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Navigating Gendered Racism through Coping and Radical Healing: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Black Women's Mental Health in Doctoral Programs

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Navigating Gendered Racism Through Coping and Radical Healing: An Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis of Black Women's Mental Health in Doctoral Programs

by

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Abstract

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Professor Vetta Sanders Thompson, Chair

Gendered racism has emerged as a pervasive mental health concern among Black women doctoral students. However, there is a scarcity of literature on the strategies used by Black women doctoral students to maintain mental well-being while navigating gendered racism. To address the current gaps in scientific knowledge, this dissertation conducted individual semistructured interviews of 15 Black women doctoral students at universities in the United States and used interpretative phenomenological analysis and the lens of Black feminist theory and intersectionality as guiding theoretical frameworks to examine their narratives. The study findings provide insight into coping strategies and the role of radical healing as a way of resisting oppression while in a doctoral program. Data analysis resulted in three themes describing coping strategies: (a) navigating identity and social dynamics, (b) incorporating coping strategies and wellness, and (c) healing and activism in the pursuit of equity. Healing and activism encompassed strategies of radical healing. Implications for research and practice are offered.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The power of a free mind consists of trusting your own mind to ask the questions that need to be asked and your own capacity to figure out the strategies you need to get those questions answered. Over time, this requires building communities that make this kind of intellectual and political work possible. (Collins, 2012, p. 90)

Within the halls and buildings of academia exist the shadows of oppression and marginalization, which cast a poignant reckoning, gendered racism, a kind of discrimination toward an individual based on interlocking identities (e.g., race and gender; Shahid et al., 2018; Spates et al., 2020; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). Historically, Black women enrolled in higher education institutions in the United States report having experienced racialized and/or gendered oppressive encounters. These ongoing acts of gendered racism are driven by institutional laws and individual beliefs denying equity and inclusion, which began with the enslavement of people of African descent and resulted in practices that produced isolation, exploitation, and traumatic experiences. During the era of slavery, Black people were forbidden from acquiring literacy skills (Patton & Croom, 2016). The enslaved would face punishment in the form of physical abuse, including whippings or a finger amputation if they were caught (Span, 2005). Knowing that proficiency in basic reading and writing is essential to socioeconomic progress, individuals of African descent were excluded from educational advancement (Diepenbrock, 1993; McCluskey, 2014). Racism in this form not only affected the perception of individuals of African descent regarding acceptance in society but also shaped Black women's mental health and overall well-being.

In 1862, when Mary Jane Patterson became the first Black woman to graduate from Oberlin College, a predominately White institution (PWI) in the northern state of Ohio (Patton &

Croom, 2016), an awareness of radical hope and optimism around social justice in education developed. However, following the abolishment of slavery in 1865, the inception of Jim Crow in 1887 forced segregation in public spaces. When the Morrill Act of 1890 passed, allowing separate higher education institutions to be developed for Black people in Southern states, many were convinced that their academic journey would be exempt from rigid racial restrictions. Yet, evidence reveals that Black women encountered the enforcement of harsh stereotypes that dictated their path, even within historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs; Njoku et al., 2017). These stereotypes resulted in Black women being confined to gender-specific programs taught separately from those offered to Black men, which left them to navigate academic spaces that contradicted equality and led to the underrepresentation of Black women attending universities (Patton & Croom, 2016).

Unfortunately, mandates to desegregate academic institutions did not end negative cross-racial interactions (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). The 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* overturned the Supreme Court's earlier *Plessy v. Ferguson* "separate but equal" doctrine. The *Brown* decision provided a path toward the goal of advancing equality in education. K–12 and higher education settings now had the potential to offer protection against exclusion, allowing African American people the same opportunities and experiences as their White peers. Though education policy created the foundation for civil rights issues to be addressed, there were challenges in higher education where White leaders and communities endorsed segregation, leading to variations in Black enrollment (Edouard, 2023). The court decision implied that Black students were relieved of subordination in educational settings; however, they were continually ostracized as victims of racially provoked violence and

intimidation (Bell, 2004). Cohen (2013) told stories of violence against Black students at the University of Georgia:

