not have to be involved in. Everything does not deserve a reaction. [That] goes back to: why are [some Black] women complacent to just not do better with their life? [They] think if [they] show out, it's going to help something, [but] it's…going to make things worse.

I couldn't have treated my child like trash because I could have gotten my child taken away from me, so [the excuse] can't be 'because of what's going on in my life'…We are putting ourselves in a double standard. 'Because I'm going through this, I can treat somebody this way.' Well, if because you're going through this [and] you don't have no money, can you go in that store and steal a whole bucket full of groceries and walk out and not expect to go to jail? And can you tell the police I stole it because I don't have any food in my house to feed my kids?...No, [you're] going to jail…We want our generation and the next generation and [so on] to be better…[they] can't get [better] if all they see is negative. If they never see you doing better, how do you expect for them to be [a] better product? They'll be a product of their environment and that's what we're trying to get away from…I tell my kids, "Just because you live in [the] projects, that [doesn't] mean that's where you got to stay for the rest of your life. That's [just] where you are right now."…[When I briefly stayed in the projects as a child], we were there for a season, reason, and a purpose because that's where we had to be, right then at that moment. But when things got better and our new

season came, we moved. So, just because this is your season today, that doesn't mean this has to be your season 20 years from now. You do not have to stay where you are, but it's totally up to you if that's the mind[set] that you choose…Just because you live in the projects right now does not mean that's your destiny for your future, that's just where you are. But where do you want to go? Put it in your mind.

I even tell my own kids, "Be better than me and I promise you your life will be so much better for you. Don't live your life based on me because you can't write my book for me."…I don't want for you what I wanted for me. I want for you what God has for you. And the only way you get that is if you have that same mindset that you want something better…I support [all my kids] wholeheartedly…Find you something that you're going to want to do because… I don't care how much money you make. If you love what you do, you wake up every morning ready to go do it…Now, of course, money looks good …but when I wake up every morning to work,…I want to be happy doing it because I don't want my life to be just a miserable train every day. So therefore you got to make sure whatever you do, you love it and you['re] not doing it for [any]body else…I have to feed [my kids] with this money, but I don't get up every morning to go to work because I got to feed my children…I go to work because…I truly love the impact that I make in these children's lives on a day-to-day basis.

[I love] to educate those young minds for future times that actually want to be educated …I take the disrespect with a grain of salt…I don't remember my project days…I remember living in a house. I remember coming home to cooked

meals. I remember family time…I had the typical life just like everybody else. [I was] outside to play with [my] friends…[I] had home cooked meals, hot running water, lights, cable, [a] roof over my head. [I] might not have [had] everything [I] wanted, but [I] had everything [I] needed to survive…I'll be honest, I wouldn't mind wearing a pair of Walmart shoes if I had love, happiness, peace, joy, [and] a family that embraced me. [My] Mama cared and loved me and took up time with me and made sure I was always protected, always felt safe, always was covered... [In] this generation, they're living through the Internet, TV, celebrities, [and] peer pressure. They're living through all of that, and that's what they see [and] want…[They want] the fast money, that street money, that street life. But what's wrong with working at Walmart? It's an honest living and you can move up the chain.

I moved out of my Mama's house when I was 24.5 [years old]…[My siblings and I] were still spoiled even when we got grown…[My mom would] cook every day…clean both of our houses [she had her own cleaning business], fold our clothes, watch our kids, pick our kids up from school. She did all that…Do I get tired [of taking care of her]? Of course I do. But I would prefer to be tired, than to be in depression and grief…[She] never once complained about anything, and the road was not easy because it was hard back then.

[In my professional life], I went into a public school system. Before that, I was working at Walmart…[In] 2009, I went into the school system permanently…I thought I was making good money [in Florida until] I came back to Georgia. Florida pays teachers so different. I had a master's degree and I still was making

like 34,000 a year. [Then], I [moved back] here with a master's degree and moved up short about 50,000…Coming into this world called teaching, you got to have passion. That's the only reason you teach, because you're passionate about it. You're passionate about the kids. You're passionate about educating young minds for future times. You're passionate about meeting new people. You're passionate about making sure that the kids that want to get out of those bad situations, have the knowledge and the understanding … They get what they need to know [such as], "I do not have to stay where I am right now…this is just for the present. My future is so much bigger than my [past]." And that's why you have to teach [for students], you can't teach for money.

[As far as learning from your past], you can go back and replay those things in your head to see what you can do differently. What can you do to make it or make a change or make things better? What can you do to go back and correct your own [mistakes]?...When you're wrong, you're wrong. And that's a lot of our Black culture. That's a lot of what we do... We don't think that we should go to therapy…Yeah, we [should and we] do because we got a lot of stuff that we [have] been through [so] we need to talk to somebody about it to [help] get us through it. Because [when we don't go to therapy], all that does is keep stuff bottled up inside. That's why the jail house [is] full of us because our kids think [they] can't cry…Sometimes crying is a relief to get things out… Black men [think they] can't cry [or] be vulnerable [and] go to therapy. We can [all] apologize. It's not going to kill you. It's going to make you stronger.

Those past experiences have helped me become the woman I am today

because I know [there are] some things I've done wrong and some things I've done right …[I'm] a better person because my past is supposed to help me to be better in my future. So if I can't understand what I did wrong in the past to put me in the present, to make me that better person [and] make sure my future looks good, then I'm totally lost as a person…That's why what happened in your past can affect your present [because] if you don't understand it and deal with your past, your [present] is gonna be messed up…I do go back and reflect on things that I've done in the past…the only thing you can do when you've hurt somebody is just apologize to them. If they don't accept it, ain't nothing you can do…move on to the future, but don't stay stuck in the past … I [had] to move on with my life because if I live back there, then I'm gonna always be living in misery and pain and hurt because [there's] a lot of hurt in the past….[I know] we're gonna think about the past. My nephew's [death is] in the past, but it's still in the present and … It's going to move in my future with me…Some things are not meant for me to understand. Some things are meant for me to pray and say, "God, you have all control over [my] life."…[My nephew] did what he wanted to do in life …That's [why] I got to live my life [too].

[I] can't regret the things that I've done, but I can apologize and move forward … to the future…I know not to question [God's] will…[God] gave me an Angel, [my son], to help me move on…Every day we're going to shine bright like diamonds because…when [my] light [goes] dim… and [I] can't do no more, I want to at least say, "Lord, I enjoyed the life that you gave. I did what I wanted to do with it…I have no regrets." … Some of my past experiences helped me to be a

better person [and] change my life for the better … and move different…I'm gonna live my life happy. I'm going to live my life free…I don't want to live in the past no more and that's what [my nephew's] death taught me … I don't want to live in depression. I just want to live happy. I want love, peace, and happiness all the time… [If someone] enter[s] into my circle and [they] don't give me that vibe, [they] gotta go…[Again], season, reason, [and] purpose… when you know better, you do better.

When you go back and look at your life over the years, and even when we look at our life as Black/African American people, women especially, because we were made [to] do things that we didn't want to do…I didn't go through anything (thank God), but I know friends that were molested by their dads and couldn't tell anybody…This was in Black households… I am the person I am today because of the things I went through…Forgive, accept what happened, [and] move forward so you can be a better person. You don't have to be that angry, bitter Black/African American woman because of what happened to you in your past… forgive the people that hurt you [and] move on with your life and understand that life can be better based on the decisions that you make in your present because it's going to help you move toward your future …That all comes with healing and understanding, and just great women with wisdom that pour into your life because we got a lot of Black/African American women that will pour into our life…[Growing up, I didn't see women], stand in the pulpit [and now I go to a church with] a woman preaching. [I thought to] myself, "I wouldn't [have attended this church] 10 years ago."… Because that was where I came from [only

exposed to men as credible preachers].

Now in my life, I make decisions that's based on my present and based on who I've become, not the tradition that I was raised [with]. Sometimes we have to get away from tradition. So [now], every time I sit in front of a woman pastor [or] minister, I actually love it…Once you understand the past …, it helps you…[As far as what happiness looks like], don't get me wrong, everything ain't gonna be a bed of roses, [but] I'm happy. I'm happy with who I am… I'm happy with my kid…I think everything right now is going great in my life for me. I got enough for me right now and that's all I want. I ain't trying to achieve to be like The Joneses … I just want to be like [Passion]…I'm okay with what I have. I don't ever want to put myself to the point where I'm trying to be up there with everybody else. I want to be just where I'm supposed to be, and that's right here facing the world…I'm happy with the things I do. I'm happy with the education that I went through. I'm happy with the kids that I have…I'm happy with seeing about my family. I'm happy with all of it … I have gotten to the point in my life where your business ain't my business, so I don't care [nor have] to deal with it…once I learned that your business belongs to you and my business belongs to me, I have no business mixing up in your stuff because guess what? Your problems don't belong to me.

I see happiness as me because I'm happy…I don't let nobody define who I am or define what I can do in life [because] I can do anything I put my mind to …every day ain't a good day, but I feel every day that I am above ground and not below it, I need to be rejoicing because somebody didn't wake up this morning… God gave [me] that extra breath this morning, [so] why shouldn't I be

happy?...[Other people] would describe me as caring, loving, dedicated, driven, selfless, loving, dependable, loyal, and honest… I don't want people to go out their way for me, no matter if I go out my way for [them]…anything I want, I go do it for myself…You got to [accept] people for who they are…because if you look for people to be who you are, you might not have anybody in your life outside of your family, and even your family is not going to be who you are…I'm a sports person too [and I love watching my sons play football and basketball]…

[As far as how I understand Black womanhood], please don't take this the wrong way…You have the successful Black women who make it out the ghetto because they have their drive. They are the women that wanted to go to school, be educated, [pursue a] trade, make a difference, [and] see something different from where they came, especially those Black women that were in power… And then you have those [who] do enough to make it. [They] don't want anything more, anything less. [They] just want to have enough. [They] don't want to strive for nothing else. And then you have those that are complacent and okay with what [they] can get from everybody else. That's how I see Black women.

[If I had to choose 3 words to describe the different types in that order], I would say success-driven, average nonchalant women [who] settle, [and then those who are] complacent [and] depend on the world…I really believe [others view Black women as] these educated women [or] these 'hood rats' (I say that not in a bad way)…I would sum them up as hood rats, ghetto chicks, somebody [who] wants to live off of the government…then you have women that have to go to work every day [to] make a living for their kids and get [paid close to] nothing [so

they] have nothing, and the money they make ain't even enough to take care of [their] kids...However, you got some women [who] just keep having babies so [they] can keep getting money and [they] don't have to go to work because [they] get food stamps, [their] kids [are] on Medicaid, and [they] get a check every month to pay all [their] bills. Plus, [some] live in a house better than yours [with minimal] rent. And then you have those [Black] women that are working really hard and trying to make a better life for their kids [who may be] living in a shack [with] roaches [because that's] all [they] can afford…but [they] want to make a living for [their]self. [They] don't want nothing to be given to [them]. [They] want to earn it, so [they] can only get what [they] have with the money that [they're] earning, but [they] don't want to just sit down and depend on somebody else to take care of [them].

[The government] plays a [huge] role in some people's life…We have some young people that can actually get out and get jobs. In the world we live in today, they are always saying that jobs are available. I understand some people got in some trouble in their life and they can't get a job, but you can do something besides just sit home and wait on the check … if they are able, willing body, they can get out and get a job… I received food stamps when I first moved out of my mom's house... I was going to school [but] I had stopped school because I wanted to spend that bonding time [with my son] …Yes, I received food stamps to better my household. I didn't use them to better someone else's household… We all need help, don't get me wrong. That's [including] the successful, average, and complacent women…[As] Black women, we all need help because we all go

through something because you gotta crawl before you can walk. [But] just because you start there, [it doesn't] mean you stay there. That's when you get complacent. You can start there, but 10 years later, should you still be there? That's [when] it becomes, 'I'm depending on welfare to take care of me and my kids. I'm not trying to go and do anything.' ... Everybody needs help. I needed help. I started there, but I didn't stay there ... We got to move forward in life.

[Another] problem [is] we as taxpayers actually pay for those people to receive it. That's where we get frustrated because we're making it so comfortable for them to stay because we're continuing to pour in them. When are we going to hold them accountable and say, "Hey, you've been on it for 10 years; what can you do to move yourself?" Because when you shift, your whole world will shift. Sometimes the struggle is okay for us [because] we struggled back then and we made it. Why can't we struggle now to make it? Nothing's different. Besides, they have made you complacent because they can give you everything. But my problem is when it all runs out, where are you gonna be? What are you going to know how to do? What will you be able to do? Because you still got to take care of those same old kids, but now you're doing it on your own.

Do you have enough resources of your own to make sure that you can continue to keep your kids with everything they were getting when the government was assisting you?...I think some people just have to be with somebody. And that goes back to: 'Be happy with yourself...the peace, the love, and the joy.' ... How much do you love yourself? How much self-worth, self-respect, self- confidence, and self-esteem do you have in you? Yes, we all need someone, don't get me

wrong, but I don't need [someone] to be there as a leech. I need you to be there as a help…You can't be there to just receive. I need you to make deposits as well.

I think that's why a lot of us Black women get stuck [in] where we are because we feel like we need somebody to validate who we are. Sometimes we have went through things in our life that we had to cover up because what goes on in a Black person's house has to stay in there. [So],…some things have happened to us [like] molestation, rape, getting pregnant by [family members]… It was swept up under the rug, so you were never able to heal from [the incident]. Now, you feel like you have to be with a man to validate who you are, but you really don't. You ain't healed from your past to help you move forward in your future, so you depend on him and you let him sit there and eat up all your children's food. You let him run up [everything]…He is just there taking up all that you are receiving.

Because of the damage that has been done to us in our lives, we think that's okay because we never healed [because] it was never brought up …But as Black women, we have to get to the point [where we know our] self-worth. I know my worth, so I'm not going to let [anyone] just come in…I'm not going to get up and go to work every day and [my man] laying in [the] bed. I'm not going to sit here and have to call somebody…to come fix something and you laying right here… You ain't going to be withdrawing from here if you ain't making no deposits because you got to go. We [have] to first love us, [but] we don't have self-esteem. We don't believe in who we are. We don't understand who we are. We don't understand why we went through what we went through in life and why we

couldn't talk about it.

We don't understand how our parents let that happen to us and didn't protect us … And so now, we just fall into the arms of anybody. But I think we have Black people [now who are willing to] get therapy … if there [are] things still affecting you from your past and you still have those thoughts, then you know that is something that is really bottled up in you that you need to talk to somebody to work through it. Because honestly, our children tend to go to through the same things we went through because we never got past it, [yet] we can't believe when it happens because it happened to us and we had to be 'Hush, hush'… You want to be with a man that's going to make fast money? …When the fast money stop[s] because he gets caught, guess what happens if it's in your house? You get caught [and] your children are in danger of being [in] foster care [because] you [are] going to jail like him.

When are we going to start knowing our worth and who we are? We are women that can survive anything if we put our mind to it…We have gotten so complacent with the flashy things in life. [We] want the fast money and the man that got the big rims and the big car. But at what cost do you have all that? If I don't have my peace, my joy, my love, and my sanity, I don't have anything.

We got complacent on thinking that we have to have a man to be around us. The crazy thing about it is: We allow these men to lay up on us, but when we get put out and have nowhere to go, they're nowhere to be found [until] we get back up on our feet…Because you don't believe in who you are, you let Johnny come right back to doing the same thing. Then you let Johnny say it's your fault,

[but] it's your fault [too] because [you let him] sit on [his] tail for 20 years [while] [you]'ve been taking care of [him]…Why did you allow Johnny to sit for 20 years?...I don't want to be complacent…[I'm not going to let] somebody come in my house and check my house…I want to be able to live freely and do what I want to do.

[My message to Black women is]: Do you know what you are worth? Where do we go for our children if we are just staying complacent? If we want better for our children, we have to show our children better. It's okay to be on the system, but do you ever see yourself being able to move off of it, and if so, what would it take for you to move? What things can I help you do? What can I show you as a woman that was once where you are? …What can I help you do? How can I help you to improve? What do you need? What have you struggled with that is keeping you there? What are your thoughts? … I can't tell nobody where to move if I don't know what they're going through because some of them might be there because they have to be there…[but] some of them might be there because they're choosing to be there. And if you're choosing to be there and there's another way out, will you go if I help you? …Give them a choice of 'will you go?' and provide [them] with some resources to help [them] move past it … You can't move anybody that does not want to be moved.

[Also], I would ask, "Do you want to be out of this situation? And if I help provide you with resources to help you move forward in life, would you take [them]?" The answers to those questions will help me to see where we can go because those 2 questions alone will tell you if the person wants to be helped [or

if] this person is really complacent and okay with being where they are…We, as Black women, have to start loving us [and] getting to know who we are and what we are capable of because we are capable of a lot of things. We're not just capable of laying down having babies. We're not just capable of living off the system. We are capable of a lot, but we have to sit down and start loving who [we] are first [by] working on those past [experiences] that haunt us and then knowing our self-worth. You can do it. You can achieve [anything]…You are no smaller than the next person or the next race. You are a giant, just like they are.

But the difference is: Are you going to push yourself to your destiny, or are you going to stay complacent at where you are? There [are] resources out there to help us overcome all of those things, but we have to [accept] our past before we can move to our future. We, as Black women, have went through some things in our life that other women have not went through. The difference is women that have went through [similar situations], they are okay with getting counseling. When are we going to start being okay with [therapy]?

For every problem, there's a solution…What did you try to do to fix the problem? Did you ever try to fix it? … At the end of the day, you gotta have some positives, some joys...Where I am in my life today, I just want peace, joy, love, and happiness. In order to get that, then the problems that arise, I have to be willing to fix them… When I fix the problem, joy, peace, happiness, [and] love [are] going to come…At some point, we've got to teach greater…[and we can't teach greater without knowledge and passion].

Meet Joy: A Community Center Leader

Joy is a 35-year old Black woman who was born and raised in Northern Florida and Southern Georgia regions. When I first met Joy (during a business dispatch), we talked and laughed for hours about life as Black women in the South. At the time, Joy was married. By the time of data collection (interviews), she left her husband who was mentally abusing her by shaming her about no man wanting a woman with 6 kids. She learned to value herself and her children more than how they were being treated. I selected the pseudonym Joy because she could make anyone laugh; she made me laugh throughout interview one and other interactions with her. Her stories were animated with action, bringing each story to life. She was such a pleasure to talk with and learn more about.

Joy always used her voice as a kid. In fact, her intelligence and creative problem-solving skills about how to help her family overcome a toxic, abusive, and "evil" stepdad shed light on the value of optimism. Even though her early childhood was tainted with his terrible choices to abuse their mom and molest her sisters, she managed to help her dad gain custody of her and her siblings. Today, she mentors and leads Black youth in the community about the value of voice, self-worth, and optimism. She is so positive about her life and leads others to value peace of mind too. Below is her profile reconstructed from interview one. After interview one, I had personal health concerns that required me to conclude the data collection before interview two and three could be completed. Joy also had a personal health situation that required her to take a step back. We are still in touch today, even though only one formal interview was conducted. Below is her life story about enforcing voice for love; domestic violence and molestation were themes.