> In January 1961 UGA students, waving a "N****r Go Home" banner rioted outside Charlayne Hunter's dormitory, hoping to repeat the anti-Lucy mob's success by forcing the removal of Hunter, along with the other African American student, Hamilton Holmes, admitted to Georgia under a federal court order. (p. 17)

These astonishing encounters of violence, along with the complete historical context of Black educational efforts, influence institutional and individual beliefs about race in ways that continue to impact higher education. These examples show how targeted racialized and gendered oppression yields chaos and turmoil.

Graduate education settings, as is true of other academic settings, are modeled as inhibiting environments where race and gender oppression are embedded and continue to exist (Coll et al., 1996; Seaton et al., 2018). The underrepresentation of Black women at a PWI or HBCU serves as an example of the operation of the race and gender stereotypes that have been enforced. Although Black women make up 7% of the total United States population, they represent less than 5% in the STEM (e.g., science, technology, engineering, math) majors (Ireland et al., 2018). Focusing on doctoral education, the National Center for Education Statistics (2020) revealed that Black women pursuing research doctorate degrees represented 3.2% of the total doctoral students. In 2021, some 2,341 Black individuals earned a research doctorate (e.g., Ph.D., EdD), 1,552 (66.3%) of who were women (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics [NSCES], 2022). In 2020–2021, Black women accounted for 11.6% of doctorates compared to White women, who accounted for 61.4% (NSCES, 2022). In line with

these statistics, Agosto et al. (2015) showed that Black women are less likely to be admitted into a doctoral program compared to White women.

Figure 1

Doctoral Degrees Conferred by Race
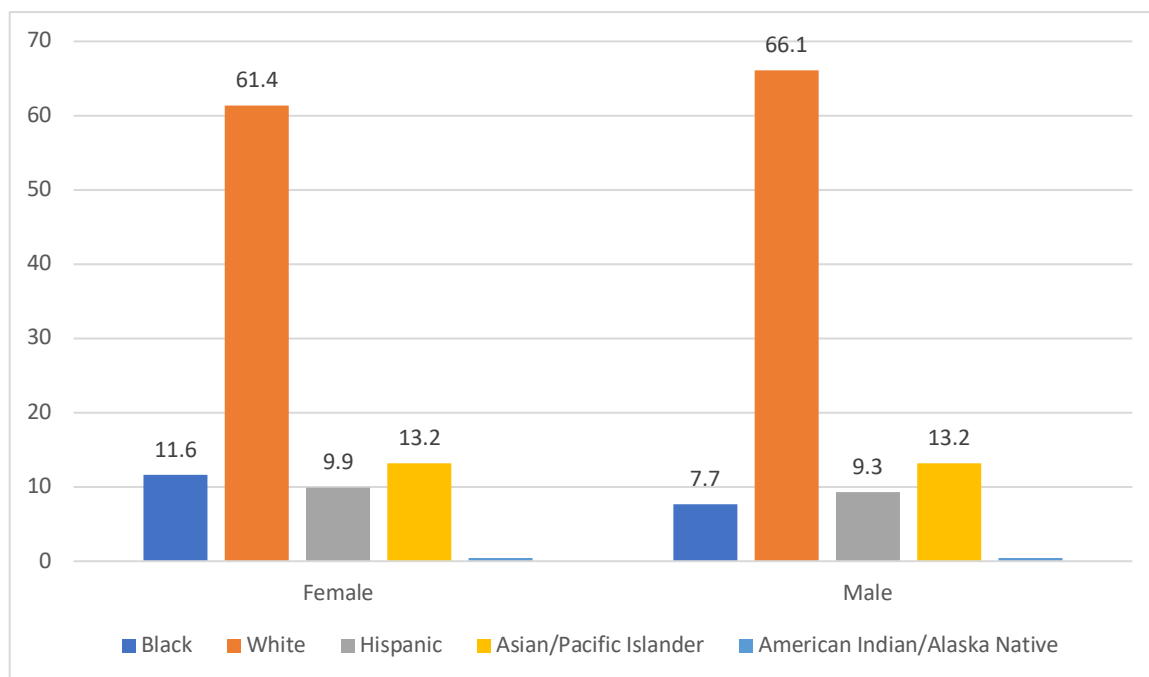
This significant disparity in doctoral degrees suggests a lack of diversity and equity in policy and ideals (American Association of University Women, 2023; Walker et al., 2009). For Black women enrolled at a PWI, HBCU, or other minority-serving institutions, this paucity may contribute to the individual and institutional social justice concerns that students are exposed to or directly experience (Siggelkow, 1991), and specifically for Black women doctoral students the interlocking oppression of racism and sexism. However, strategies to change these disparities remain understudied in the scholarly literature.