[If I had to describe myself to somebody who does not know me, I would

say], I'm very social and [have] been that way for a long time since I was little. Growing up, we weren't allowed to … go around speaking to people [we] [did]n't know … I always tend[ed] to do that…I knew that I was a people's person. I'm the youngest out of 5. I'm 35…My oldest sister…passed away [but she would] have been 39 this year…I [have] always been a bubbly [and] friendly person. I'm very blunt and straightforward [too]…I never looked at race or color... I'm very protective…[For example, one of my students has down syndrome, students with] special needs cling to me… I guess it's the person that [I am and] the energy that [I] have. I'm very friendly, so it has got me a lot of good in life, [but] also caused me a lot of bad in life…My [youngest] baby is 2 years old … I remember being 2 years old because … I got stuck [in a] swing [that] you put your legs in…I didn't want anybody to know [because I believed I could] help myself get out…[But] when I tried to get out, my foot got caught…I flipped over and I still have this dent in my forehead [as a reminder of my independence]…Back then, [parks] had concrete, [not woodchips]…I remember I didn't bleed…,[but my forehead] was really swollen.

My mom is very quiet [and] to herself and my dad is [the opposite]. I got my daddy's personality…[My mom is an] introvert [and my dad is an] extrovert…[She always told me], "You [are] just like your daddy. Y'all can go and talk to anybody."… My Mama [is] real mild and mellow like my sisters…I can mimic [my dad] to the tee because we got so many similarities…He's straightforward [and] blunt too, and got that goofiness to make you sit there and laugh all day. So, I got that from my dad, [not] from my Mama because she ain't

going to say too much to you…In the beginning, as I can remember, like majority of most Black families, we went through it… [I] never recall our water being off, but as far as inside the household…I hated going home because of everything [that was] going on… I got teased a lot [because] I was the youngest...I went through that in the house with my mom [and] dad. They [were] …married already before they had my older sister. When they got me, they [were] almost through a divorce, [but] they never got divorced…[Instead, they] separated for 23 years.

Inside of the household…Oh God, I'm trying to describe it in the nicest way I can: It was hell. At that particular time, my daddy was selling drugs and also on drugs. I did see a lot of struggle with my mom [and] the stuff that she went through. [As a kid], I told myself when I get grown and I get a man, I ain't going to let no man do me like my dad did my momma…I was 4 and I remember stuff that he used to do. [For example], he would bring women that he [was] with at a particular time…to my Mama's house [after] he had moved out. He was doing his own thing. He would come see us, but he would have [a] different woman in the car all the time. Him [and] my mom would go back and forth…As a young child, [I didn't understand but], now I'm old enough [to understand when] you and your baby momma having problems, you ain't supposed to do that. You being funny and acting a mess…I didn't get that back then…I didn't know what they [were] always fighting for… It was a lot of physical fighting [between] my mom and my dad.

[As a child, I told myself I] ain't never [gonna let that happen] to me because [I saw] it so much with my mom. I think every man that my mom has ever

been with really, really beat her... I stood still one time when this man was going to hit my mom [because] I [was scared he was going to] hit me…[One time this man] beat my mom with a hammer. My Mama's head has been through a concrete wall ... I told myself that I would never let anybody put their hands on me…That's instilled in me; to this day, I never allowed that to happen…People have tried it like I used to be a fighter [growing up]…[But you're not going to] just hit me. No, I'm going to fight [and] we will go blow for blow…Even [in] some of my relationships, when they tried it with me [like] finger pointing [in my face]… I [lost] it because don't put your hands on me; I don't put my hands on you…[As a child], I went through it because I [saw] my mom and how she would never fight back…[So], I told myself I ain't going through that. If somebody put their hands on me, I'm calling the police, [they]'re going to jail, [I'm] pressing charges, and I'm going to court, and Ima get my lick back <laughter>…Growing up, I did have good times [though], everything wasn't all bad.

[But the last man I remember my mom with], she was with this man [roughly] 17 years [up until the] last minute. When he passed away in 2017, my Mama got back with my dad, and now she's up here in Georgia. My dad did the whole 360, [so he] is a Bishop now. He's a pastor; he [left] the streets…[But growing up, he'd try to not let us see them] fighting. [So], we really wouldn't see what we heard; we weren't allowed to go bust the door open…But when my mama got with this other man, we thought, "That's not our daddy, he really beating my momma." So we tried to stop it [and] do something to protect [our] mom. Sometimes, it would [cause] changes on us [because he used to say], "You

need to do something with your kids" and she would take that anger out [on us and] we ended up getting whoopings for [trying to protect her]…I got tired of getting whooped for trying to save her…Me being the youngest, I didn't want to go through that…but when she got [with] this man that she was with [for] that long period of time [17 years], it started off good with him. [I thought], "Oh, she finally got somebody." [He] was an older man…I was in the 4th grade when Mama got with him…[My parents were] separated since I was 4 [years old], so by this time, I was 8-9 years old.

The new man involved, [it] start[ed] off very well. He was so nice. We went to the parks [and] the beaches and everything. One of those days, we [were all] riding back home from Tampa … I was sleep with me and my 2 sisters in the car [until] I heard them arguing…When I sat up, he said something [like], "You need to check your daughter." [My mom] was like, "They're my kids" and she really flipped back…She was really trying to stand up for herself and also for us. And she turned around and [saw] me [with my eyes closed and asked], "What [do] you mean?" Next thing you heard: BOP! <pause> He hit her. I thought to myself, "Oh no, not another one."… That took maybe like 2 years [for him] to do that. He [already] won us all over. By that time, he was getting everything for Christmas that we wanted, we liv[ed] in a nice big old house, and just everything was so perfect…He was the worst one...[yet she stayed for 17 years].

He put me into the mindset of something that I went through not too long ago. He was a narcissist. At the time, I didn't know what that was until I got involved with a narcissist [and he was] very controlling. [We'll] circle back [to

my ex-husband] …[But] Mama couldn't talk to none of her family members. She was just secluded to him and his family. We didn't go nowhere [anymore]…He didn't want my mom to talk to her mom, [so] we didn't have no [relationship] with our grandma. It just was like he pushed everybody apart, [so] it was me, my sisters, my mom, and his family. But he didn't deal with his family either, so it was just us…It wasn't fun growing up in the house… He [was the one who] put my Mama's head through a concrete wall… Me and my brother ([who] was in a lot of different camps and juveniles; he was 'bad' growing up), but one day he came [over to] stay with us. I can remember [us] witnessing the fights…We had a plan to kill this man. We went to the kitchen, we got knives, and by the time we came out the kitchen, [we got] down [to] crawl like we [were] in the army (I [was] 10 years old [and he was] 13), so he's already put a plan in mind to say he's going to kill him… [We thought, since we're] kids, we won't go to jail…[we were] right in front of the door…I had a knife [and] Mama [opened the door] like, "What y'all doing? Go to bed!"… The only thing that saved that man that night was [my mama because we] had everything planned. I [was] going to stab [and] kill that man. I told him that before: "The only reason why you [are] still here [is] because we didn't kill you that night."

I told him because I had to get it out [my chest because] we hated him. [When] he got older, he got really sick. He had cancer. He had all kinds of things. He went through it. Got put him through it… [but] my Mama still stuck beside him the whole time…[even though] he beat her up in public places…it didn't matter where…If she did something wrong [or] she looked up the wrong way,

he'd stall off [on her] in the car…My mama has a permanent black eye because of how much [she] got beat in her lifetime…I had numerous relationships…I understand it: why did she stay? …[When] I got [in that] relationship with a narcissist, which was my [ex]husband, I had to get out that relationship with him because [even though] he was not physically abusing me…It was other abuse that came with him [like] the verbal, the mental, [and] the emotional...All [that] is still abuse. I had to realize that…With all this time telling myself, "I'm not going to be like my mom. I'm gonna get out of this right now." I stayed with this man for almost 6 years, going through what I was going through. So, I understand her now. I understand [what] she [thought] to herself [because that] man put in her mind: "No one's going to work for [you because you] got all these kids… Nobody [is] gonna want [you]. I'm the [only] one that wants you. I'm doing it for you. Your family [does]n't do [any]thing for you." I [went through] the same thing. I was able to recognize that when I got out of there.

Now, [me and] my mama talk about it. We [were] never able to talk to about it [before] because we [were] children at the time and we brush[ed] it up under the rug. Now, [I'm] grown. I got daughters... I [don't] want my children to ever see me go through. [I learned] I was putting my children in the same position that my mom had us in…[When] my dad [was] selling dope [and the police kicked the door in, I saw] my dad get tased in front of us…As far as growing up, I [didn't have] a regular childhood… Most kids [were] able to be with their friends [and hang out, but I wasn't]… that's why I think I'm so social now. That's why I love kids. I got that goofiness to me still because I didn't have it as a child…[We were

told], "Don't say nothing. Hush. Be quiet. Sit by me." We [were] like little robot children, so we [were]n't able to have fun [outside of] that little 2 year experience that we had with him. That was it.

No more parks, no more beaches, no more nothing. Stay in the house. [Go to] school. Go do your homework. Clean up in here. Go to sleep… Then do it all over again…They would leave us at home and that was our free time…[I remember sneaking in the neighbor's pool and] trying to put on 2-3 pairs of pants [when I got home, so the whooping wouldn't be terrible]…That's the worst whooping I have got. [My mom] told me that I could have been dead. I understand as a parent because none of us could swim, [but] we just want[ed] to [have fun]. We [missed] the beach and we [couldn't] go, [but] we want[ed] to go…I still got a bruise on my thigh [from that whooping]. [My mom would] rather have beat us than bury us.

I didn't like my childhood. That's [why I] make my children have the most fun as possible. We do a lot of stuff … I go home and talk about these kids [at the community center]. I call these my kids too…[As far as biological kids], I have 2 girls and 5 boys together; one [child] passed away, [but] I always count him…It's just a lot to take in…I've been trying to be focused … I [like] to tell you [about my private life] because I know I can release it…[and] feel better about it…[As far as childhood], everything else was down the drain.

[I remember times when he] attempted to feel on us [while we were sleep]. I was the one that stopped it, and that's why he couldn't stand me. He hated me. He even lied to my momma [about] stuff I didn't do…I couldn't say nothing about

it because [he'd say], "You gonna believe her over me?" ...He told her to start [beating us with a 2x4 and she did]…She was terrified of this man. We [only] got my Mama when he really wasn't around…[I used to] bust through doors when she was getting beat up and I'd take the whooping…with it [to try to protect] my momma…I couldn't stand him. He came in the room one day [during a time] we had bunk beds. Our bunk beds were separated…[but] I slept in the bed with my sister… My daddy got 4 kids from my Mama and 1 child with my older sister from another lady. But [since] he was with my mom the longest, we were all raised together. But he [would] come in the room ([which is] why I sleep light to this day) [because] he would come in the room. The room [was] dark…[and] he'd put that flashlight [on me to make sure] I was sleep…I [saw] him…feeling on my sisters… I don't know how long that [was] happening. I wasn't paying attention to it…I don't think it was his first time doing [it because] he did like he [had] been doing [it]. They [slept] hard, I [didn't].

I [was] 10 years old looking to see what he [was] doing. My sister, [name], she was about 14, so she [had] a little breasts now and all kind of stuff. He [was] doing all that to her chest and he pulled the shirt down. So, I [was] looking [across the room], but [not really] so he'd know I [was] still sleep…I went to my mom…She [didn't] do anything about it. So, I told my sisters, I said, "Y'all know when y'all go to sleep [name] be coming in here and feeling on y'all?"...So, we started going to sleep in routines. You watch me while I go to sleep and then when I wake up, I'll watch you while you go to sleep. We had to sleep like that [because my mom] didn't believe us… [until] we got grown. She

[said], "I always knew. I just didn't know what to do in a situation like that." For years, we didn't talk to our momma when we got old enough to be like bump you.

That's how we made sure that she felt that we wasn't stunting her, like she wasn't stunting us when we were children…We told her, "You had to pay for that because we [were] innocent children."…[It mostly happened to my older sister because] she was the one that was getting more older (14 years old [with] breasts)…so I see why he was looking at her…My mom kicked her out the house [because] that's what [my sister] wanted to [happen]. We came up with all kinds of plans [to escape that house]…My brother got in trouble and [mom's boyfriend] was like, "He can't [live] here." So, my brother [went to] live with my dad and my other grandma. So, we figured if we got enough trouble, he'd make us leave…[My sister] tried getting in hell of trouble (she was running away) …[Eventually], I was the last one left in the house…they tried their best to be nice to me…I figured out when I got older, they [were] getting benefits for us, so if there [were] no children in the house, no benefits (probably food stamps)…[I remember when] I was 12 years old and went to middle school with my dad. I was 12 years old when I was [finally] able to get out that mess [after] 5 years.

We lost all kind of respect for our mom. We didn't talk to her [because she] chose him over us…[When we went with our dad], Mom went to the courts and got full custody of us at the time my dad was in prison…The last time he went to prison, he got out, came home, lived with my grandma (his mom), and he started calling us all the time…[My mom won] full custody of us, so we had to go back…One day, [my mom and her abusive boyfriend] started arguing real bad, so

I got my little toy, pushed record, and put it at the kitchen table…I've been smart for a long time…That recording was the only way how my dad got full custody of us…We [were] telling our dad a lot of stuff that was going on and that's what gave him the fuel to say, "I want my children. I messed up in my lifetime. I'm getting my life together and going to the church."…[That was] a different daddy for us…I didn't start dealing back with my momma until 2017 after [her boyfriend] passed away…That's when she was wanting us to be around more because he was no longer there. So I understand, to a certain extent, because of what I went through in my relationship. I understand what was going on with her, with having so many kids home. 4 kids [is] a lot on any woman. Back in the days, trying to work and just raising kids in general ([especially] more than one), it's hard. So I look at that situation [and] I understand. [Before], I was like, "Why would you stay with somebody who's beating you like that?" [Now], I tell myself, "Why would you stay with somebody that's doing you [wrong] which is not right either?"

[In my last relationship], [there] was scarring on the inside, [but] nothing [was] showing [on] the outside…Everything that happened to me was on the inside, so [if] what happened to her was on the outside, for sure [it was on] the inside as well…Every man my Mama [has] ever been with, I can't say "Well, I liked him" … I don't know if there was an era going on in the 90s [where] the man beat the woman real bad…It was just so much stupid stuff growing up in my lifetime. [Today], I just try my best to show my kids differently…I don't think it damaged me that much, but I do have things that I can't cope with right now …[For example, if] I'm intimate with a person …when it comes down to a man

touching on me, I have a problem with it…I don't like [forced affection] …[I told my current partner], "I'ma give you time to cope with it. I know you're not doing anything wrong. I just don't like nobody trying to force nothing on me."…[My] relationship now is getting deteriorated because [of] stuff that I don't like for a man to do because of what I've seen [and] what I've been put through… I don't want to be beat [because again,] I'm pressing charges, I'm going to court, and I'm not dropping nothing - And Ima get my lick back…I don't want nobody in my face or yelling. I would cry if [a] man yell[ed] at me. I can't stand nobody yelling at me [because] I heard all the stuff that [my mom's 17-year boyfriend] would do and… I [would] rather somebody to hit me than to sit there yelling at me…I'm very sensitive when somebody yells at me…I'm a cancer, so [I'm] hard, but [also] soft. [When you get] inside of that shell (like a crab), its outside shell is hard, but inside is nothing but mushy stuff… that's how [I] really [am].

Even though [my dad] sold dope before, my daddy was there [at] school dances…[I remember one day], my daddy came to the door and said that he would kill [my mom's boyfriend] if he ever put hands on his kids…he said, "That's what they momma for."[He threatened him and said], "I'll come and kill you and I just did 6 years in prison…I'll go right back with a smile on my mugshot."…[So the boyfriend] always made [my mom] whoop us a lot of times for nothing [because] that was his get back…I don't want my daughters going through what I went through…I want them to see that's not how a man is supposed to talk to you. It's not normal. It's not something that you look forward to. It's toxic; you don't want none of that, it's poison…[Growing up], when we

[went] to school, ... we [had] bruises on us, but we knew better not say nothing…[my mom] would teach us [and] really school us on what to say because she already knew if they came to the house already, they [were] going to the school…One day, I just spoke up. It [is] always me [who speaks up]…Everybody knew that [the boyfriend] was in there beating my mom and my mom was beating us…At the time in the 80s, they didn't have a neighborhood hospital [in my town]…We didn't have any TV…we [were] behind [on] a lot of different things...Like I didn't get my first cell phone 'til I was grown.

*[I remember when] he would lock us in the garage and turn the lights off...[Today,] I'm scared of the dark because he would do a lot of evil sh*t…[My mom worked] at night time because she cleaned motels…He would leave us in the garage (lights off) and put the dryer on so not only was it dark, but also hot…We learned real quick that he'd lie on us…He was already old when he got [with] my Mama. He was an older man, so when he died … He was [nearly] 70…he was born in 1952 [and] mom was born in 1978…all the White folks thought he was a good man because he acted a certain way around the White folks because he worked at the police station. So all the little things [like] dressing up [to look] nice and go [to] the little dinners … at the police station for him …[to be] a motherf*cking janitor … We didn't know that's what he was [because] he had a badge and uniform, but the whole time he was a damn janitor…[he] dressed up [in police attire and he was] just mopping floors…We found out later on in life that he couldn't even be run around his own children…His [ex] said, "That man is going to kill your Mama."…He wasn't supposed to be around kids...[because]*

he picked up his own son and snapped his neck on the concrete and paralyzed his own flesh and blood from the waist down…my Mama knew that [but] he was in her mind.

[But] he [is] dead and gone … Now, I understand the whole time when my Momma did what she did, it was all mental... It can be mental abuse [too] …Maybe [when] he got older, he wasn't beating on her no more, but he was still mentally abusing her…We thought that he probably had roots on her and the only way a roots spell can break [is] if [the person who casted it] die[s]…[Around] Hurricane Irma, I got [my parents] back together…[My dad used to] always stand up in the church and say,… "The first time I talk to my wife again, I'm [going to] apologize to my wife."… Today, [they're] still in the little honeymoon stage…My [parents have] been happy ever since…I [have] always been bubbly. I look at the positive…I hate gloomy things…I don't like negativity…[because] it drains you. The madder you get and the depression, all that's draining.

When you're more happy, it's like giving your body [and] yourself life…heavy stuff drains me. I don't like that feeling so, I stopped smoking Black & Mild [cigars]…energy carries…[I make sure these young girls in the community center know that they can] talk to me because…not everybody [understands them]…Life is too short now…I can't force God on nobody [but I] thank the Lord every day because it was not my alarm clock that woke me up…somebody didn't wake up today…[I] pray because [there is] all kind of evil and danger…I lost my baby when I was at work, so I have PTSD. I can't keep a job…[but I can keep my Joy].

Meet Shuri: An Executive Banker

Shuri is a 31-year old Black woman leader who was born and raised in South Florida. She relocated to South Georgia at the start of her career as an executive banker. She earned her bachelor's degree, which jumpstarted her career opportunities and salary. She has one daughter and relocated to South Georgia to be closer with family for support. As an adult, she learned to speak up for herself. Since she became a mother 8 years ago, she mindfully teaches her daughter how to stand up for herself and use her voice too. Her daily affirmations practiced with her daughter brings them closer together and helps them both become more confident in who they are. Although she was initially reluctant to participate in the study, by the end of all three interviews, she was so happy that she did.

Each interview with Shuri was filled with laughter due to her sense of humor and facial expressions. Shuri majored in Legal Studies with a minor in Criminology with plans to become a lawyer. When she realized her becoming a lawyer was her mother's dream, she changed her path to become an executive banker. Shuri's interview series was very in-depth and was the first one to offer how college experiences bolstered her successful career. I thought she was in the high class because of her banking leadership and numerous responsibilities that are essential to keeping the bank successful, however, her salary does not match her work contributions because she was never promoted. Below is her profile reconstructed from the three in-depth interviews about learning and teaching success; college and leadership were recurring themes.

> *If I [had to] describe myself [to someone who does not know me, I would say], I am a true introvert, turned extrovert…a lot of people think (with the type of field that I'm in) that I'm this big, extroverted person that just loves talking to people, I really don't... I put a lot of passion into my child ... I do like to have fun. I*

consider myself a little adventurous. I've been skydiving [and] bungee jumping. I like to travel to different places [and] experience the world … [I'm] very simple [and] low key…I seem put together…I know how to put on the front [and] wear the mask…[As far as my] childhood (birth to 18)…From what my parents and grandparents tell me…I was real quiet back then too…I grew up in a household with an older brother. He's 2 years older than me. The rest of my siblings are between 16 to 21 years older than us. We were the little babies of the bunch [that] came along later in life…In school, any type of issues that I would have, big brother was there the majority of the time, especially during elementary…I was a smart kid... I was bringing home straight A's. I was a part of the gifted program. We actually grew up in [South Florida]…We had nice experiences down there, lots of different cultures, especially Hispanics... We grew up in a 2 parent household. Our parents didn't divorce until we were in high school, so that was nice to experience having both parents in a household.

My first grade teacher, her name was Miss [name], she was so kind [and] out-of-the-box…she always smil[ed] so bright and welcome[d] and hug[ged] [students]…Teaching radiated from her… she was just amazing, kind, hope[ful], [and] lov[ing]. Her positive energy [was contagious]... [She] love[d] the kids like her own…Kids that [were] not native English speakers, she would take the extra time, even though she had a class full of kids. Each kid always felt like an individual. [She poured] into me [by] helping me learn… even if it [was just] 5 minutes away from the whole class … [She] pull[ed] me aside so that we [could] talk, go over [the curriculum], [and] made sure I [was] good…She made it so

easy [to learn, which engaged me early in school].

[During] middle school/junior high school, that was a mess... That's when [my] world turned upright…In middle school, I wasn't one of the popular kids…I had bad acne, so I got picked on and bullied a lot…[I] had to overcome those challenges [from] middle school, so I found solace in doing band… I learned how to play the flute. I [tried] different sports, [but they] really didn't work out for me. I used to try to play softball, [but] I always hit my helmet with the back of the softball. I would trip and fall trying to do track and field…Music was just what I had…I still have [my flute] because my intentions are [to] teach my daughter how to play…I played [the flute] a little bit in college, but that's it…If that would have been my belonging, I would have kept doing music, [but] it was just an outlet, just something for me to do other than my school work.

[The bullying] was bad. I used to spend days crying and go home and try to talk with [my] parents. But [my] parents grew up in older generations, where a lot of that stuff [was]n't discussed. [I had to] silently deal with it…I would try to tell them, "Hey, can I get some Nikes instead of going to Payless? Or can I get some Jordans instead of the Walmart shoes?" [I wanted] the kids to stop picking on me…Kids can be cruel and mean…I do remember after graduating high school, some of those same kids came back and gave little apologies to say, "Hey, we should have never treated you that way."…I did have about a handful of people that realized within themselves that [bullying me] wasn't right… and apologized…Throughout that middle school time, I gain[ed] a best friend because she saw what they were doing and even though she wouldn't defend me for them,

she [would] always be open to talk to me and…welcome me to [her] house after school… I'm 31 [now and we've been best friends for] 21-22 years…she's actually the godmother to my daughter.

I didn't go to school in [South Georgia]…I got my bachelor's [degree] in Florida, but I've been in this area for the past 8 years…[Growing up, I never] felt any stings of racism. The schools that I went to were primarily Black except for elementary [school]… I really did not truly experience racism honestly until I moved [to South Georgia]…[The person I went to when coping with bullying] was me …My brother was 2 years older than me, so of course I [was] just a crabby little sister that's always [had] an issue… [My] parents, had their own stuff going on. Anytime [I] tr[ied] to talk to them, it [was] either shut down or not taken very seriously … it was just me, my bedroom, [and] my teddy bears. I [would] talk to and hug on [my] teddy bears, cry a little bit, and keep pushing for the next day…[My school smarts] came naturally, especially being a part of the gifted program … I spent [time] by myself doing different puzzles … we had TV back then, [but] back in those days, we really weren't watching the TV because we were outside playing … I was able to visually see things a little bit different than other kids [would] see it (like spatial awareness) … [My childhood neighborhood] was a vibe. I actually went to my old neighborhood weeks ago when I was in [South Florida]. It [has] changed a little bit … everybody in the neighborhood was cool… we even had a nice old lady that saved us from a couple of beatings back in the day.

Corporal punishment [was a] big thing in our household. …[For me, I

wouldn't consider it trauma, but] probably for my brother…because he wouldn't perform well in school. … One time, we did actually have the principal come to our home because my father had beat him so bad, he couldn't sit down, [but] I've never gotten beaten like that…I wouldn't consider it traumatizing for me. It was more discipline to make sure that I knew right from wrong [and understood] ethical standards [to] stay on the right track…[In my childhood], I was not pushed to work because they [saw] how smart I was. They really wanted me to focus on my studies, [but] my brother had a job when he was 15. I remember asking them …, [but] I didn't get my first job until I got into college…[After graduation, I went to college] right after high school. I had to get out of there, girl…[I picked a college that was] the furthest away [and] still [could] get in with in-state tuition…[It was] 9 hours away...

[My parents divorced because] my father had an outside child when I was 5 years old…I think it more so hurt because he hid him for so long. I was the one that found out about my little brother because we were in the same elementary school …I went home and we had that discussion at [the] dinner table and …[then my parents eventually got] divorced…My dad was the financial in the household, so he handled all of the taxes … [my mom] ended up pulling one of the tax forms that [had the outside child's] name on it…that ended it for them…they made us [attend] a divorce class … There was a whole group of kids whose parents [were] divorcing…they were crying [but] me and my brother [sat there wondering] why [we were there] because it [wasn't] our fault that everything happened…we [did]n't have the emotions that the other kids ha[d]…[but] we had

to stay…because it was a part of the divorce that we had to complete the 3- hour class and stay for the whole time.

I grew up going to my mom's Missionary Baptist Church…My father did not attend church throughout that whole time, but since he's been [in South Georgia], he actually got baptized Jehovah, so [that has] been an experience watching him go through that…Honestly, to this day, I don't know if he was [an] atheist back then or what. But with him being home, we really [were]n't reading the Bible, discussing church or nothing ... It was just Sunday morning when we went. ...I don't think we have any pastors [or] preachers in my family. We ain't that sanctified…[Today], I don't attend [church] regularly, but I do study. I still have my Bible … I try to get my daughter [to engage through her] Bible app on the phone …each course teaches the different [biblical] stories …But we haven't been attending …I know it's a little shameful …

[As far as music], we used to watch the TV. I really didn't have any set music [because] my parents [were] older. So, we [heard] a whole lot of Johnny Gill, The Temptations, [and] The Isley Brothers. That's [the] type of music we had growing up…I still listen to that music today, but as far as other media like [TV] shows, Out-of-the-box was one of my favorites coming up. We used to stay up 'til 1:00 o'clock in the morning just to watch Zorro. [I liked the] regular little kid cartoon [shows] on Nickelodeon [and] Cartoon Network. We did have TV time…[Most music was] some old school R&B…Being simple through childhood and not really hav[ing] those big experiences that other people had (like your first job and getting to drive) …I [didn]'t have none of that…[no] one thing

shaped me to this person that I am today.

The gifted program only carried to the 5th grade and after that, it was no more gifted. It was just getting into high school, doing dual enrollment, [and] AP classes… I literally figure[d] [college] out on my own… My parents didn't go through [college], so I knew they really wouldn't have the best advice [and would] just tell me [to] go find somebody … at the school…[I was] first generation [in college] …[so orientation taught my parents how to] support [their] child, especially if they're far away from home … it was nice having them there [at orientation]… my parents made it happen. They didn't have to pay a dime for me to go to school. My scholarships and grants paid for everything except my last semester [when] I had to take [out] one loan because one of the grants got discontinued … Other than that, my parents didn't really pay for anything except for sending care packages in the mail…[College was] a good experience for me. It wasn't an HBCU experience, but it was [still] nice… be[ing] away [and] knowing that I [was] responsible for my own life. I [was] responsible for getting up, going to classes, [and] speaking with my advisors …

I felt like a real adult…My major was Legal Studies with the minor in Criminology…I didn't [end up] go[ing] to law school… honestly, it tie[s] back to the different standardized [career] tests [I] had to do in middle school [that report how] you could grow up to be in [a certain] field because of how you tested… One of those tests came back and the top thing on the paper was a lawyer. So, my mom took that and ran with it [by calling me] "my little lawyer" when she talk[ed] to her friends… So subconsciously, I think it got embedded in

my brain that I need[ed] to go and be a lawyer, [but] that's really not what I wanted to do…when I got my internship, [I knew that was] not what I wanted to do. I didn't feel like going through the process of changing my major and having to be in school much longer [and] needing to pay for school, so I [kept] the bachelor's [and found] something else to do.

After I graduated, I was still working at a fast food restaurant [as] a manager. I was able to [earn] decent funds to be able to take care of everyday expenses. [Then, I joined] Navy Federal, [which] was a big company [in my college town]. Everybody wanted to work for Navy Federal … So, I applied, got the position, and started working for the banking experience and to be able to transition between credit unions and banks. Once I got that job, [I] was getting paid even better money than what I was making in the fast food industry, [so] I stuck with it…[I had fun in college and went to] house parties every night of the week except Sundays … That's why I don't go to the club now because I am clubbed out…I think it's also that stigma of when you're sheltered and you get away from home, you're going to go out there to experience life and that's exactly what happened. I got away from home and broke free.

[As far as connections with the university], one of my criminology professors was really nice. We're even Facebook friends (I know that don't count for nothing)… I also [joined] Phi AD [Phi Alpha Delta Law Fraternity], which was like the pre-law fraternity that you [join] to help people learn about law school. I was the President of it [and] she was the advisor over us. She was so sweet, [so] I did have a nice connection with her because she was kind of like

Miss [name] from 1st grade. … she used to be a detective for the FBI … and then she retired and went into teaching because she loved it so much…she drew me [in] and kept me there… the Black population was not as high. [Again], this was not an HBCU experience…It was just a group of us Black folk and we hung tight together. All the Black people knew all other Black people…[It was nice to see] strong Black [students and faculty] symbolize: "We can do this. We can work on mental health. We can work on wellness." [because the campus was] predominantly White.

We didn't have a football team. When our football team got there, they were great because they started recruiting a lot of the Blacks from South Florida. Their first year out there [in] division two, they were able to win the championship the first year, which was after I graduated. [During my time], we ha[d] soccer games [and] a big disc golf course … Growing up in [South Florida], you learn how to deal with certain cultures and just see people for how they are [and] who they are. And a lot of them [college] folks [were] drunks … During the house parties, [I was] looking at them like, "I don't think this is what we normally do?" … My freshman year was mostly hanging around the White people because that's [who] my roommates were; we had a room full of 4 girls, 1 bathroom (not great). I would go out with them because that's who I knew … [Eventually], I started getting to know the Blacks and then it [was] like, "I fit in more here. This is where I belong... I'm more comfortable now… It's a little more chill [and] laid back."

[I remember one time after the dorms changed around] sophomore year…

I was coming into the common area and I only had a towel on because I just got out the shower. I just wanted to grab something out the refrigerator and [this guy] came out of his friend's room (it was co-ed) and he was drunk. He pulled my towel and then I had to slap the guy and then call the RA. There was this whole big court deal, where they [asked if I] want[ed] to press charges … I [did]n't want to press charges on them but [he] need[ed] to learn the lesson…It [was] like, "I don't know you. You don't know me. But you just see me out here in my towel, and you just gonna pull my towel off? That's a problem for me."…Maybe he liked Black girls or something? I don't know. … I kept the papers from the court docket…I told [them] I didn't want to press charges and [instead wanted] an apology. I got my apology and we went our separate ways.

I met my child's father while I was working in the fast food industry. I would go over to his store for supplies and he'd always joke [and say], "Oh, I'm making you my woman one day." [I used to be] like, "Boy, bye. I ain't interested in you. Both of us in fast food. You ain't finna better me. I ain't finna better you. Baby, we doing the same thing, [so] I don't see us bettering each other at all." …We [eventually] exchanged numbers, started talking, and then, of course, had sex that one time and boom: there goes the child. He felt as a man that because we only had sex once, that there [were] other possibilities of my child's father … By the time I [gave] him his DNA test, I was like, "Okay. Bye. I'm leaving because you have done nothing to help and support me and this child for the first 6 months." …By the time she was about 8 months, that's when I moved over here. When I moved [to South Georgia], … I started working for the post office [until] I

found my [current] job…[I] moved over here because I didn't have any support [in Florida]. My friends that I [had] from college moved on and [went] to different places. So, I was pretty much by myself again, which I didn't mind. … it was just me and my baby.

*My mom is completely opposite to me [because] she has that outgoing energy…[she's] always trying to help and do something for somebody, even if they don't want her d*mn help. She's always trying to throw her 2 cents in and it aggravates the heck out of me because [she does] all this stuff [for] people [who] don't appreciate [her]. We bump heads a little bit sometimes, but she's a good woman. She does what she can. She tries to never say no. If she can do it, she'll do it… this is just me also working on myself …[because] I felt like I could have avoided bullying in my childhood … it's like, "[She] was the reason, but at the same time, [I'm] not trying to place [the] blame on [her] but [my parents] played a big part." … When we were coming up, it was just always: "You're okay. They're not hurting you. You're not coming home with bloody noses and black eyes and bruises all over your body." [But] it wasn't that type of physical bullying…[I felt like] if I'm telling you that this is going on, help me!... [there] really wasn't much help given. It was just, "Deal with it. They're not hurting you. Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words may never hurt you."… I felt, "Nah, the words are hurting [and] stinging a little bit."… My parents [were] not helpful [by] seeking therapy for me…I never became suicidal…I see all the time where these kids just get bullied so bad…I guess it never got to that point for me.*

[There are] certain things [my mom] still [does] that don't make sense.

[For example], my mom is the type of person that likes to repeat herself like 5 times in a row… I'm not that type of person [who] wants to hear the same thing over and over again…When it comes to the parenting, I have to remind her that I'm raising my daughter differently than the way that I came up in hopes that things will be different for her. [I want my daughter to be] more aware of herself and confident because] I think that was also my big issue back then: I just didn't have no confidence because it wasn't put in me. We didn't wake up doing affirmations. We didn't get bedtime stories read to us at night … [My parents] yell and raise their voice …, [but] I teach them to use their words [with my daughter] … that was also part of our problem: we weren't taught at home, when it came down to issues, we really wouldn't speak up about it. We just [held] it in there.

I got nieces and nephews before my daughter came along…[Now], they're getting to the ages of understanding, …[I say to] them, "Hey, you're 16 now. Are you looking at schools?" …I try to offer them as much guidance as possible… now that I am older and have that knowledge [to] have more adult conversations, … I started [affirmations] with [my daughter]. …growing up and learning the different stuff that most kids learn, like ASL, shapes, numbers, letters, [and] colors... Affirmations [were] always there because I felt that that was important [to teach her too] because that was something that I lacked. [As a child], I didn't have the confidence aspect of [my] personality, so I figured [to] go ahead and push it into her. As she say[s] [them], I [listen to them] too. [She] straightens [her] shoulders up [when she] looks in the mirror … Through her, I think I've also start[ed] healing myself from a lot … I have not been to therapy. I'm no guru

…[But] I'm giving her the best version of me that I can give her. I'm not giving her the "traumatized" [version] … I'm not giving her that version of, "Oh, just go in the corner and cry. You work on it. You'll be okay." No, let's talk. Let's figure out what the issue [is]…These kids these days deal with stuff that I ain't deal with until I was in high school, …[so, I] mak[e] sure she understands right and wrong. [For example], apparently [the school has] one kid going around there touching the little girls' butts. [I talked with her and asked,] "What do [you do] in that situation, if he wants to touch yours?" So, having those real conversations [at] 7 [years old] is like what? …I agree that [there needs to be more Black mothers having real conversations with their children].

[I] started doing a lot more for myself recently because of [my daughter]. … we normally don't actually say affirmations until we get to the [school] drop-off line and she'll pull the mirror down so she can look at herself. I don't force her to do a structured affirmation to where it's the exact same every time. [I tell her], "Use your affirmations to tell me what you feel about your day, how you feel your day is going to go, [and] what you want to accomplish for your day." But one thing we always say every time is: "Man don't work, don't eat" …You have to put in the work if you want to be able to flourish… So anytime we say affirmations, that's always the last one…I'm trying [my best] because [there are] already so many negative stigmas around the single parent…[They say kids] do better when they're in a 2 parent household. That's not our story. I am what she has [because] her father denied her when she was conceived, and now he only does for her when it's convenient for him…[Because I'm] a single parent, [people told me to] just

rent [and not] buy a house. No, I [bought] a house for me and my daughter so that she can see "Yes, Mama's doing it alone." ... she doesn't see me with no guys, friends, boyfriends or nothing because I haven't had that…I've focused so much on her [and support her at] basketball games, ballet, softball, whatever she's into…[Today], I don't work out…I'm a little lazy. I sit and watch my baby work out 'til she gets tired… working out for me [was] back in my thinner days…[supporting my daughter in extracurriculars is] enough to keep me busy to where I don't even miss that [dating] side of life right now.

[As far as how others perceive me], everybody [does]n't get the same [Shuri]…[My family would] describe me as being fun, always tak[ing] people out, always hav[ing] all the kids, [and] always hav[ing] games for the kids to play when we get together… [I am] reserved because I don't keep my family in my business too much… [as far as] the whole family dynamic ... certain blood relatives [I say to myself], "I'm going to love you from a distance." ... I really don't have issues with my family like that. ...[I was always] very studious and inquisitive because I was that one to ask [questions]… I do remember getting in trouble when we were discussing Columbus Day, and I was the one that asked, "Well, if the people were already there, how did somebody else discover it?" ...That [question] had got me in trouble because the teacher didn't know how to respond to that. [The teacher told me], "Alright, [Shuri]. Just calm down, take the lesson for what it is, and let's keep it moving." ...I used to ask a lot of questions [because] that was my time to talk…I really wasn't talking at home. So going into school, being able to talk and engage with my classmates [was] helpful because if

there were some other students struggling …[we had] peer intervention, … [I] helped them along the way [like a] teacher's pet.

My coworkers love me, girl. … Everybody wanna [be] in [my] office. Everybody [is] always coming [to me because I'm] always willing to help. [They always say], "She's so knowledgeable." Anytime they [have] questions and they just don't know, [they come to me]. … "Oh, you need somebody to cover the teller line?" Oh, [Shuri can] go up there and do it because she can do everything in this bank <sarcasm>…Then, some of the customers don't know my name. They're like, "Where's the Black lady?" …because I'm the only one there. It [does]n't bother me [any] more. [But] at first,… I was like, "Come on now. You got to know my name is [Shuri]" and gave them a business card [and said] "Don't come in here asking 'where the Black lady at?' That's just a little demeaning."… [this first interview] has been nice and comfortable.