Statement of the Problem

In social, economic, and institutional contexts, Black women experience gendered racism, which is of the utmost importance for higher education because (a) the hegemony that exists in society also exists in higher education, and (b) emerging adulthood may prompt an onset of mental health concerns. Gendered racism combines concerns of both race discrimination and sex discrimination, and additionally influences social and political practices, laws, and ideals that ignore challenges specific to being a Black woman, how gendered racial stereotypes are enforced, and why Black women must navigate resiliency strategies (Collins, 2009; Hughes et al., 2024; McCallum et al., 202; McGee et al., 2019; Womack et al., 2023). Black women doctoral students face gendered racism in many ways, including disproportionately limited access to mentorship and opportunities for advancement as the number of Black faculty, particularly Black women faculty, whom they can seek identity-relation with is low (Minnett et al., 2019; Walkington, 2017). Yet, a relationship with a mentor or advisor is essential to the successful completion of a doctoral degree (Kador & Lewis, 2007).

Gendered racism is being described by Black women and ignored by faculty and peers (Chavous et al., 2004; McPherson, 2017); their intellectual capacity is doubted (McPherson, 2017); and they receive negative messages on skin tone, hair type, and body image, with White features being viewed as more acceptable (Awad et al., 2015). These encounters may present as a challenge and negatively affect health outcomes comprising implications for mental health (Jones, Womack et al., 2021). Among Black Americans and the college population in general in the United States there is a widespread crisis in mental health (Williams & Lewis, 2019, 2021). In a report by the Healthy Minds survey of over 76,000 students, 41% reported experiencing depression, 36% experienced anxiety, and 29% had self-injurious behavior (Lipson et al., 2023).

In addition, in a national sample of over 43,000 participants, Black undergraduate and graduate students reported experiencing mental health issues (40%) and feeling so depressed they found it difficult to function (34%; Lipson et al., 2018). Szymanski and Lewis (2016) examined gendered racism among a sample of 212 Black women college students (3% graduate students) and found that experiences of gendered racism were related to psychological distress. Shavers and Moore (2014a) found that gendered racism experiences at PWIs took a toll on the overall well-being of African American female doctoral students. Although, recent scholarship has indicated that incorporating strategies to navigate gendered racism could positively influence mental health outcomes (Jones, Leath, et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2016; Womack et al., 2023), to date research that explores the interconnectedness of gendered racism, mental health and strategies used to navigate the experience by Black women doctoral students is limited.

Under favorable conditions, Black women doctoral students may use coping and radical healing strategies to overcome obstacles of gendered racism to assist with program completion. Coping is a strategy used by college students to manage stress, but it is individualistic and solely focuses on symptom reduction (Lewis et al., 2012; Shavers & Moore, 2014a; Utsey et al., 2008). Amid adversity, coping is the art of resilience and tenacity and produces benefits of self-fulfillment and self-efficacy (Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). Minnettet al. (2019) suggested that for Black women doctoral students coping includes having a practice of communal support to aid them in achieving educational goals while they "annihilate systemic oppression" (p. 225). Radical healing consists of resisting oppression and marginalization, propelling individuals to recognize and confront sociopolitical disparities affecting their community and work together to overcome them (Ginwright, 2008; Henderson et al., 2021). Whereas coping focuses on symptom reduction, radical healing addresses the root causes of injustice (French et al., 2020). The radical

healing framework developed by French et al. (2020) includes *critical consciousness*, an awareness of social, political, and cultural injustices, *strength and resistance*, embracing one's vulnerabilities, fostering resilience and self-love, *radical hope*, unwavering optimism in changing systemic inequality, *collectivism*, shared healing journey and communal support, and *cultural authenticity and self-knowledge*, embracing one's cultural identity. Their framework exemplifies the intersectional nature of oppressed groups' lived experiences and proposes social action to move beyond individual-level factors. Although no studies have used the term *radical healing* to explore the dimensions of Black women doctoral students' lives, some of the theoretical and empirical literature has recommended that Black women doctoral students build a supportive network, embrace racial and cultural identity, and leverage peer and faculty mentoring relationships (Patton, 2009), all of which fall under a framework of radical healing. However, radical healing has not been studied collectively or with the aim of resisting oppression. Regarding mental health care, empirical research has highlighted that a conscious effort to navigate stress is important to mental well-being (Chen et al., 2019; Minnett et al., 2019; Robinson & Snipes, 2009). Emerging scholarship has identified coping and radical healing as tools to help individuals—Black women and youth in particular—navigate the burden of discriminatory actions to relieve mental health challenges (French et al., 2020; Ginwright, 2010; Hope et al., 2014; Jean et al., 2023; Robinson & Snipes, 2009).

The Black doctoral women students in Shavers and Moore's (2014a) and Lewis et al.'s (2013) studies explained being part of the bigger whole or relying on a supportive network, which underscores cultivating and maintaining community (e.g., family and community support) as an effective strategy to motivate students to persist through doctoral studies. Additionally, both studies identified "prove them wrong syndrome," focusing on how Black women doctoral

students redefining themselves to combat negative stereotypes by overworking, which can "take a toll on psychological and physical health" (Lewis et al., 2013, p. 13). Together, Shavers and Moore (2014a) and Lewis et al. (2013) illustrated John Henryism (James, 1994), where individual strengths are used to fulfill goals of hard work, yet there is an adverse outcome of strain, stress, and imposter syndrome (McGee et al., 2019). John Henryism is an important concept for this dissertation, which seeks to understand how in addition to individual coping strategies, collective strategies rooted in radical healing can help students navigate gendered racism, for instance, fostering a sense of empowerment and cultural affirmation. A vital aspect of mental health and well-being is focusing on and increasing coping and radical healing and reducing encounters and experiences of gendered racism (Burton et al., 2020; Hammonds et al., 2023). However, the literature on coping as a potential mediator of mental health outcomes of experiencing gendered racism is limited (Szymanski & Stewart, 2010). Additionally, radical healing is a new area of scholarship (French et al., 2020; Ginwright, 2010), and to date no research studies that address radical healing among Black women doctoral students have been published. Scholarship in this area focuses mainly on Black adolescent youth (Ginwright, 2010, 2018), but emerging literature is focusing more specifically on Black adults (Leath et al., 2023; McNeil-Young et al., 2023), indicating help for individuals to identify oppressive systems and combat them through community engagement. For this dissertation, validating and empowering the voices of Black women doctoral students are central to creating supportive and inclusive environments during their academic journey.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

Research into how coping and radical healing influence Black women doctoral students' ability to navigate gendered racism (McGee et al., 2019; McNeil-Young et al., 2023; Shavers &