[In my professional life, bank workloads are mostly] between me, my assistant branch manager, [and rarely] the branch manager. … between us two, I think I get more of the, "Hey, go in there and she'll give you what you need or get you the answer to what you need." That's tiring and frustrating because if I can get the knowledge, [then] you can get it too…We got web pages that [release] new information or if they change something in the banking industry, you have to look at the web page once a week…you have to read through the links to see [the new] process … a lot of times they don't read the links, … So it is frustrating because … we are all adults over 25 … get it together. [They usually respond with], "I'll do that next time." And next time comes, [they]'re still in my office

with the same type of problem. … at the same time, I'm not in an [official] management position, so I try to allow them to know that they have a workplace friend in me. I can help [them], …but at the same time [they] need to be helping [their]self.

[As far as mental health, sometimes I use] sick days and feel just fine … I take all my vacation time because they don't roll over. So if you don't use it, you lose it…I stress taking my vacation time … I have to request my time to be off and the majority of time, whatever time I want, I can get unless [there's] already somebody else off. … you can't have 2 people off at the same time…[the branch manager doesn't] do [any]thing in the office all day. [He] barely will pop his head out [because he has] his own bathroom in there …[When] major customer issues [arise], even if someone says, "I need to speak to the branch manager," [he tells us to] figure out what they need and it's [frustrating because] they requested you directly. [I usually have to] go figure it out or help them … The only thing that I take home from work is the sound of the phone ringing …typically in more major situations, [if] a good customer passed away and [I had a] bond with them, sometimes it's hard.

Once I get home, … I turn my phone off for at least an hour, just to make sure I'm not immediately jumping on social media or playing on my phone. … I decompress from the day a little bit, not thinking about work, but just get[ting] the weight off of me. Then, I get up and start to either cook dinner or do what needs to be done around the house…I don't feel that it's healthy per say, [but] I do stress myself a little bit too much at work to where it doesn't truly feel like a balance … I

don't do nothing for me these days. It's always doing stuff either for work or for my daughter…There's no in between. …even within that hour that I turn my phone off, I [still] have my daughter at home. We do puzzles, on the switch, …whatever she wants to do that's also calming to me [sometimes I just] watch [her] make [her] Legos, [so] I can just sit there.

[My current neighborhood is] diverse, but it's mostly quiet. Most people [are not] outside. I know my neighbors. If I see them in public, [I greet them and] keep it moving. [When] I first moved in, [I] dream[ed] of… the neighborhood bring[ing] me fruit cake [and other] bake[d] [goods, but there was] none of that. [I] barely got waves and hellos from some of them …It is what it is. Most people just don't interact like that … I live across the street from a Black police officer. He's pretty nice [to] me and my daughter …I teach her certain things, [but we still use] YouTube for a whole lot of stuff …[As far daily routine], I take her to school every morning, … She's a girly girl, so she might throw her eyeshadow [on] while she gets ready and feels her face is prepared. … She looks in the mirror. She says her affirmations. Every time she gets out the car, I always get my goodbye kiss and I love you. … And then I head to work. … Once [I'm] at work, [I] check [my] emails because I get about 100 emails a day from different people …I [usually] make a plan for my day. … I try to get myself mentally prepared to go through that 8 hours at work…I leave from there [to] go pick up my daughter at my mom's house …[I] might scroll on social media a little bit while I'm cooking dinner ... [go to] bed [and] repeat.

[As far as social media], I only use Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat

(not a big fan of TikTok)… I scroll a little bit until I see some posts that [make me want] to get off Facebook. [Then], I go on Instagram [to see] a few celebrities living my dream life. Then, I get on Snapchat, so [I can check what my family is] doing with their kids…[On social media], I do have a lot of Black friends, but most of the time they are posting about their business…[I don't see a lot of them] having conversations about, like you said, the state of Black people, maybe I'm following the wrong people …[I] might need to start unfriending a few people…I think most people are starting to use [social media], from my experience, for more of the comical aspect of it, just posting funny videos, not really meaningful stuff.

[As far as my daughter, she's] good [and] she's healthy. I don't have too much worries with her except for the little lip action every now and then. … I'm not pushed to get no sort of significant other because I don't need [them] disturbing my peace [because] I love [my life]…[Again], we haven't really been in church [but] I try to do what I can to make sure that…my Bible ain't collecting too much dust …[I] try to read my Bible and understand that everything here is temporary. But of course, we want to be able to live a good life. We want to able to prosper, reap what we sow, and do what we can… [my family] would [also] describe me as the one that [does]n't get [in] the drama. [I'm] the cool cousin that just don't get into no trouble. [I] ain't dealing drugs. [I] ain't smoke …I don't be pressed to do too much. … I do take my travels to get the new experience. …[My] routine brings me peace. …[like knowing] the skeleton of my day. Sometimes I might have a femur go that way, or a tibula going that way…, but the spine part [stays the same]… it's all pretty much structured for me, real boring.

Sometimes I do like to pull out my college vocabulary [because I don't do it] all the time, [except] in real deep conversations [like this to show that] I ain't no fool. I [have an] education. I ain't go as far as I wanted to, but I got the smarts to me. But I think that going to college [created a] success factor of knowing that I can flex [my knowledge]… I can learn what I need to learn in the time frame that I need to learn it; give me a test and I can pass the test … At the same time, I'm able to make adjustments because of [my college experiences]…[For example], one of the major things that school taught me [was] I can submit this paper to you and you give it back to me with all these red lines [even though I thought] my paper was perfect [but] other peoples' opinions of [my] work [required changes]…it's the same thing in the workplace … you have to be able to make those adjustments as needed, [same goes with] being a big corporate company. As often as things change, you have to also be able to go with the flow and just keep it going… I'm not one of those people [who] hate change. No, bring it on, especially if it's better. [At the bank], we're starting to get some new processes now, but I'm like [we] should have been this way from the beginning …[people could've] sued [the bank]… I'm glad they're talking about seeing there was a problem with the old, [and] now changing it.

I'm waiting for [the branch manager] to push the retirement button because he needs to go… The branch is structured, [so you have] a branch manager role, the assistant manager role, and then everybody else under that (your regular bankers and tellers). So once the branch manager [is] either deceased or decides to retire, typically that assistant is going to go into that role.

[There's] not much movement unless something like that happens. You could be literally stuck in one role until the people above you decide to move on …Do I have aspirations of being a branch manager? Yes. Do I think that it would technically work within a time frame of 5-10 years in my current company? No, because if my branch manager moves, my assistant branch manager can move up. I would [then] be transitioning to the assistant branch manager, but that branch manager that just got there [may] be there for a while. If she plans on working another 20-30 years, what does that leave me stuck in? The assistant branch manager role.

Absolutely, [I would leave to pursue another leadership opening at another bank]. But then once again, … in the financial industry, it can be the exact same structure. If you go and look at other branches in the area, what do they have? [The] same structure. So if they have a branch manager that's getting [ready] to retire, [they'll more than likely promote] the assistant [if they] want the branch manager role. …we do have employee[s] that [have] been with the company for more than 20 years…[That employee is] still a teller because [they] just never wanted to move [up] or do anything different than what [they] do. But then of course, with [them] having seniority, [they] get [priority] vacations and can alter the schedules…[They] never wanted the extra responsibilities. So even though [they have] technically been there longer, [they are] not going to automatically go into the positions, primarily because [they] don't want them, but also because [they] probably don't possess the leadership skills that [are] needed to do the job. When you're in the assistant manager role, you go through all of the

trainings to get you prepared to become the branch manager…As long as you can pass the certification and testing [requirements, then you're in].

[At the bank], you're not dealing with a lot of different personalities per say because you typically are only going to have anywhere between 6 - 9 employees, [unlike] a big retail company where you got about 50 people all over the place. But when you have communication skills, it just makes [leading] easier…People [should be able to] come and talk to you and open up to you about what's going on … without it becoming argumentative …[As far as leadership skills], you have to be able to communicate (#1) [and do] conflict resolution (#2) because even though you only have 6 to 9-10 employees, you're still going to have some conflicts at some point [and] you have to be able to resolve those conflicts peacefully. Now, everybody's not going to be happy about the resolution, but as long as you guys can come up with the resolution [together with clear expectations, it'll work out]. … I've been in management roles before, …Another [great leadership skill is] the "trust but verify" [#3]. Don't micromanage me, [just]trust me that I can get it done and just come back and verify [instead]…if you don't do the follow up and it actually doesn't get done, then that's going to be a whole other issue …[It's as simple as], "Hey, [just] touching base to see how far you are on the project?" [A good response could be], "Hey, [I plan to] complete it by XYZ date."

We do have lots of audits and paperwork done in a branch that most people just don't know about… People think we keep millions of dollars in the branch, [but] we have cash management and we have to be able to manage our

cash within the branch to show that the branch is good…To me, leadership is not just cracking the whip at the pack, it's running with the pack. You never want the people that are following you to get into a place where they're like, "Oh, you're just telling us to do it because you can't do it or you won't do it." You definitely don't want that, so running with your pack and being a strong foundation [is essential for a successful leader]…[Leadership is about] being able to make the hard decisions [and] being able to communicate properly and fully with everybody, so everybody has that understanding [of] the goal… run with them [and] help them to achieve it. You don't just leave them to do all of the work. You need to be out there running with them and that shows leadership. It shows that [you're] out here doing the work with [your team to] make it easier for y'all to get the work done. Make everybody responsible [and] hold each other accountable for getting it done.

[Growing up, I didn't see many high-profile Black women leaders, so I didn't] have anyone personally [outside of] a lot of the people during the Civil Rights movements and how they used to coordinate and get so many people together because they believed in what they were doing. It's just too many to name …, but those are the people that I would say that I looked [to]…I'm not a very political person, but a lot of the people in [the] Senate office show very good leadership skills because [they understand] that one decision is not going to fit all, but at the same time [they] have to make the decision…about healthcare, gun control, [and] education… It's still going down there in Florida with this 'taking the Black history out of schools' …Do not follow people in Florida; they're crazy.

[There are] too many [Black historical figures] to name at this point [like] Jesse James, MLK, Rosa Parks, [and] a lot of the big mainstream people. But [there are] so many other names underneath as well [who helped by] creating that foundation so that they can actually portray a lot of those leadership skills as necessary, even today.

[I didn't learn about many] Black women leaders. Of course they're going to suppress that because Black women still ain't up there yet…Recently, because [of] my daughter, for the past couple of years during Black History Month, we've done this segment where different relatives will call and read books to her for bedtime instead of me reading her story…they'll [teach her] different leaders that they found [like] the women from NASA [hidden figures reference] …that's really when I started to learn about these people. I'm too old to not know how many Black people were working behind the scenes [and] really made it happen … I didn't know [because] I was not taught it…[I learned about] Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, and we [got those same] three every year …[One day, my daughter came home with a] pamphlet where it talked about MLK. It had some kind of profound questions on the back asking how my daughter's life [compares to MLK's] …Much of anything in the curriculum, when it comes to learning about Black history (other than when they throw it in there for Black History Month… and that's not even a lot), they typically stick to the major names.

So, [she] typically [learns] what she gets from [family] and what she learns at home…[There are no school programs or curriculum for her] directly

tailored for Black girls…When my daughter is doing something, a lot of the times, she'd be the only Black one … [my] baby sticks out like a sore thumb. …that's just how it is at that school … she is going to be the only Black one participating in certain stuff…the demographic of the school that she attends [is] maybe 20% Black [and] then the big majority [are] White…For 2 years, she was the only Black one in her class, [so we had] those conversations on "Mommy, My skin." [I told her], "There's nothing wrong with your skin. You're just a Black child. You're beautiful. Your skin is darker. So what? [Did] they make fun of your skin? [If] they touch, you knock them out." … Certain things out there in the community, like dance, … doesn't fit my daughter's personality, …or what she identifies as. She loves ballet, but we don't have any Black ballet schools in this area; the majority of [them are] White. [I support her proudly], "In case you can't tell, that's my baby!"

[I remember one time for a Nutcracker performance], the hair pieces were little Sue's cute curls that my daughter's hair ain't never going to do…So, I went to the dance instructor and said, "I know that you've had other African Americans that came through your school. Has anyone ever discussed with you about a different hair piece?" She said, "No ma'am, come on. Let's have a discussion." … because my baby's hair is Afro, we're not going to have her [center] stage with these little Susie cute curls because that's not her hair. I need something that looks more like her hair…having that conversation and just the fact that [the instructor] was open to being educated on it (because she just hadn't been in the past years because the girls would just go with what they said)…[but] not me

[because I needed it to be] inclusive... We were able to do like Black girl Afro puff curls, which was amazing.

So it's getting over those hurdles because South Georgia [is] red ... when you get with people that's willing to have that conversation, it just makes it a lot easier. You actually can feel included [and not] tak[en] for a joke ...I need[ed] the representation for her, ... I'm not going to put her in it if she's not going to be comfortable ... [I don't allow people] to overpower or overshadow me or make me feel less or belittle me because I was born Black, ... you're not going to pretend that you can't see me all the time ... You're going to see me. You're going to hear me. I have thoughts, feelings and opinions. ... I don't do the silence…[To me, it] seems like [silence is] breaking more for Black women, ...[we] wear our natural hair and it's not being viewed as old or nappy or "Oh, you need to upkeep your hair [so] perm it and look a certain way or have a certain standard." ... y'all gonna get this puff ... What [are] you going to come and say to me?...I didn't have a lot of confidence back then [but I do] now.

In politics, people are always going to be arguing, ...[and quick to say], "I'm not racist. I'm just saying this." ... Why do you feel that you have to say you're not racist? ... I really didn't truly experience racism so blatantly [but] maybe I did experience [it] back in the day and just didn't know that's what that was… until I got older… I do have one experience that really stuck with me. I had literally just moved up here and I had my mom and daughter in the car. We were in the Sam's parking lot, [which has] certain aisles [where] you can only go one way. ...I was getting ready to turn down one of the aisles [and] a white Ford car

*[came the wrong way]…it's just like "Now, you know you're not supposed to be coming down this way." So, I tried to scoot over as much as I [could] and my windows were down. It was a nice cool day…I'm trying to scoot over as far as possible without hitting the cars that [are] parked. He comes through, sees that my window is down, and says, "Well why don't you move out the way you nigger b*tch!"…So what [Shuri] politely did was turn my car around and I went and followed him. … he tried to take these turns and dodge in and out of traffic … I remember the tag because it literally sat in my brain. I was just called that out of nowhere. Like, because you're coming down the wrong way and you're trying to tell me to move, [you're going to insult me]?… and you shouldn't even be coming down the aisle in this direction? So, I think I followed him for about a good 2 miles and then my mom was like, "Have you calmed down?" … that stuck with me because I've never had it thrown in my face like that…[gave me] anxiety…[I thought to myself], "How deep does this go?" This [had] literally just happened [when] I [moved] here. What else can I expect?*

[Not to mention, people] were not used to seeing a woman of color in that bank …I had a few instances when I first got there to work where non-Black people would look at me and be like, "Can you give my transaction to [another] person or … they [would] just wait for them and [not] even want to come and talk to me because I [was the] new Black woman on [the] block… I had left the main office to go work downtown, [which is] when I started being a little bit more open [because] we had the bullet [proof] glass in there, so it felt a little more safe… A lot of the people who were downtown moved their account to start coming to see

[me] at the main office [because] people [started] saying, "Oh, yeah, [Shuri]? She's fine. I deal with her all the time."… Once they kind of put that person with this person, then [my] name start[ed] to flow around [and I] flourish[ed]…People [began] trusting [me] to take care of their stuff without thinking that [I was] going to mess up them up or that [I was] going to steal their money or make a mistake that'd benefit [me]…downtown was … an impoverished area …more low-income people [because] it was closer for them to get to the branch. They [could] either walk or bum a ride with somebody … They were just so welcoming and when I say in poverty, it wasn't just the Blacks.

Motherhood would honestly be (if I had to say anything) the experience that's shaping and molding me because it's still doing it. … I do get so drained at work where it's like I gotta go home [and] try to put on a smile. [I don't want to] show my daughter that I'm too tired to do anything with her, … I have to get my mental together and be able to actively engage and participate even though sometimes I really just don't want to…in my current adult friendships, those are pretty good experiences to be able to also have the support of not only my 21-year [long] friend, but [also] my friends since college. [It's nice] just having the support and [also] understanding each one of our life dynamics and bouncing ideas off of each other as we all go through motherhood. We're all experiencing life [and] trying to get out of debt, [it's] a nice experience to have those women friends to be able to confide in…[I] call them [my main support], besides my family … my mom and dad do what they can, when they can, when they want to… [my friends are] so far away.

[As far as my daughter's friends], this is going to probably come off so horrible and I don't want it to, but she's getting in trouble in school by hanging with some of the Black girls that she hangs with … a lot of them are a little more defiant. … my child could be mouthy, but she's a good kid; I know my daughter, … her teacher called me one day and was like, "Listen, I normally don't see [her] act like this, but I just wanted to make you aware that her behaviors are changing."…she gets into a little bit more trouble when she's around some of the Black kids because she's trying to follow after them … instead of making the right choice… sometimes the influences don't seem as positive, but of course I don't know what those other kids have going on in their backgrounds and their households, [which] can affect how they act in school.

[I teach her] to look at people and start to understand who people are when [she's] making choices for [her] friends. … there is one Black teacher in particular there that typically keeps her eye on [my daughter] because she likes her. She's a good kid and when I drop her off in the morning, she gets hugged from her every morning. Then she waves at me…[I silently say to myself], "I see you, my sister. Thank you." … I'm hoping that she gets her as a teacher for next year because …she loves her energy …[and] she ain't had no Black teacher, [so] she needs her…[As far as dreams for the future], we're gonna be rich, [and find] some rich husbands.…we're going to hit the Lotto. We're going to be living lavish. … [and] go buy some island [to] live on…I [enjoyed] interview two.

I haven't sat down and made any sort of 5-10 year plans …I keep trying to continue to grow as much as my mind allows me to grow and expand. [I] stay

open minded on a lot of different stuff [to] continue to help my child transition through school. I want to get a fence put up … I have been in the financial industry for so long. So, I can't see myself going outside of the financial industry [unless] there was a big move that was more profitable for me to get out of where I am. … or I get the rich husband that don't want me to work no more [and] I just got to be a housewife to the kid, then that's fine [too].

[I would tell other Black women to] be unapologetically you. …a lot of times, we get put in these places where we have to look a certain way or be a certain way or don't say things this way because you look like the mad Black woman, or don't do things this way because it just shows that you're aggressive. The playing field is not level so you have to be able to get in there, be who you are, and make it happen. Understand that everybody's going to come from different walks of life, different cultural backgrounds, different financial backgrounds, [but] you just got to make the most of what you have and run with it … Are you in the sunken place? Let's figure it out. … From my experience, you can try to introduce and help them to understand, but it's going to ultimately be up to that woman…Speak up when something happens to [you] or somebody… People gon' talk, but you have to also understand that it's okay to correct it. [If] they're making misjudgments about your hair or if they're [joking] about the way you talk, [correct them]. I hate [when people say], "You talk White. You talk proper." … No, I talk like I have an education just like anybody else that's educated, … You have to come to the understanding and realization yourself …depending on where they went to school …It's a struggle, but we learn it.