Moore, 2014a, 2019; Truong & Museus, 2012) is limited. This dissertation study sought to address this gap. The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological research (IPA) study was to (a) explore how Black women experience gendered racism while pursuing a doctoral education and (b) examine how coping and radical healing are used as protective factors for navigating gendered racism in institutional settings. By exploring coping mechanisms and radical healing, I intended to uncover insights into how Black women doctoral students use strategies for managing stress can confront systemic challenges. In exploring this topic I aspired to amplify the voices of Black women doctoral students, provide knowledge to higher education institutions, and attain a greater depth of understanding of the dynamic of gendered racism, particularly in doctoral education. Collins (2009) and Crenshaw (1989) emphasized researching Black women to comprehensively address their unique challenges and empower their voice through the sharing of stories. BFT and intersectionality were used as guiding theoretical frameworks to address the gap in the literature through the research question, How do Black women doctoral students describe and identify strategies of coping and radical healing as a way of navigating gendered racism?

For this dissertation, the experiences of gendered racism in higher education institutions among Black women doctoral students and coping and radical healing strategies they use to help manage mental health are studied. By delving into their lived experiences, this study centered the voices of Black women doctoral students integrating stories of critical awareness, which amplifies their encounters as a specific demographic group and can inform policies to be inclusive. Methodologically, it provides a representative sample of individuals who are most impacted by gendered racism. Additionally, by addressing gendered racism in doctoral programs, this study acknowledges the challenges targeted specifically toward Black women, providing a

greater understanding of how intersectionality is at play in doctoral education and higher education. This understanding of intersectionality could contribute to the development and enhancement of theories that consider the experiences of Black women. Last, highlighting the need for targeted mental health approaches for Black women doctoral students could enable tailoring of mental health frameworks to address the intersectionality of race and gender as well as the barriers and protective factors that can support mental health needs. Findings from this dissertation study have implications for research and practice that conceptualizes aspects of gendered racism and strategies that could help Black women manage and ameliorate gendered racism in institutional settings.

Theoretical Framework

This study is intentionally guided by two frameworks: Black feminist theory (BFT) and intersectionality. Below, I outline each guiding framework and illustrate how and why these frameworks will be used for this study.

Black Feminist Theory

BFT provided a foundational framework that guided this work. BFT is an understanding of institutionalized racism among Black women that influences injustice across social positions (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, class, education; Davis & Brown, 2017). Currently, BFT combines aspects of intersectionality, womanism, and critical race theory, all of which amplify the voices of Black women and people of color, detailing solidarity in opposing oppression (Carbado et al., 2013; Collins, 2009). Therefore, BFT encompasses both acknowledgment and understanding of the perpetuation of discrimination based on intersecting identities and advocating for social change (Collins, 2009). The basis of BFT focuses on exposing sociohistorical systems that ignore and omit Black scholars, Black thought, and Black life (Collins, 2009), through a matrix

of domination. Additionally, it supports Black women in defining themselves through self-reflection, prioritizing wellness, and living freely (Collins, 2009).

Theories are limited in recognizing the intersection of race, gender, and class. Therefore, Black women intellectuals and artists (e.g., bell hooks, Angela Davis, Zora Neale Hurston) articulated, supported, and participated in social justice that served Black women through "poetry, music, essays, and the like" (Collins, 2009, p. 11). Particularly, Collins (1986) posited that Black feminism emerged as a response to social movements inadequately addressing the concerns of Black women, including dismantling systems of oppression that not only influence Black women but all other oppressed and marginalized populations (French et al., 2020). Historically, the Feminist Movement centered on the concerns of middle-class White women (hooks, 2000) and the Civil Rights Movement-centered concerns of all Black people (Crenshaw, 2002). Thus, Black women have long been aware of how White supremacy intersects race and gender and how this power structure is not representative of the complex dynamics yielded by a lack of inclusivity.