I was born into [Black womanhood]. What can I do besides flaunt it? I do everything in my power to not be made less than because it still happens these days. [Black women are] on the bottom of the totem pole when it comes to pay, [or how] they look at you …[Black womanhood] means more of understanding the culture and understanding the part that I play in it… If you don't go and do it, then you're not going to get anything from it. [If you] don't play the Lotto, you're not going to win the big jackpot. If you don't go vote, you're not impacting your local community plus big federal votes. … For me, it is just more so embracing [Black womanhood] because it's not something I can change. I might as well just embrace it and understand that it's going to come with challenges and I need to be able to face those challenges unapologetically…[The top 3 words that come to mind when I think of Black womanhood is] definitely empowerment. [Second], raw because it is one of those things where there's no preparation, it's going to hit you and you [have] to be able to transition from going from the little girl into the adulthood and womanhood. It's just going to come at you and you got to do what's necessary to make sure that you [are] seen, make sure that you're heard, and not just timid on [the] sidelines…If you want to be a part of the LGBTQ, if you figure that's who you are, … come to grips with [it and be that] Black woman.

You get looked at in so many different ways as a Black woman …there's the "ghetto ratchet" type, [who is] loud, wears big hoop earrings, booty shorts, and twerk[s] online. Or [there's] the Black, educated type that [are] view[ed] as [they] talk proper [or they] talk White. …I kind of feel ashamed of myself that I have not reflected that much [on all that Black womanhood comes with]…I feel

like I needed to know more to really press this thing out, especially when [I am a] Black woman raising [a] Black daughter…[But Black women are] some real powerful impactful people in this world…I don't try to do resolutions at the beginning of the year, but I did tell myself: "This is going to be the year where I take care of me"[because] I don't do enough self- care… [but I am] going on a cruise in May, [so] … I need to be bikini ready…[I want to] get this weight down by May…In this single mom mode…any dynamic… you still need to take care of yourself. …[Some] days I wake up a little early … to meditate [and] get ready for the day…When I go home and cut my phone off, that's self-care for me too because I don't have to worry.

[Motherhood means] not going to jail. <laughter> … It means save money so that I got bail money. Ha, but no, it's honestly rewarding because you get this whole new person that's solely you and you love this person… we on this journey together. So, motherhood for me also means being able to adjust because everything is not going to go as I planned for it to go. I need to also be listening to her and open to her, not being closed off… a lot of times when we were growing up, you really didn't talk, … unless you do something that's just completely horrible. …[I tell my daughter], "Hey, come talk to me…if something happened in school [or] on the bus. Come, let's have a conversation. Let's talk about it." …I'm not used to that. … [It's about] learning and adjusting… I need to remember to be open instead of just shutting her down because once you shut these kids down, they're not going to come to you, especially when something big and major [happens]…I play [the] Auntie role too [so I claim those as] my kids

too. [Even though I get] a little drained…I stay the course.

[As a high-profile leader, you need] empathy because you have to understand that decisions that you make … is not going to be in favor of everybody. Show the empathy for the people who are not going to get the best benefits out of that decision … we can come back and maybe revamp it or come up with a different decision that could also help more people than the original decision did. So, I believe empathy is a very big part of making decisions, whether it's political [or] social. However, be loyal and stick to the decision. It's so important … And a lot of times that's easier in the political world because you get all these different laws that just go into place. It's a little bit harder in the workplace and the social standpoint because you have direct influences on people, whether they're walking around the office or they're walking around the neighborhood… [accept and correct when you didn't] make the right decision. …You don't make decisions for yourself, [so decide] …what is the best for the group…When you make that decision, you have to not only have empathy, but [also] be able to communicate. … You have to be an effective communicator if you're going to be a leader making decisions for any group of people. …You don't have to sugarcoat nothing for me. Just tell me like it is. … And if you give it to me straight, if I don't understand it, [then] I might come up with a follow up question. That's the point of communicating.

And a lot of times I communicate a lot better in my professional world than I do in my social world because I don't be really wanting to talk to people. … The biggest challenge for me in communication right now is communicating with my

co-parent. …We just don't communicate well …[different] backgrounds… [but we try] to communicate for the bigger person [our daughter] … I think I instilled confidence in her enough with the affirmations. [I tell her], "Mama don't wear makeup, so I can't help you with that … get on YouTube, learn how to put on your eye shadow" … They look like a clown some days and I just got to go in there with a Q-tip and say, "Let Mama help you out because we ain't going to be sent to the school looking like this." … As far as like body images... She's very comfortable and self-aware. It was a little challenging [in] kindergarten and 1st grade, …[She used to say], " I want to wear my hair straightened" because she wanted her hair to look like her classmates …[I] instill[ed] in her there's nothing wrong with your natural hair [and] we can do it up in some braids, in some ponytails, [whatever] you want, but we're just not straightening it …[Now], she doesn't try to conform to anything other than watching some of the kids and women do their makeup …

[As far as material flexing, I don't see the need for] some Birkin bag, …purse, … Most of my clothes [are] from the Kohl's and the Beall's outlet [because] who's spending money on that? Not me. I will go and buy anything from the Walmart to the Target. If it's clothes, I'm going to put it on … I understand the world is your stage. …But [just for] the image?... I can have $1,000,000 in the bank account and guess what? I'm gonna put these New Balances on. I think part of the issue is that a lot of times (and this does not go for everybody in the African American community), but they spend money on their own stuff…You put more of your money and resources into things that give you temporary, not long

term…They get these nice cars on the rims and… pulling up to [their] momma's house because that's where [they're] still living … we got to get our priorities together.

Some people can buy the Birkin and still got the money in the account. That's great, that that's what you should strive for. But [to] go get the Birkin and you can't even afford to eat at McDonald's, [so] you got to ask people to hold some money because you ain't got it? [That's a problem]. And it kills me when people [say], "Let me hold $25-30 'til next week," but maybe 2 days later [they're] out in Miami. But you just had to borrow some money from me? … I don't understand it. Don't compute…[Baby's] clothes need attending [to]…I get it [because] we see it all the time. … they always say you're going to find more people living off of welfare doing bigger and better stuff than us folks in middle class…. They got food for the house [and] rent [assistance]. But the people in middle class, we can't get nothing?... I can't afford to go splurge and go all out because I'm in middle class and I need to fill my fridge up with food and keep gas in my car, make sure my mortgage [is] paid because I don't get no help with that…[welfare is] a made life.

The more you work, the more they take away …that's the concept that I, to this day, struggle with … Why continue to stay on it when you put yourself in a situation to where you could have the good paying job with the stable hours, so that maybe the next person or the next family that's been on the waiting list can go ahead and start receiving the help that they need. Why stay on it? Because you feel it's just a handout … I'm not going to be around here struggling. … I can't see

myself doing that. I would never go broke for Christmas … I see them all the time coming into the bank and overdrawing their accounts to go and pay for PlayStation Fives … the little hoverboards [but] they get mad at the bank for charging fees? Don't spend more money than what you have. Make a plan for Christmas and you don't have to be overdrawing your account to satisfy kids that [are] not even grateful for what you give them, [but] that's a whole 'nother subject … I try to have an uncomplicated life [because] I'm real simple … [your ability to keep on growing and wanting to be better and not settling is] definitely necessary, you [can] live [an] uncomplicated life when you know that you can continue to grow. You're not one of those stubborn people [who are] stuck [or] stagnant. Come on, let's help you get up…I feel that in turn also complicates things for them because they're [not] willing to move …[like] Shuri from Black Panther [said, "Just because something works, it doesn't mean that it cannot be improved."]

Summary: Life Story Profiles

In this chapter, I reported the study results by structuring participant profiles based on Seidman's recommendations. In each profile, I included verbatim segments of what each participant said. At the same time, I made minor corrections within brackets to each profile to smooth out the narrative. Each story was presented in chronological order (from interview one, two, and three).

Chapter 5: Comprehensive Analysis – What Was Learned?

So, what did I learn from these five Black women leaders? First, I learned that the literature was spot-on about how Black women have been devalued in American society. One primary recurring theme noticed in every participant's story was strength. As outlined in the literature review, Black women use strength as a form of resistance, even when they reach their breaking point. Mental health was also a recurring theme in the life stories. To no surprise, each participant experienced some form of struggle with their health (e.g., depression, anxiety, and high blood pressure) and identity (self-pity, failed relationships, and loneliness). Their response to every adversity was strength and prayer. Harris-Perry (2011) described this cultural response in Black womanhood:

> African American women are standing in a room skewed by stereotypes that deny their humanity and distort them into ugly caricatures of their true selves. As they struggle to find the upright in this crooked room, they are beset by the emotional, physiological, and political consequences of race and gender shaming. This shaming has tangible, even disastrous consequences: it can decrease their opportunities for recognition by the state, reduce the effectiveness of speaking on their own behalf, and set off spirals of fury that lead to further victimization. Under these conditions, …the realities of [B]lack women as church organizers, community activists, and elected officials indicate that sisters have developed strategies to push back against both the stereotypes and the shame…The *[S]trong [B]lack [W]oman* is the most pervasive and widely accepted of these self-constructions…When [B]lack women are expected to be super-strong, they cannot be simply human. (Ch. 5, pp. 183-185)

Stereotypes Against Humanity

As a researcher who is well-versed on the social realities of Black women in America (Collins, 2022), I could not help but present an argument that revolves around Black women's humanity. As you read in the theoretical framework, Black women have been framed as invisible (Crenshaw, 1989) because of their intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1989) tainted by socially constructed controlling images (i.e., Jezebel [too revealing], Sapphire [too aggressive], and Superwoman [too independent]; Harris-Perry, 2011). These images were created and grounded by Black women's social status during colonial times when Black women were frequently vulnerable to sexual violence because they had no value in the eyes of their oppressors. I explained this phenomenon in Chapter 2 during my discussion of controlling images. Based on the interview data collected from participants, controlling images increased Black women's likelihood to experience psychological distress (e.g., depression), physical injuries (e.g., sexual assault and domestic violence), verbal assaults (e.g., micro- and macro-aggressions), and limited high-profile leadership opportunities and representation (e.g., concrete ceiling). Let's take a closer look at each woman's story.

Grace: What Does Love Got to Do with It?

From Grace, I learned that some things (e.g., abuse) are not worth enduring for love. But that's just the surface. I understood that since childhood, no one ever valued Grace, so in turn, she never valued herself in adulthood. She was frequently isolated, leading to her isolating and self-sabotaging herself with drug abuse. It is easy to say that Grace should have walked away from that 20-year marriage or spoke up more about the familial molestation and excessive corporal punishment. But it is harder to understand why she couldn't. What role did her school(s) play? What role did her parent(s) play? How did her childhood home life influence her adulthood

experiences? What was happening in the American world during her childhood (1960s, 1970s, 1980s)? What was the societal value of Black girls, let alone Black women, during a peak time of racial turmoil and drastic social change? How could Grace see high-profile leaders as an example to become if Black women were not yet allowed into those spaces/positions? Kendall (2020) had plenty to say about Grace's unwavering loyalty to her ex-husband:

> Far too often those in relationships with men are told that they need to be submissive, to learn how to hold a man down no matter what, to be understanding and patient despite red flags ranging from cheating to outright abuse. Calling these things out is necessary, albeit difficult to do when a community is figuring out now just how to dismantle patriarchal structures but also how to replace them. And replacing them will benefit everyone, making it easier to confront internalized homophobia and transphobia that is rooted in the devaluation of women and girls. We have to work toward equity within and without. (pp. 82-83)

When Grace was born in the 1960s, she had no idea that American society and educational institutions would not be prepared for her arrival as another Black girl wanting to be seen, loved, and heard. Collins (2022) explained the political, social, and economic context of America during the post-World War II political economy. In her book, Collins contextualized the lived realities of Black Americans during a time period of "several contradictions" (p. 78). Ergo, below is a segment from her explanation to better understand Grace's options as a Black woman in America during the post-Civil Rights movement. Collins (2022) discussed:

> After 1945, a changing global economy in conjunction with the emergence of a new postcolonial, transnational context fostered significant changes in Black society…Within the Unites States, the Black activism of the 1950s-1970s stimulated the dismantling of

> dejure and de facto racial segregation. When combined, these international and domestic political shifts greatly affected the relationship between work and family for African-American women…While many African-Americans benefited from the changed legislative climate, others did not. Class factors were equally important…the introduction of crack cocaine into urban Black neighborhoods in the early 1980s incorporated men and women into the informal economy in gender-specific ways. Drugs became a major employer of young Black men, and young Black women looked to these men for financial assistance…the racial segregation in housing that fosters inequities of education and employment also persisted...Overall, young Black men and women could not see the optimism of the diverse antiracist social justice projects of the 1950s and 1960s but instead encountered the pessimism of shrinking opportunities. (pp. 78-79)

Abuse was a recurring theme throughout her life story. Did you catch how she married within a few years of leaving that toxic marriage? Grace clearly craves love, but I don't think she knows how to give it to herself just yet because she has not healed due to minimal mental health resources. To this day, she still does not understand her life experiences and the role her story plays in the bigger picture of historical social attacks on Black women. Based on my conversations with Grace, she is searching for healing so she can love the woman she became, especially after blaming herself for her son's death because she was not yet able to leave her third marriage. Losing a child is an indescribable feeling, but with a little forgiveness, I challenged Grace to not blame herself. Grief is a heavy burden to carry alone. Maybe the new therapy experience will help her understand her life more clearly? I hope so.

Although the two formal interviews did not solely focus on her leadership experiences as a nurse and store owner, they offered deeper insight into how our personal lives impact our

professional lives. How can she be the best leader that she can be if she struggles with self-love? She does not believe in herself, even though others believed (and continue to believe) in her. But as a leader, you have to be confident in who you are and what you are capable of. Sometimes it is hard to have the needed confidence when you don't feel loved, appreciated, heard, or valued. So…love has everything to do with it.

Rose: What Does Acceptance Got to Do with Family?

From Rose, I learned that when your family does not accept you, it is more difficult to accept yourself. The key thorn in Rose's life was her discovery that her uncle is her biological dad. After being mistreated by her mom her whole life, her discovery of that family secret just about broke her. She craved attention and acceptance from her mother, but never got it, regardless of her early extracurricular achievements (i.e., dance). But instead, she was greeted with isolation and rejection. But that's just the surface. I understood that since childhood, Rose just wanted to be accepted. When her mother kicked her out as a child (12 years old), Rose lost hope until she had her children, who she emphasized always made her feel loved and accepted. But when she lost her kids multiple times to government agencies, she was reminded of how she would do anything to make sure they never felt like how she did. It is easy to blame Rose for selling drugs and losing her children, but it is harder to understand why she did it. What role did her parent(s) play? How did her early childhood pressures (e.g., taking care of her cousins and siblings) lead her to becoming 16 and pregnant? What role did lack of resources play in her ability to achieve in school? What role did the school(s) play? What was happening in the American world during her childhood (1980s, 1990s, 2000s)?

Rose grew up in the 1980s, a peak time when drugs (especially crack cocaine) were distributed to just about every poor Black neighborhood community by government agencies.

Everyone either wanted to sell it, smoke it, or snort it. Regardless if you were the seller or the buyer, either way you were framed as a criminal. It was the perfect crime. Selling drugs was how Rose felt seen, not only by her child's father, but also by her peers. Before her management position, selling drugs was how Rose was able to take care of her children. Kendall (2020) addressed this phenomenon:

> Internalized bias may make it easier to believe in racist myths that dehumanize parents from severely disadvantaged communities, but the onus is on those with privilege, as feminists and as parents, to check themselves, to ask what they might be willing to do in order to give their children access to a life they never had. Would they also risk life and limb to immigrate regardless of arbitrary borders and laws? Would they sell drugs? Privilege, especially economic privilege, can make it easy to forget that while every parent faces challenges, not every parent has the same resources. (pp. 247-248)

When Rose learned of the consequences (i.e., jail), she stopped selling drugs to become a restaurant manager. But she couldn't keep her leadership job because she needed help raising her children. The people she turned to (her first boyfriend, her first girlfriend, and her current boyfriend) manipulated and betrayed her. As someone who struggled with acceptance since childhood, she accepted how they treated her because she wanted love. One could argue that love and acceptance go hand-in-hand, but you can have one without the other.

For example, Rose was accepted by her first boyfriend, but was not loved (otherwise he would not have slapped her [regardless of her making him pay for it]). She was accepted by her first girlfriend, but clearly was not loved (otherwise she would not have been shot in her face and frequently abused). She did not offer many details about her current relationship, other than her dissatisfaction with not feeling loved or accepted. Due to only conducting one formal interview

with Rose, there are a few missing pieces to her story. But one thing is very clear: Rose is grieving the kidnapping of her child and is troubled by the lack of assistance from law enforcement agencies. She is aware that she is not healed all the way, but still goes the extra mile for others to validate her worth. So…acceptance has everything to do with it.

Passion: What Does Teaching Got to Do with Understanding?

From Passion, I learned that education is the cornerstone to societal success. For one, you need an education to work and a higher education to work with good pay. Passion taught me a lot about sacrificial Black motherhood. From the beginning of interview one, she made it very clear that she is a proud mother to two young Black men. By the end of her story, I understood why she was so proud of her motherhood contributions. Her responses to most questions revolved around her children. Contrary to the experiences of Grace and Rose, Passion had a loving childhood filled with acceptance and her stepdad was the "love of her life." She was raised in a two parent household and was taught to value education at an early age. She was never isolated by loved ones and her parents were very supportive, which inevitably impacted the outcome of her parental decisions and overall life. Passion and Rose are the same age, and grew up in the same area, yet their stories are just about the complete opposite. This realization taught me that parental love and acceptance can help validate who you are and who you believe that you can become. The absence of her biological father taught her how to not get too attached to others, which she believes grounds her identity and worldview.

Passion grew up in the 1980s as well, during a peak time when family-oriented Black TV shows broadcasted messages of love, family, and unity. Consequently, Passion was always family-oriented and held those same values that she was taught at home and learned from media influences. Passion's story was flooded with the importance of teaching Black children about

self-worth, self-respect, grit, independence, and educational success. Based on her upbringing, Passion was able to teach her kids how to 'be the best them,' which she believed was critical to them obtaining a happy and successful life. Overall, she taught her kids about self-worth, prayer, stability, growth, and financial wellness based on generational differences she noticed as a public educator. Passion was very cognizant of social issues that not only impact Black women, but also how toxic masculinity from Black men impacts Black women's wellness as well. For this reason, she always practiced setting boundaries in her personal, professional, and romantic life.

Although Passion highlighted the overrepresentation of Black men in jail, it is more relevant to add that Black women make up a higher percentage relevant to their population in the jailhouse too (Jeffries, 2022). As pointed out in the literature review, convict leasing was a government-funded system that recruited Black women from the plantation to the prison houses during the early 1900s (Jeffries, 2022). Their labor was exploited due to the loophole to African American citizens' freedom: You were only free if you weren't charged as a criminal. Therefore, the American criminal justice system (since its origin) targeted, harassed, and framed Black people as criminals to erase their citizenship and humanity. During this 20th century convict leasing time, countless Black women were raped, humiliated, and their labor was exploited. Yet, the dominant narrative in American society is how many Black men face injustices in the criminal justice system. But what about Black women? Passion's story does not focus on the high rates of Black women's incarceration, however, her story does show that she is aware of how Black women are marginalized as single welfare mothers.

The primary question that informed Passion's interview series was: Why are Black women settling in the projects and stagnant in depending on government assistance? Her answer to that question was simple: "They're just not happy with moving forward." I, on the other hand,

think we should give Black women more credit than that seeing the critical role that government agencies played in creating their social reality; that answer was hard to hear because it blames the victim. Though, to Passion's point, Black women have endured so many injustices, that often times they just feel defeated and settle. Passion, however, does not view battling adverse circumstances as an excuse to settling in poverty. For this reason, I turn to Kendall's (2020) words to middle-class Black women who are more inclined to judge low-class Black women:

> We assume that a lack of financial stability is an indicator of parental ability, despite knowing that the reasons for the wealth gap have very little to do with what might be best for a child emotionally and socially. The crushing reality of poverty can force parents to make choices that put their children at risk, such as leaving them home alone or with unsafe caregivers. Toxic stress can leave parents too numb to meet the emotional needs of their children…Poverty can look like neglect, even if a parent is doing their very best. When your income is substantially below what you need to raise your child, and every possible economic solution is unavailable, ineffective, or illegal, then what do you do? (p. 246)

Kendall pointed out frequent misjudgments about what Black women in low-class are willing to do for their children. Contrary to popular belief, most are willing to do anything, including selling drugs for survival or staying in a toxic relationship for love or family image. From Passion's perspective, financial stability can only be obtained by moving forward from one's past. As you read, Passion had plenty to say about Black womanhood. I was mindful to include competing statements that went against my personal beliefs. For example, Passion had a tendency to blame Black mothers for their circumstances in interview one and two, but during interview three, her perspective shifted to: "maybe they just need more resources." Her

perspective changed from one of judgement to understanding. Passion was very talkative, which I loved about her. I did not have to ask her many questions because she had so much to say. Though, I want to take this time to critique her judgements on Black women stuck in poverty. Kendall (2020) explicated:

> This veneer of respectability that came from getting more education…I like knowing that people will listen to what I have to say, but I'm always aware that people don't usually listen to the Black girls like me, and that even now some will carve out a space for me that is separate from the other people like me. Because you'll decide that me being able to get where they didn't means they aren't trying hard enough. In fact, they're trying just as hard, but they didn't have the same luck, the same relatives, the same community. It's not a question of "Why can't they do what you did?" It's a question of "Why can't we give everyone else the same support and access?" … Without the extra obstacles of racism and classism, so many more people like me would be succeeding. (p. 248)

Overall, I enjoyed every interview with Passion because she offered a variety of perspectives on the importance of educational leadership. Based on her story, she engaged in formal education (i.e., college), nonformal education (i.e., church), and informal education (i.e., society). Though, these different dynamics of education all overlapped with the parental education that she proudly shared about self-awareness and self-worth. She taught her children right from wrong, how to take accountability, and how to change their way of thinking. I don't think her statements about Black women living in better housing than middle-class Black women gave an accurate picture of their lived realities. During my times traveling to hundreds of low-income neighborhoods across South Georgia, I saw a completely different picture.

Into the bargain, although I do agree with her statements on Black men needing to work

on emotional vulnerability (e.g., crying), I don't agree that is the reason that the 'jailhouse is full of them.' I think we should give the criminal justice system more credit, though, I respect how she taught her sons early about emotional intelligence. On another note, Passion briefly talked about her being judged at her church as an unwed and pregnant woman. Consequently, she emphasized the need for churches to have more women in high-profile leadership positions (i.e., pastor). Although I also see this representational leadership need, I do not think that having women in high-profile leadership positions will change any judgements about unwed mothers. Further, I found it interesting that Florida's school system pays less than Georgia's school system. As someone who once pursued being a public educator, I thought it was important to highlight the economic need of public educators.

Lastly, Passion believes self-worth is the cornerstone to relationship success, therefore, she refuses to settle for less than what she deserves. Passion had a 'protected, safe, and loving' childhood. But the reality is…many Black youth may not have shared those same luxuries. Regardless, Passion teaches her students who may have a more traumatizing childhood home to change their way of thinking. She teaches her students about optimism and consciousness to empower them to take action over their own lives through education. Her educational leadership practices were admirable because her leadership philosophy centers effort, self-awareness, growth, accountability, positivity, and structure. With these components in place, Passion believes that any student can turn their life around, regardless of their environment. Passion's recurring message to Black women mothers was to accept and deal with their adverse past by seeking therapy in order to experience a better future for not only them, but also their children. She educates hundreds of Black girls and Black mothers about how to be transformative leaders based on her educational leadership experiences. Thus, education has everything to do with it.

Joy: What Does Voice Got to Do with Protection?

From Joy, I learned that using your voice can help you get out of difficult circumstances. I met Joy in the projects in a South Georgia city. Like every other woman selected for this study, I chose Joy because I witnessed firsthand her leadership and intellectual abilities while she was at work. I was impressed by how she spoke with her students with such humor, wisdom, and empowerment. Every girl and boy in the community center wanted to be around her. Before the first interview, Joy invited me to her home, which at the time, was in a local housing authority community. Joy used to tell me that folks got shot in broad daylight around there, so it didn't take long for her to find a house and relocate. Kendall (2020) dedicated two separate chapters on gun violence (Ch. 2) and housing (Ch. 15):

> Many women, especially those from lower-income communities, face gun violence every day…The media often presents a narrative of gun violence as the consequence of Blackness and poverty intersecting, and thus the key to avoiding it is to stay away from poor Black neighborhoods…But while [W]hite people measure their safety in cubic feet from Black people, the reality is that while Black people in the hood are more likely to be victims of gun violence, it can and does happen everywhere. (Ch. 2, pp. 16-17)…Housing is foundational for success, and having it makes it possible for people to go to school or work, care for their children, care for elders and for themselves. Yet as housing becomes harder to secure and to maintain because of escalating prices and stagnant wages, the crisis is becoming a catastrophe. (Ch. 15, p. 208)

Joy, a mother of 7, was aware of how low-income housing exposed her children to more violence. Before she moved, she told me during an informal conversational interview about how one of her interactions with a White police officer led to him spitting in her face and he arrested

her for threatening to report his actions. She quickly learned that she was not safe nor respected in that neighborhood. After she shared that story in tandem with many others, I wanted to learn more about Joy. Even though her profile was presented from the one formal interview, I learned that she experienced violence in her childhood, which was her reasoning for moving from the projects into a safer community.

In Joy's profile, she talked about witnessing her mother never using her voice when faced with physical and mental abuse. As a child, Joy using her voice saved her sisters from further molestation by their mom's 17-year long boyfriend. As much as I want to focus on Joy's story, I must point out how interested I was in her mother's story. What experiences led to her defeat? Was it only fear that stopped her from protecting her children? Was she deflecting her anger from the abuse onto her children? Why did she settle for the abuse? What was her upbringing like for someone born in the 1970s? Why did the boyfriend wear a police uniform even though he was only a janitor? Why did the boyfriend paralyze his own son? Joy's story left me with so many questions. But one thing was clear: Joy refused to repeat her mother's mistakes.

Joy made it very clear that she raises her children differently, especially her daughters. As an adult, Joy quickly learned the consequences of settling for a mental and emotional abusive relationship with her children's father. Despite his parental status, she stood up for herself and her children by deciding to leave him, which left her vulnerable to picking up a maladaptive coping strategy: smoking tobacco. Joy understood that abuse was abuse; it did not matter if abuse was physical, mental, and/or emotional. Either way, she knew that abuse impacted one's health.

Although she initially stayed with her child's father for roughly 6 years, she made the tough decision to divorce him to teach her children that abuse is not love. Her brave choice to willingly leave a toxic relationship counters the choices of other participants. Although she

struggles in her romantic life due to what she went through as a child, she does not let that take away her joy. She uses her voice to communicate to her new partner in hopes that he will understand how to respect her comfort levels. It is quite obvious that Joy, from an early age, just wanted her mother to speak up to protect herself and her family. Because she did not see that happen frequently, she mindfully teaches Black girls in the community center about using voice.

As someone who did not have a true voice in her childhood, she teaches every child how to use their voice in school, at home, and in their community. Joy's ability to not only use her voice, but also ignite her voice with action (a core tenet of Black feminist thought), positions her to impact hundreds of Black girls in the community center who may not see that leadership representation elsewhere. Collin's (2022) 30-year theoretical framework directly aligns with Joy's leadership decisions to speak, act, and lead the way for other Black girls and women who may not have the courage, confidence, or resources to be so bold. Collins expounded a core theme of Black feminist thought is finding one's voice:

> Emergent women have found that one way of surviving the everyday disrespect and outright assaults that accompany controlling images is to "turn it out." This is the moment when silence becomes speech, when stillness becomes action…Black women intellectuals have long explored this private, hidden space of Black women's consciousness, the "inside" ideas that allow Black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality…The voices of these African-American women are not those of victims but of survivors. (pp.125-129)

Shuri: What Does Opportunity Got to Do with Success?

From Shuri, I learned that pursuing a college education can truly change the tone of one's

life. However, most importantly, I learned that opportunity has everything to do with success. Shuri was the youngest participant, so to no surprise, when she was growing up in the 90s, she had more privileges and opportunities to pursue higher education. She shared of mostly positive, though some negative, experiences from her college journey. Although Shuri struggled with being bullied in childhood with no mental support from her parents, she shared how that experience inevitably helped her learn how to use her voice in adulthood. Did you catch how her parents gaslighted her bullying concerns because no physical harm was done? I understood that as during that time period, Black parents saw abuse primarily as physical, not necessarily mental or emotional.

Shuri wanted to make better decisions than her parents, so she instilled in her daughter to complete daily affirmations before school in hopes to make her more confident at an early age. She has 'real conversations' with her daughter about uncomfortable topics (e.g., being touched in private areas) to ensure that her daughter understands her worth and rights. Although her parents were not as supportive mental health wise, Shuri found healthy ways to cope by participating in band and seeking emotional comfort from her teddy bears. Shuri confided that her parents were very supportive in her college journey. Due to Shuri's academic achievements, they did not have to pay out-of-pocket for her college education, leaving her with minimal college debt by graduation. Even though her dad cheated on her mom, Shuri and her brother understood they were not the reason for their parents' divorce.

A recurring theme in Shuri's story was positive experiences in school. She had positive interactions with her teachers. However, I'd be remiss if I didn't point out the need for culturally relevant teaching praxes because when Shuri asked a valid question ('If people were already there, how can you discover it?') in reference to celebrating Columbus Day, she was discouraged

from asking because the teacher didn't know how to respond. Still, Shuri achieved by obtaining honor roll, joining the gifted program, and taking dual enrollment classes for college credits. Shuri valued education because that is where she felt seen, despite the bullying experiences. In addition, Shuri shared how the ability to 'flex her knowledge' empowers her as a Black woman and mother. As affirmed by Collins (2022), education is a form of intellectual activism:

> Education has long served as a powerful symbol for the important connections among self, change, and empowerment in African-American communities…The commitment to the value of education by prominent Black women such as Anna Julia Cooper, whose 1892 book, *A Voice from the South*, championed the cause of Black women's education; Mary McLeod Bethune, the founder of a college; Nannie Burroughs, a vigorous campaigner for Black women's education; and Johnetta Cole, the first Black woman president of Spelman college, goes far beyond the themes of gaining the technical skills essential to African-American employability, or mastering the social skills required for White acceptance…African-American women have long realized that ignorance doomed Black people to powerlessness. (pp. 269-270)

Shuri's story offered more insight into Black women's experiences in the workplace as the "only" Black woman. In fact, I recruited Shuri because I was curious about what it was like to be tokenized in the financial industry. Shuri expressed how draining and frustrating it gets when her coworkers turn to her as the knowledge powerhouse, yet her salary does not reflect her leadership efforts nor intellectual contributions. The banking leadership structure limits career laddering opportunities. So even though Shuri clearly holds the leadership and educational requirements to become the branch manager, the reality is she will likely not get the position. This goes to show how Black women are continuously marginalized in the workplace due to

structures that keep only a few people in power.

Despite this organizational leadership issue, Shuri continues to strive in the workplace by prioritizing her mental health. With a branch manager that dumps his workloads onto her, she emphasized how she needs those breaks for wellness. Additionally, she shed light on several leadership skills that keep her successful in her professional life (e.g., effective communication, conflict resolution, empathy, openness, not micromanaging, and making hard decisions). As far as leadership representation in childhood, Shuri disclosed how she looked to the mainstream Civil Rights leaders that she was taught about, but she did not recall being taught about the contributions of Black women leaders. For this reason, she makes more efforts to teach her daughter in hopes that she will learn more inclusive curriculum that does not center racial trauma, but instead focuses on more Black women as intellectual leaders.

Growing up, Shuri did not experience outright racist events. However, when she moved to South Georgia, she was reminded of the racial tensions in the area when called a "nigger b*tch." Quite demeaning, right? She shared in her story of that encounter how her daughter and mother were in the car when she was verbally attacked less than a decade ago. Hence, Shuri is quite mindful in teaching her daughter about Black empowerment and reminds her daughter of her worth and beauty, especially because her daughter attends a predominantly White school. It is worth mentioning that Shuri attended a predominantly White institution (PWI) during college and found it was easier to survive with connections with Black students, faculty, and staff. She hopes her daughter will have positive connections with the few Black teachers at the school. But if she doesn't, she teaches her daughter how to pick the right friends and make the right choices.

In the third interview, Shuri had a lot to say about Black womanhood and motherhood. Though, she was not afraid to recognize that she did not know as much than what she led on.

Regardless, she offered a helpful financial perspective of the sacrifices Black mothers make just for an image. For example, Shuri expressed how many times she witnesses Black people overdraw their accounts to satisfy material short-term wants and needs. On the other hand, she critiqued their choices by highlighting the dominant narrative in Black culture: financial instability. Although Shuri mentioned many great points, some of her points overlapped with Passion's interview series. This is not surprising because they are both middle-class Black women hoping that Black women in low-income communities will begin to prioritize long-term investments. For this reason, I conclude with Collin's analysis of Black single mothers:

> Black women who work yet remain poor form an important segment of the Black working class…On average, approximately one-third of Black women and men who find employment work in jobs characterized by low wages, job instability, and poor working conditions. These jobs are growing rapidly, spurred by the increasing need for cooks, servers, laundry workers, health aides, and domestic servants to service the needs of affluent middle-class families…few of these jobs offer the wages, stability, or advancement potential of disappearing manufacturing jobs…Many Black women turn to the informal labor market and to government transfer payments to avoid being called out of their names and asked out of their clothes…Just at a point in life when young Black girls most needed affection, many felt unloved by their mothers, ignored by their schools, and rejected by their fathers and boyfriends…Often in poor health, anxious, distracted, and generally worn down by the struggle to raise their families in harsh urban neighborhoods…Increased access to managerial and professional positions enabled sizeable numbers of African-American women to move into the middle-class in the post-World War II political economy. (pp. 82-85)

Summary: Seeing is Believing

In this chapter, I presented my reflections on each participant's life story and what I learned from them. I included references from the literature to support my interpretations of each story. Each woman made social contributions that will likely spark positive social change. The results will also help organizational leaders to actively seek counternarratives, which are stories that present a different view that contextualizes a marginalized group's or isolated individual's oppression-laden lived experiences. Although the results do not focus as much on organizational leadership directly, the findings indirectly reveal the individual impact of not seeing Black women in high-profile leadership positions due to the legal restrictions throughout the 20th century. Seeing is believing. Representation requires conversations. Most importantly, change requires acknowledgment. The next chapter concludes the study by offering recommendations on how to improve the complex experiences of Black women in America.

Chapter 6: Discussion – Where Do We Go from Here?

This chapter concludes the study by offering interpretative answers to the research questions grounded by the conceptual framework and interview results. Also included are implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research based on the interviews with five Black women intellectual leaders in South Georgia. At the beginning of this dissertation, I pointed out my personal, intellectual, and practical goals with this dissertation. Again, my personal goals centered on learning more about the collective experiences of my social group (both past and present) to improve their leadership representation, social status, and democratic opportunities. My intellectual goals were to understand the role of the American legal system in Black women's oppression, investigate how controlling images were enforced by American society, and explore how narrative inquiry can shed light on the real impact that these images have on Black women's personal, professional, and social experiences. My practical goal was to report the social disparities that impact Black women's ability to gain representation in high-profile leadership positions, which I found critical in order to transform the collective narrative of Black women as a social group.

How can we correct the narrative if we do not know how the narrative began? If we know how the narrative began, but are not equipped with the resources to help this social group, then what legislative policies can we put into place to protect Black women's humanity? If we do not see the contextualized lived experiences of Black women in research, then how can we learn more about them? The answer to all of those questions is simple: Fill the literature gap about this group by seeking knowledge from Black women. In this dissertation, I strived to paint a clear literary picture to document different approaches to combatting controlling images and resolving gendered racism. Next, I answer the research questions presented in preceding chapters.

Research Question Answers: Controlling Images, Health, and Experience

What can be learned from the life histories, lived experiences, and perceptions of five Black women leaders in South Georgia? In Chapter 5, I analyzed and reported what I learned from the participant's profiles. In that chapter, I pinpointed specific parts of their stories that coincided with the study's conceptual framework (i.e., experiential knowledge, theories, and feasibility assessments). Each life story displayed some form of power struggle due to the participant's race, gender, class, sexuality, or all of the above. I provided support from the literature to explain and further analyze the core narratives. After sharing what I learned from the literature review of research on Black women's life histories and discussing what I learned from each participant's lived experiences, I report the participants also perceived there were controlling images and narratives that oppressed (and continue to impact) Black women collectively as a social group. Every participant disclosed combatting known stereotypes; they resisted the images through attempts of self-definition, social action, and/or educational advancement.

Research Sub Question 1: Controlling Images

How do Black women living in South Georgia perceive, coexist with, or resist controlling images within the context of their intersectional identities? Based on the data collected from participants, I learned that Black women respond to controlling images differently based on their childhood experiences and the time period of their upbringing. The trend from the data analysis was two Black women in low-class (Grace and Rose) perceived controlling images as people attacking their character and wellness. Consequently, they coexisted with the two controlling images dominating Black single mothers in poverty (i.e., the 'welfare queen' and 'drug addict') (Collins, 2022; Harris-Perry, 2011).

In their adulthood, Grace and Rose grew conscious of these controlling images and resisted them by seeking therapy and engaging in intellectual leadership practices. For Grace, her leadership pursuit involved starting live broadcasts about mental, emotional, and physical wellness in toxic relationships to not only become a better person, but also help others in her social group find healing and self-worth. Grace also became an entrepreneur and maintained a part-time job for disposable income to help change the educational path of her son. For Rose, her leadership resistance involved helping Black women in her local community overcome depression by getting comfortable with uncomfortable conversations about family secrets. Although these women fell into media images centered around welfare and drugs, they still maintained their strength by trusting in God through prayer. To no surprise, this spiritual source of strength was a recurring theme found in every participant's story.