Conceptualization of an intersectional lens with BFT recognizes the interconnectedness of Black women's identity and their experiences, which differs from that of White women and Black men (Lewis et al., 2013). Intersectionality, coined by Kimerblè Crenshaw, indicates social identities intersect creating a hierarchy of oppression and privilege, that ultimately neglects all aspects of Black women (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989; Rankin & Thomas, 2020). Intersectionality is similar to Moya Bailey's concept *misogynoir*—the connection of misogyny and anti-Black racism directed at Black women (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). Misogynoir is important to acknowledge because it highlights dehumanization that is experienced by Black women through media, negative stereotyping, and literary arts and reinforces biased views that situate

constraints and disadvantage in education, healthcare, politics, and economics. *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised*, Rebecca Wanzo (2015) examined media-created false narratives about Black women that contribute to social marginalization. BFT proposes that given such experience, a Black women's role in addressing the injustice, can in turn further influence the negative stereotypes of being an angry Black woman (Davis & Brown, 2017). Thus, misogynoir emphasizes the goal of patriarchy to maintain a multidimensional social hierarchy rooted in racial and gender bias as well as limited access to economic and educational opportunities. BFT and misogynoir provide insight into broader theoretical complexities (e.g., race and gender) and specific examples of discrimination rooted in the intersection of identities.

Collins (2009) explained multiple key aspects of BFT as essential to challenging systems that oppress and "suppress the ideas of Black women" (p. 7). The first distinctive aspect is a dialectical relationship that emphasizes intersecting systems of power used to inhibit Black women, which is connected to Black women's liberation. BFT recognizes that Black women live with their intersecting identities at the forefront, investing in activism that seeks to address social, political, and economic inequality. The second aspect involves acknowledgment of diversity among Black women, discounting descriptions of Black women as a homogenous group. Although gendered racism is a common experience for Black women, Black women occupy different spaces and have unique experiences, emphasizing the need to center the diversity of their perspectives on how they contribute to activism and reshaping societal norms. The third aspect of BFT highlights the dialogical relationship between theory and practice. Black women's understanding of oppression is deepened by their lived experience and thus informs practical application that is inclusive of diverse realities. The collective strength of Black women inspires social action and ongoing social change. BFT's fourth aspect involves fostering a

dynamic that is inclusive of all Black women, including those inside and outside of academic institutions, as these relationships create an exchange of rich experiences and ideas leading to collective understanding and shared goals in the pursuit of social justice. The fifth aspect stresses the importance of collaboration and coalition building to achieve social justice. This component recognizes the importance of forming alliances using resources from Black women scholars and community activists upholding communal empowerment.

Although the overt structure of racism in our society is no longer present in the form of slavery, this genocidal event and the inception of race- and gender-based stereotypes (e.g., gendered racism) have resulted in various challenges that shape the way Black women are treated in higher education settings (Collins, 2009; Evans, 2016). Davis and Brown (2017) contended that Black women have an exclusive understanding of the social, political, and educational barriers impacting them, putting them in a position to influence systems that "are dominated by cultures that have not been socialized to account for the unique position of Black women" (p. 2). The social structure of the United States makes racism and sexism a common occurrence in any setting. PWIs and HBCUs involve ongoing tensions, and Black women as teachers and learners can reflect on their cultural suppression and refocus critical consciousness for the betterment of self and society, fostering race and gender equity. Ultimately, Black women use challenges and injustice to create a positive societal shift, because being marginalized creates a special standpoint as an "outsider-within" who understands the contradictions of racist ideology and can distinguish the truth about their culture and experiences (Wilder et al., 2013). Founded by Moya Bailey and Brittany Cooper, the Crunk Feminist Collective "emphasizes the self-care and empowerment of Black women" (Brewer, 2020, p. 93).

Black women doctoral students experience a double-edged sword because of being Black and female, and the *double edge* refers to need for Black women to cope in ways that negatively impact their overall well-being and to choose between coping/persisting and their mental health (Shavers & Moore, 2014b). For Black women doctoral students, recognizing the intersectionality of their social identities provides a lens through which they can view their experiences and the power dynamics that shape those experiences. This recognition validates their reality, including challenges that are specific to being a Black woman, which entices Black women doctoral students to collectively be involved in activism to create a culturally humble environment (Minnett et al., 2019; Stewart, 2019).