Comparatively, Passion and Shuri actively resisted controlling images because they were aware of images that tied to Black women's overrepresentation in the "Black underclass" (Collins, 2022, p. 78). Although they were privileged with supportive and loving parents, they still struggled economically despite their successful careers and lives. Despite what I expected, these two women did not share difficulties with the 'angry Black woman' trope in the workplace. Instead, they shared how they were the 'knowledgeable Black women,' leading to coworkers seeking their support and assistance. Shuri shared the pressures of having to achieve organizational responsibilities that were not included in her job description. Passion and Shuri presented judgements about Black womanhood and motherhood based on their experiential knowledge about their social group.

Into the bargain, Joy shared her experiences with witnessing the 'sexy Black woman' cultural image when her sisters experienced early sexualization by their mom's boyfriend. Joy

and Grace's stories included supportive evidence that molestation is a known social issue in Black girlhood. Passion added that she was aware of this issue even though she did not experience sexual assault firsthand. Not to mention, Shuri disclosed how she teaches her 8-year old daughter how to standup for herself when boys try to touch her butt at school. Rose did not mention specific instances with sexual assault.

Based on the data collected from participants and the in-depth literature review, I report every woman described God as their strength to make it through every adverse experience, as supported by Harris-Perry (read Ch. 6, for more). Every participant disclosed how when they were met with a challenge, they prayed to God for healing, safety, and peace of mind. Although this dissertation focused on three main controlling images ('sexy,' 'angry,' and 'strong'), the Strong Black Woman cultural trope seemed to be most relevant because it was their reasoning for survival. Every story shed light on how the historical events covered in the conceptual framework impact their daily lives and mental wellness.

Research Sub Question 2: Health Impact

How do controlling images impact their mental, physical, and/or spiritual health? Each woman reported controlling images primarily impact their mental health. However, three participants (Joy, Grace, and Rose) expressed how Black women's physical health (from domestic violence) is also impacted by controlling stereotypes (e.g., perceived as 'submissive' and/or 'aggressive). In total, based on the interview data, controlling images impact all aspects of one's health. Because there were attacks on either one's mental and/or physical, the spiritual health of the whole person was left as the remaining factor to improve their wellness. The participants shared their attempts to improve their mental health by engaging in self-definition practices and/or self-care routines.

Research Sub Question 3: Social Structures

How do Black women make meaning of American social structures that influence their lived experiences? As highlighted throughout this dissertation, American social structures dictated Black women's democratic opportunities, leadership attainability, and lived experiences. However, to no surprise, every woman was aware of the role that the government and society at large played in their success, or the lack thereof. Collins (2022) emphasized that people who are oppressed usually know it; hence, every participant was well aware of their oppression as individuals and within their social group collectively.

Implications: Ask More Questions

In this section, I pinpoint the major practical and theoretical implications. As I stated in the first paragraph of this dissertation, context is everything. When you do not know the whole story, you are left with a partial image of who someone is or what they can achieve. The primary implications are to ask more questions, listen to learn, and read to understand. The study results imply that social issues are educational issues. These results build on existing evidence of how harmful controlling images can be on Black women's wellness. Black women must learn to link strength with wellness, not just strength with sacrifice. This dissertation provides a new insight into the binary relationship between educational attainment and sociocultural experiences; childhood upbringing and adult choices; social support and self-care; demographic characteristics and socioeconomic status; sacrifice and strength; media representations and stereotypes; and self-definition and transformational learning.

The study results should be taken into account when considering how to improve the collective representation of Black women as intellectual, organizational, and transformative leaders. The data contribute a clearer understand of Black women's postmodern lived

experiences, which had direct sociocultural connections to American social, legal, and educational systems. While previous research has focused on Black women in academia, these results demonstrate that Black women in poverty deserve attention as well. After all, their social experiences are negatively broadcasted in mainstream media, which impacts the professional experiences of middle- and high-class Black women.

Limitations: Transferability and Accessibility

One key study limitation was the limited relevant literature available about Black women and their lived experiences in America. There was a huge gap in research about Black women sharing their life stories in their own words. Another limitation was the inevitable subjectivity that could have potentially seeped into this dissertation. Humans are emotional and spiritual beings (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020); therefore, all research is subjective. However, I made monumental efforts to minimize my subjectivity by not only reflecting on it in the conceptual framework, but also by having each participant check my interpretations and comprehensive analysis of their life story.

Another study limitation was every participant was a mother and identified as Christian. Future research on Black women could explore non-religious Black women who are not mothers. In addition, exploring other controlling images documented in Collin's *Black feminist thought* book would be helpful to learn more about Black women. As far as transferability, another key study limitation is every Black woman has a uniquely different experience, regardless of if there were similarities to other narratives within their collective social group. Although each participant did not complete all three interviews because of unanticipated obstacles, the results were still valid for the purpose of answering the research questions.

While I offered a comprehensive picture of Black women's lived experiences, it was

clear that many other concepts and social constructs were equally relevant. For example, sexuality is a critical part of someone's identity. Hence, I would recommend future researchers to explore other social constructs like that (i.e., Black women in LGBTQ+ communities) to paint another intersectional picture for organizational leaders, policymakers, and key stakeholders. Lastly, due to a global health pandemic, accessibility to participants' homes (which could have offered another perspective) was limited. All in all, the study limitations did not interfere with the validity nor reliability of this dissertation.

Recommendations: Educational and Organizational Leadership

In total, I recommend for there to be policies that support and protect the humanity and rights of Black women. Future studies should explore how to improve the high-profile representation in leadership by including more Black women, and not judging them based on controlling images that may not fit their personal narrative. Plus, I recommend policymakers and decisionmakers in organizations (especially educational institutions) to account for the harmful controlling images/narratives that impact Black women's leadership opportunities. This can be done by standing in solidarity with Black women through personal and professional interactions. By the same token, it is also critical to prioritize the wellness of Black women by offering them social support, especially when they are already marginalized and/or tokenized in predominantly White male spaces. Most importantly, there needs to be more legislative protection, not just affirmative action, to truly transform the dominant narrative of Black womanhood.

Summary: A Future of Empowerment

In this dissertation, I was fundamentally interested in the transformative process of Black women who shared a similar American experience of normalized mistreatment and misrepresentation. Because of my experiential knowledge, I hold the strong belief that every

Black woman is forced to come to terms with her Blackness and womanhood at some point in her life. This identity journey causes many Black women to latch onto strength (i.e., God) to survive in inequitable American social structures. Some are exposed earlier than others to stereotypes that increase exposure to violence, such as sexual assault. From my perspective, violence can be an action that harms someone or something and that action can range from very subtle to very dangerous. According to the study findings, violence can be physical, emotional, mental, verbal, and/or spiritual. Because the whole person is made up of the mind, body, and spirit, violent words or behaviors that target a person inevitably impact their wellness.

The literature (Langley, 2021; Long & Ullman, 2013) tracked a pattern of Black women's susceptibility to violence in American legal systems and households. That is not to say that every Black woman experiences (sexual or domestic) violence, but rather they are more likely than other social groups to experience violence because of being stereotyped as sexual objects, or to experience domestic violence because of being categorized as submissive. Although I do not believe Black women should experience violence, I do recognize that, unfortunately, many do experience violent injustices because of their race, gender, class, sexuality, and/or nation. However, every Black woman does not experience violence.

Based on interview data, I hold the strong belief that every Black woman deserves love, respect, safety, and to be treated like a worthy human. Contrary to contemporary ideologies, I do not believe that Black women need a man to have worth or to feel worthy or to mobilize up the social ladder. I believe that every Black woman deserves the right to be who she is and express her identity in her own way (i.e., self-definition). I believe every Black woman should share her life story to contribute to the global liberation movement for Black women (i.e., dialogical engagement). I do not believe that every Black woman has a struggle story nor should have one.

However, based on historically situated patterns of access, I understand that Black women are likely to have a struggle story. Ergo, it is important to give underrepresented Black women a scholarly platform to voice their lived experiences to expand their consciousness about their mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. That is, in part, how educational leaders can help this social group.

The impact of Black women's marginalization heavily depended on false images and narratives designed to keep them in subservient or submissive positions. This was my understanding as to how and why there are many Black women still living in poverty. These false narratives (e.g., the victim is responsible for the oppression) impacts the mental wellness of Black women. I believe Black women (including those in poverty) are strong transformational leaders because they understand how to inspire, encourage, and motivate others to create positive social change through activism (e.g., self-definition efforts, voting for change, and advocating for protective policies). So, the conversation circles back to this concept of strength as a functional, yet problematic tool for survival among Black women leaders.

If I know my social group is being oppressed based on personal experiences, interview data, and field observations, then how can I help make our situation better? How can I help individual Black women heal in healthy ways? How can I transform our consciousness as an educational and organizational leader? This dissertation was an attempt to answer those questions by contextualizing controlling images and narratives. In the words of Audre Lorde from *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984):

> *You do not have to be me in order for us to fight alongside each other. I do not have to be you to recognize that our wars are the same. What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other and to work toward that future with the*

particular strengths of our individual identities. And in order to do this, we must allow each other our differences at the same time as we recognize our sameness.

References

Abrams, J. A., Maxwell, M., Pope, M., & Belgrave, F. Z. (2014). Carrying the world with the of a lady and the grit of a warrior: Deepening our understanding of the 'strong Black woman' schema. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 38*(4), 503–518.

Allen, A. (2020). The Black woman's math problem: Exploring the resilience of Black women who lead in the United States federal government. *Journal of African American Studies, 24*(4), 530–548. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-020-09498-z

Apugo, D. (2021). Black women graduate students on Whiteness and barrier breaking in leadership. *The Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Education, 53*(3), 424–442. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-020-00552-4

Arnold, N. W., Crawford, E. R., & Khalifa, M. (2016). Psychological heuristics and faculty of color: Racial battle fatigue and tenure/promotion. *The Journal of Higher Education, 87*(6), 890-919. DOI: 10.1080/00221546.2016.11780891

Berry, D. R., & Gross, K. N. (2020). *A Black women's history of the United States*. Beacon Press.

Blackmon, S. M., Coyle, L. D., Davenport, S., Owens, A. C., & Sparrow, C. (2016). Linking racial-ethnic socialization to culture and race-specific coping among African American college students. *Journal of Black Psychology, 42*(6), 549–576. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798415617865

Brah, A., & Phoenix, A. (2004). Ain't I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality. *Journal of International Women's Studies, 5*(3), 75–86.

Carbado, D. W., & Gulati, M. (2013). *Acting White: Rethinking race in 'post-racial' America*. Oxford University Press.

Catalyst. (2001). *Women of color executives: Their voices, their journeys*. Catalyst. https://www.catalyst.org/research_type/report/page/12/

Catalyst. (2022, March 1). *Women in management (quick take).* Catalyst. https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-in-management/

Chance, N. L. (2022). Resilient leadership: A phenomenological exploration into how Black women in higher education leadership navigate cultural adversity. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 62*(1), 44–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678211003000

Chen, G., Williams, S., Hendrickson, N., & Chen, L. (2012). Male mammies: A social-comparison perspective on how exaggeratedly overweight media portrayals of Madea, Rasputia, and Big Momma affect how Black women feel about themselves. *Mass Communication & Society, 15*(1), 115–135. https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2011.569682

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.

Collins, P. H. (1989). The social construction of Black feminist thought. *Signs, 14*(4), 745–773. https://doi.org/10.1086/494543

Collins, P. H. (2022). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (30th anniversary ed.). Routledge.

Crash Course. (2021). *Crash course Black American history preview* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPx5aRuWCtc&list=PL8dPuuaLjXtNYJO8JWpXO2JP0ezgxsrJJ&index=1

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique

of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1*, 139–167.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Davis, S. M., & Jones, M. K. (2021). Black women at war: A comprehensive framework for research on the strong Black woman. *Women's Studies in Communication, 44*(3), 301-322. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2020.1838020

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (3rd ed.). NYU Press.

Demby, G. (Host). (2022, January 30). Bonus: Getting real (like, really real) with Gabrielle Union (No. 325) [Audio podcast episode]. In *Code Switch*. NPR.

Dickens, D. D., Hall, N. M., Watson-Singleton, N. N., Mitchell, C., & Thomas, Z. (2022). Initial construction and validation of the identity shifting for Black women scale. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 46*(3), 337–353. https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843221089330

Dorsey, M. S. (2020). #Blackgirlsmatter: Turning the tide of historical injustice toward civil and social restitution. *Journal of Poverty, 24*(5/6), 369–388. https://doi.org/10.1080/10875549.2020.1728009

Duckworth, A. D., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92*(6), 1087–1101.

Galvan, J. L., & Galvan, M. C. (2017). *Writing literature reviews: A guide for students of the social and behavioral sciences* (7th ed.). Routledge.

Hall, J. C., Conner, K. O., & Jones, K. (2021). The strong Black woman versus mental health utilization: A qualitative study. *Health & Social Work, 46*(1), 33–41.

https://doi.org/10.1093/hsw/hlaa036

Halliday, A. S., & Brown, N. E. (2018). The power of Black girl magic anthems: Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, and 'feeling myself' as political empowerment. *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture & Society, 20*(2), 222–238. https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2018.1520067

Hannah-Jones, N. (2021). *The 1619 project*. New York Times Company.

Harden, J. (Host). (2014–present). *Therapy for Black girls* [Audio podcast]. Therapy for Black Girls.

Harris, T. W. (2015). *The sisters are alright: Changing the broken narrative of black women in America*. Berrett-Koehler.

Harris-Perry, M. (2011). *Sister citizen: Shame, stereotypes, and Black women in America*. Yale University Press.

Hart, J. (1967, July 20). Black Womanhood No. 1. *The Black Panther*.

Harts, M. (2019). *The memo: What women of color need to know to secure a seat at the table*. Basic Books.

Hobbel, N., & Chapman, T. K. (2009). Beyond the sole category of race: Using CRT intersectional framework to map identity projects. *Journal of Critical Theorizing, 25*, 7689. https://www.academia.edu/921778/Beyond_the_sole_category_of_race_Usi_a%20CRT_itersectional_framework_to_map_identity_projects

hooks, b. (1981). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. South End Press.

hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking Black*. South End Press.

hooks, b. (2000). *Feminist theory: From margin to center* (2nd ed.). South End Press.

hooks, b., & West, C. (1991). *Breaking bread: Insurgent Black intellectual life*. South End Press.

Ignelzi, M. (2000). Meaning-making in the learning and teaching process. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 82*, 5–14.

Jeffries, H. K. (Host). (2022, May 16). Criminalizing Blackness: Prisons, police, and Jim Crow – w/ Robert T. Chase and Brandon T. Jett (No. 15) [Audio podcast episode]. In *Teaching Hard History*. Teaching Hard History: Learning for Justice.

Johnson, N. N. (2021). Balancing race, gender, and responsibility: Conversations with four Black women in educational leadership in the United States of America. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 49*(4), 624–643. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143221991839

Jones, M. K., Harris, K. J., & Reynolds, A. A. (2021). In their own words: The meaning of the strong Black woman schema among Black U.S. college women. *Sex Roles, 84*(5/6), 347–359. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-020-01170-w

Jones, M. K., Leath, S., Settles, I. H., Doty, D., & Conner, K. (2022). Gendered racism and depression among Black women: Examining the roles of social support and identity. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 28*(1), 39–48. https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000486

Kendall, M. (2020). *Hood feminism: Notes from the women that a movement forgot*. Penguin Books.

Kim, J. H. (2016). *Understanding narrative inquiry: The crafting and analysis of stories as research*. SAGE Publications.

Kirby, M. M. (2020). Tell it like it is: Black power era music and the construction of the strong Black woman archetype. *Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research, 14*, 274–295.

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F., IV. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record, 97*(1), 47–68.

Langley, N. A. D. (2021). #Seehername: Using intersectionality and storytelling to bring visibility to Black women in employment discrimination and police brutality. *DePaul Journal for Social Justice, 14*(2), 1–21.

Lindsay-Dennis, L. (2015). Black feminist-womanist research paradigm toward a culturally relevant research model focused on African American girls. *Journal of Black Studies, 46*(5), 506–520. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934715583664

Linton, R., & McLean, L. (2017). I'm not loud, I'm outspoken: Narratives of four Jamaican girls' identity and academic success. *Girlhood Studies, 10*(1), 71–88.

Long, L., & Ullman, S. E. (2013). The impact of multiple traumatic victimization on disclosure and coping mechanisms for Black women. *Feminist Criminology, 8*(4), 295–319.

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*. Crossing Press.

Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Maxwell, J. A., & Miller, B. A. (2008). *Categorizing and connecting strategies in qualitative data analysis*. Guilford Press.

McIntosh, P. (1989, July/August). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Peace and Freedom Magazine*, 10–12. https://nationalseedproject.org/Key-SEED-Texts/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack

Merriam, S. B., & Associates (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S. B., & Baumgartner, L. M. (2020). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*

(4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformational learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,74*, 5–12.

Mezirow, J., & Associates (2000). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In J. Mezirow, & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. Jossey-Bass, 3–33.

Mishler, E. G. (1995). Models of narrative analysis: A typology. *Journal of Narrative and Life History, 5*(2), 87–123.

Motro, D., Evans, J. B., Ellis, A. P. J., & Benson, L., III. (2022). Race and reactions to women's expressions of anger at work: Examining the effects of the 'angry Black woman' stereotype. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 107*(1), 142–152. https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000884.supp

Nielsen, E. A. (2015, September 22). *Mary Turner (1899-1918).* Blackpast.org. https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/mary-turner-1899-1918/#:~:text=Mary%20Turner%20was%20a%20young,1922%20Dyer%20Anti%20Lynching%20Bill.

Obama, M. (2019). *Becoming: A guided journal for discovering your voice*. Clarkson Potter.

Okello, W. K., Quaye, S. J., Allen, C., Carter, K. D., & Karikari, S. N. (2020). "We wear the mask": Self-definition as an approach to healing from racial battle fatigue. *Journal of College Student Development, 61*(4), 422–438.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Peshkin, A. (1991). 'In search of subjectivity—one's own' in *The color of strangers, the color of friends: The play of ethnicity in school and community*. University of Chicago Press.

Porter, C. J., & Byrd, J. A. (2021). Juxtaposing #BlackGirlMagic as ‘empowering and problematic:’ Composite narratives of Black women in college. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000338

Ravitch, S. M., & Riggan, M. (2017). *Reason and rigor: How conceptual frameworks guide research* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Roberts, C., & Hyatt, L. (2018). *The dissertation journey: A practical and comprehensive guide to planning, writing, and defending your dissertation* (3rd ed.). Corwin.

Rogers, L. O., Versey, H. S., & Cielto, J. (2021). 'They’re always gonna notice my natural hair’: Identity, intersectionality and resistance among Black girls. *Qualitative Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000208

Roux, M. (2021, August 3). *5 Facts About Black Women in the Labor Force*. U.S. Department of Labor Blog. https://blog.dol.gov/2021/08/03/5-facts-about-black-women-in-the-labor-force

Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Sears, K. P. (2021). Intimate partner violence, cultural belief systems, and help-seeking among African American and Jamaican women in the United States. *Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research, 15*, 300–314.

Seidman, I. (2019). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.

Simmons, A. (2020). Why are we so mad? The truth behind “angry” Black women and their legal invisibility as victims of domestic violence. *Harvard BlackLetter Law Journal, 36*, 47–71.

Smith, C. (2021). *How the word is passed: A reckoning with the history of slavery across*

America. Little Brown and Company.

Snider, I. N. (2018). Girl bye: Turning from stereotypes to self-defined images, A womanist exploration on crooked room analysis. *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research, 17*, 11–19.

Stanley, C. A. (2009). Giving voice from the perspectives of African American women leaders. *Advances in Developing Human Resources, 11*(5), 551–561.

Stanton, A. G., Jerald, M. C., Ward, L. M., & Avery, L. R. (2017). Social media contributions to strong Black woman ideal endorsement and Black women's mental health. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 41*(4), 465–478. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684317732330

Sue, D. W., Alsaidi, S., Awad, M. N., Glaeser, E., Calle, C. Z., & Mendez, N. (2019). Disarming racial microaggressions: Microintervention strategies for targets, White allies, and bystanders. *American Psychologist, 74*(1), 128–142. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000296

Taylor, U. (1998). The historical evolution of Black feminist theory and praxis. *Journal of Black Studies, 29*(2), 234–253. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/002193479802900206

Thomas, V. G. (2004). The psychology of Black women: Studying women's lives in context. *Journal of Black Psychology, 30*, 286–306.

van Breen, J. A., & Barreto, M. (2022). Mind the gap! Stereotype exposure discourages women from expressing the anger they feel about gender inequality. *Emotion*. Advance online publication. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/emo0000810

Vargas, S. M., Huey, S. J., Jr., & Miranda, J. (2020). A critical review of current evidence on multiple types of discrimination and mental health. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 90*(3), 374–390. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000441

Walker, A. (1983). *In search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist prose*. Harcourt Brace

Jovanovich.

Watson-Singleton, N. N. (2017). Strong Black woman and psychological distress: The mediating role of perceived emotional support. *Journal of Black Psychology, 43*(8), 778–788.

Williams, Q., Williams, B. M., & Brown, L. C. (2022). Exploring Black girl magic: Identity development of Black first-gen college women. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 15*(4), 466–479. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000294

APPENDIX A:

Feasibility Assessment – Sample Interview Responses

Appendix A: Feasibility Assessment – Sample Interview Responses

Interviewee (08:25):

Uh, yeah. Well, grandma [participant dad's mom], um, my grandma, um, she used to, uh, show me strength by when she used to work, uh, at the hospital. Uh, she would have like these different, um, ailments or whatever, but she would still go to work … sometimes she would get hit and, you know, stuff like that. And, uh, she showed me strength and she gave me advice about how to deal with that. And, um, one of the things that she said is to pray. So that was, uh, a message of strength from my grandma [long pause] and my other grandma [participant mom's mom] mm-hmm <affirmative> [the grandma's name]. She showed, she showed strength by sharing with me that, um, [her husband] used to, uh, do, uh, bad things to her. And she still stuck by him. To me, that was a message of strength.

Interviewer (09:55):

What do you mean by bad things?

Interviewee (09:58):

Um, he would bring his mistress home to her house. He would be drunk and beat on, uh, the kids and, uh, um, like verbally abused [the grandma's name]. Um, basically he was a male chauvinist pig, uh, pretty much a drunken male chauvinist pig … deal with, you know, pretty much she had to, you know, she showed strength. Mm-hmm <affirmative>, you know, by sticking by her husband and, you know, loving on all the kids, you know, that to me, that's that's strength.

Interviewee (14:23):

And my second strength I think is when I used to take whoopings for my siblings because I was the oldest. So I think it took a lot of strength for me to endure that. Um, and uh, just keep until, you know, keep taking it until, you know, pretty much I left home--and got married--to my first husband.

Interviewer (14:49):

Mm-hmm how did you cope with that by the way, like, you know, with taking, you know, taking the accountability for the actions of your siblings?

Interviewee (14:59):

Um, I asked my parents if I could run cross country. So I did sports. That was my outlet. Um, and of course the, um, my dad and mom taught me how to pray. So I used to pray too. Um, but I loved … going to the library when I was permitted to, um, <affirmative> as far as under 18

mm-hmm. <affirmative> [long pause] yeah. So that's pretty much how I dealt with that was, you know, as I got older, I, my outlet became alcohol. Alcohol and anger. I used to fight, fight a lot when I was younger.

Interviewer (37:28):

Beautiful, beautiful. Well, those were all the main questions that I had, um, for you. I definitely appreciate your time and your honesty and just, you know, just your openness to share, you know, some of your experiences, uh, with me. Um, and, uh, anything that I do post, um, in my class for my paper, your name will be removed, uh, nothing will tie back to you. Um, and is there anything else that you want to add in that, that you want, that you want to add to your story?

Interviewee (38:05):

Uh, yeah. Um, my determination to get my children back from DSS. Um, I was very proud of that, that moment in my life, because I was torn and I was heartbroken when I lost my children to the system. So, um, when I made my mind up that I was gonna do whatever I had to do to get my children back, um, that was, uh, a highlight, one of the biggest highlights of my life

Interviewee (40:53):

Uh, when I was dragged down the steps and I was walking with a cane and I ended up pissing on myself because, uh, I was going into church to get food from the food bank and I didn't speak, I guess, the proper way or whatever. And I was with [former woman partner name] and next thing you know, you know, I'm saying I'm being dragged and nobody came to my rescue, but my mom and my mom, went off on my dad and told my dad that he owed me an apology. But even after my dad apologized to me, it was still like in my heart, you know what I mean? Mm-hmm, <affirmative> like, I still felt a certain type of way. Like, I, I, I, I said verbally and I did mean it that verbally, you know, dad. Yeah. I forgive you, but I'm scared of you. And so that stayed with me and then eventually I have allowed myself to forgive my father and I have nothing else in my heart against my dad.

Interviewee (57:23):

OH! This is very important for me, um, I, well, uhh, I, um, I haven’t, I put, uhh, I used to blame myself for um uh uh I was raped a couple times in my life and I used to blame myself because every time it happened, I was intoxicated, and for a long time I blamed myself, but [therapist name] helped me go down that path of of forgiveness um so I think that’s important part of my story too and it kept me fighting you know uh fighting for my life fighting for me, fighting to not give up mothering fighting to um not allow how people who knew about it judge me and stuff like that so um I am very proud of myself for not letting that deficit stop me from uh growing and um believing in myself again and uh believing I am a beautiful woman.

APPENDIX B:

Interview Guide – Sample Interview Questions

Appendix B: Interview Guide – Sample Interview Questions

Interview 1: Background/Upbringing

Goal: This interview is about me getting to know you. – Life History

RQ: How do Black women living in South Georgia perceive and resist controlling images within the context of their intersectional identities?

1. How would you describe yourself to someone who does not know you (Obama, 2019)?

2. Share a story about your family background/dynamic.
   a. Where were you born?
   b. What were your parents like?

3. Share a story about your childhood upbringing. What are some of the details that stand out the most (Obama, 2019)?
   a. What were your schooling experiences?
   b. What was your neighborhood like?

4. How would you describe your childhood self?

5. Share a story about your transition to adulthood.
   a. What were some employment experiences before this job?

Interview 2: Lived Experiences

Goal: This interview is about concrete details of experiences. – Lived Experience

RQ: How do controlling images impact their mental, physical, and/or spiritual health?

1. What is one specific life experience that contributed to who you are today (Obama, 2019)?

2. Share a story about your daily activities beginning from when you wake to when you sleep.

3. Share a story about your experiences as a leader.
   a. How would you define leadership?
   b. Describe your relationships with your students, peers, and/or mentees.

4. How did you end up living in South Georgia? Share a story about your current home environment and household dynamic.
   a. Married? Children? Class?

5. Describe your social relationships.

a. How do you feel supported (or not)?
b. How do you stay centered (or not)?

Interview 3: Meaning of Experiences

Goal: This interview is about making meaning/learning of the lived experiences. – Meaning/Learning

RQ: How do Black women make meaning of American social structures that influence their lived experiences?

1. How would you define yourself after sharing parts of your life with me?

2. If you could empower Black women in America, what advice would you give?

3. What does Black womanhood mean to you?

4. What does self-love look like for you?

5. Share a story about how you imagine yourself and your life in the next year.

6. What are some recommendations that you have for decision makers in your personal, professional, or social world?

7. Would you like to add anything else about your life story before we complete the last activity? This question transitions participants to creating life maps on 8.5” by 11” paper.

APPENDIX C:

Participant Recruitment Letter

Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Letter

Greetings (participant),

My name is Mirakal Jackson. This letter is to request your participation in a research project that investigates the lived experiences of Black women leaders living in South Georgia. Specifically, I am interested in Black women who are open to honestly sharing their life experiences within the context of their identity as a Black woman leader. The overarching goal of this research is to investigate, document, and report how controlling images influence the perceptions, experiences, opportunities, and/or health of five Black women living in South Georgia through conducting three 90-minute life story interviews based on their background, lived experiences, and how they make meaning of their experiences. *Controlling images* can best be understood as stereotypes that control how an individual is perceived and treated by others.

This research project will employ *narrative inquiry*, a storytelling qualitative approach that seeks to uplift the voices of marginalized groups and promote justice to improve discriminatory practices and policies. Each interview will be audio-recorded for research transcription purposes and recordings will be deleted immediately after transcription is complete. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. Research data will be collected over a span of roughly 2 weeks, though, if there are scheduling conflicts, this time span will be extended. Data will be kept in a secure location to maintain confidentiality and participant protection. Your name and any other identifiable information will not be included in my dissertation. To ensure this, I will encrypt all data and you will be asked to check my findings.

I am a doctoral student at Valdosta State University in Valdosta, GA. This research is part of my dissertation. I am working under the direction of my dissertation committee. My dissertation chair is Dr. M. Denise Lovett (malovett@valdosta.edu). If you have any questions regarding my research, please contact me at mirajackson@valdosta.edu. For your protection, this project has been reviewed according to the Valdosta State University and Institutional Review Board procedures governing your participation in this research. If you understand the parameters of this research study and are willing to participate, please confirm you meet the criteria before giving consent:

- I am at least 18 years old.
- I identify as a Black woman leader.
- I live in South Georgia (south of Cordele).
- I am willing to openly and honestly share my life story within the context of my identity.

Note. During the first interview, you may be asked to disclose certain demographics that may include your age, social class, religious affiliation, sexuality, educational attainment, relationship status, parental status, and place of birth. Each demographic will assist me during the data analysis process.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Mirakal Jackson at mirajackson@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

APPENDIX D:

Research Statement for Recorded Interview

Appendix D: Research Statement for Recorded Interview

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled "Black Women as Active Champions: A Narrative Analysis of How Black Women in South Georgia Resist Controlling Images," which is being conducted by Mirakal Jackson, a student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to investigate, document, and report how controlling images influence the perceptions, experiences, opportunities, and/or health of five Black women living in South Georgia. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study outside of greater self-awareness. However, your responses may help us learn more about how Black women cope with, survive in, and resist differential treatment based on controlling images. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

Participation should take approximately 4.5 hours total per participant. The interviews will be audio-taped in order to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed. No one will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview will serve as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Mirakal Jackson at mirajackson@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

APPENDIX E:

Official Interview – Sample Interview Responses

Appendix E: Official Interview – Sample Interview Responses

Interviewee 1 (00:14:31):

He used to have me in the room as he interrogated me. And you know how you go like this right here? <enacts protective movement> “I'm gonna wait til’ you put your hand out,” which he used to wait and make me put my hand out so he can slap me. It <long pause> was hard you know. But I endured it, you know. It wasn't me that walked away. God came in. If it wasn't for God, I promise you I’d still be there taking it, hoping that it gets better, still going through. God was fed up because I didn't deserve it. I didn't do anything but work. I was too scared to look a man in his eyes. Always dropped my head.

Interviewer (00:15:34):

Wow. Wow. Was he the same husband that had you put your head down when another man would come around?

Interviewee 1 (00:15:40):

Yes, very controlling, yes. I could be out with him. Say we went out that night and I'm just sitting at the bar with him or whatever and somebody will come up and say, “Hey, [Grace], how you doing?” and give me a hug <pause> Oh my God. He beat me right then.

Interviewer (00:16:04):

Right in front of the person?

Interviewee 1 (00:16:05):

Yes, yes, I'm running to vehicles, trying to jump in people’s vehicles so that I can get away from it, yes.

Interviewer (00:16:14):

Did he do it in front of them? Or did he- Interviewee

1 (00:16:16):

Yeah, [close friend’s name]-

Interviewer (00:16:17):

Did they do anything to try to stop him?

Interviewee 1 (00:16:20):

[Close friend’s name], she actually slapped him in the face with her shoe and spit in his face because, you know, she was really tired of the way he was treating me in front of people…

Interviewee 1 (00:17:10):

… he knows that God has completely took him out of my heart. He always says he's sorry. You know, he says he wished that he can turn back the hands of time. He would treat me better, he said. But I never would give him a chance now to show me that he's better. Because you left me with nothing to believe that you would treat me better.

Interviewer (00:24:52):

Do you feel like you easily adapt to change?

Interviewee 5 (00:24:54):

Yeah, absolutely. I'm not one of those people, that's like, "No, I hate change." No, bring it on. Come on, let's do it. You know, especially if it's better, you know, so we're starting to get some new processes now, but I'm like we should have been this way from the beginning. I don't know what y'all got going on because y'all was doing stuff that's going to have people sue y'all you know? So it should have been this way. So I'm glad they're talking about seeing that there was a problem with the old. So now let's change it, yeah.

Interviewer (00:25:19):

Sounds good. Do you have dreams of being like … promoted?

Interviewee 5 (00:25:28):

I'm waiting for this guy to go and push the retirement button because he needs to go…do I have aspirations of being a branch manager? Yes. Do I think that it would technically work within a time frame of 5 to 10 years in my current company? No, because if my branch manager moves, my assistant branch manager can move up. I would be not packing nothing, but I will be transitioning to the assistant branch manager, but that branch manager that just got there, she's going to be there for a while. So if she plans on working another 20 to 30 years, what does that leave me stuck in? The assistant branch manager role.

Interviewer (00:26:58):

Would you ever like… leave to pursue that leadership?

Interviewee 5 (00:27:02):

Absolutely, absolutely. But then once again … everything is just kind of tight when it comes down to working in the branches.

Interviewer (00:27:37):

Yeah, it seems like it's like based off of seniority and not really like leadership qualities?

Interviewee 5 (00:27:48):

Kind of. Because I can say that in our branch … with [colleague names] having seniority, [names] get priority vacations and can alter the schedules…You know how that go.

APPENDIX F:

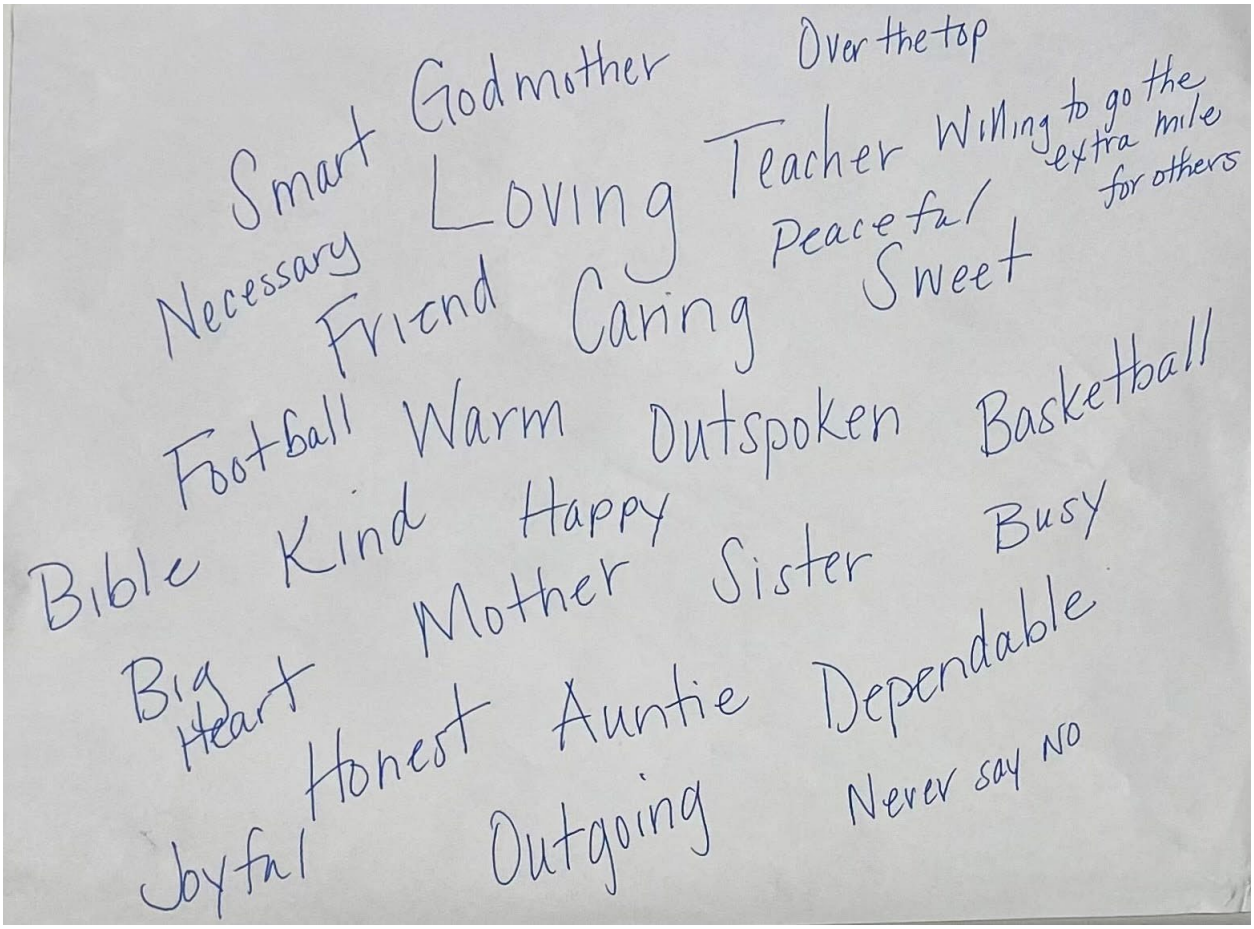
Participant Life Map Sample

Appendix F: Participant Life Map Sample

Instructions: At the end of the third interview, on a 8.5" by 11" white paper, ask the participant to create a life map or word map of their life story and perceptions to answer the overarching research question: What can be learned from the life histories, lived experiences, and perceptions of five Black women leaders in South Georgia? *Note*. The participant has creative freedom.

Figure 1

Passion's Word Map Example



APPENDIX G:

IRB Approval and Exemption Form

Appendix G: IRB Approval and Exemption Form

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
For the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04331-2022 **Responsible Researcher(s):** Mirakal Jackson

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Marilyn Lovett (01.31.2023)

Project Title: *U.S. Black Women as Active Champions: A Narrative Analysis of How U.S. Black Women in South Georgia Resist Controlling Images.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Exempt guidelines **permit** recording interview sessions for the purpose of creating an accurate transcript. Recordings must be **deleted immediately** upon creation of the transcript. Exempt guidelines **prohibit** the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recordings.*
- *The research consent statement must be read aloud to participants at the start of each interview session, and documented in the transcript.*
- *Pseudonym lists and corresponding name lists must be kept in separate, secure files.*
- *Upon completion of the research study, all collected data (e.g. transcripts, data set, name/email lists, etc.) must be securely maintained and accessible only by the researcher(s) for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*

☒ ***If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.***

Elizabeth Ann Olphie *12.13.2022*
Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.

Revised: 06.02.16