In higher education, institutional leaders have failed to incorporate policies and practices that uplift Black women and all people of color on campus (Patton & Haynes, 2018). As a system created to educate White men, campuses need an intersectional lens when implementing equity initiatives to uncover the different inequalities based on overlapping social identities is essential (Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991; Patton & Haynes, 2018). BFT posits that individuals experience discrimination and microaggressions differently based on their identities (Morales, 2014). The use of BFT for this dissertation was ideal because it inspires Black women doctoral students to use their critical consciousness while continually working toward transforming academia.

Intersectionality Theory

The work of Patricia Hill Collin's introducing BFT to confront the matrix that complicates lived experiences of the oppressed and marginalized, inspired Kimberlè Crenshaw coinage of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a framework for understanding how intersecting systems of oppression, like racism and sexism, form experiences for individuals with more than

one targeted social identity, like being Black and a woman (Fields & Franke, 2023; Grimes et al., 2023). Both BFT and intersectionality relate in that they challenge feminist perspectives that undermine and ignore Black women's challenges and illuminate Black women's dedication to "social thought designed to oppose oppression" (Collins, 2009, p.11). Addressing challenges that shape inequities for groups with multiple and intersecting identities involves a commitment to social justice and liberation (Oyewuwo & Walton, 2023). This approach emphasizes that oppression exists and the importance of creating intersectional interventions (Walton & Boone, 2021).

Kimberlè Crenshaw (1989) introduced *intersectionality* to explain the relationships between many facets of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, ableism) and identity (e.g., race and gender, disabled, lower class) among Black women. This theoretical framework suggests that it is only possible to understand the problems faced by Black women by recognizing and accepting that discrimination against them is common. Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier, and Beverly Smith at the Combahee River Collective (1977) enacted this framework by organizing retreats to engage in conversations that reject single-axis thinking that does not consider the racist acts that take place against Black women alone (Bowleg, 2017). Similar to the theoretical framing of BFT, the role of the Combahee River Collective was to create solidarity for Black women to engage in feminist movements and contribute to academic discourse through a lens that tells the story of oppression and liberation. In the Combahee River Collective Statement, participants detailed notions of intersectionality and the role of Black women:

> This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the

case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and

therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political

movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than

ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be

recognized as human, levelly human, is enough (p. 4).

Black women's voices should be central when discussing intersectionality of Blackness and

womanhood as a way of considering intersectional invisibility, which Bowleg (2017) clarified:

"This invisibility has real-world implications for interventions, public policy, and social justice

because you can't research or develop solutions to social problems you can't see" (p. 511). The

experiences of Black women are the drivers of institutional and structural change.

The motivation for intersectional thinking is fully capturing the experiences of

communities that are often forgotten. In "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity

Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," Crenshaw (1991) highlighted antiracist

frameworks missing integral components toward intersectionality. In addition to the stereotype

of mamification, which figures Black women as nurturing and submissive, sometimes Black

women are victims of invisible labor, expected to be self-sacrificing for the greater good to make

society more equitable. In academia, this is known as the "grind culture," which Tricia Hersey

(2022) discussed as the pressure enforced to be productive and competitive. Black women are

faced with the challenges of resisting that oppression all while maintaining success in their field

of work. All this work taking a psychological and physical toll on well-being (Hersey, 2022).

Incorporating, "rest as resistance," Hersey posited a social justice framework through the

development of the Nap Ministry, an organization dedicated to advocacy on reducing burnout in

academia. Instead of constantly performing and proving worth through productivity, this thought

process invokes setting boundaries to, in-turn lend policies to support acts of rest, an approach needed for Black women.

Black women doctoral students could incorporate intersectional practices in their lives through rest, coping, and radical healing. Prioritizing self-care and self-preservation are acts of coping and radical healing that reject grinding and empower Black women doctoral students. In Bowleg's (2008, 2012) research, self-preservation concerns thriving, highlighting the importance of strengths-based research to understand resilience in the face of adversity. For Black women doctoral students, the process of enduring oppression, surviving the effects, and resisting discrimination, tell the story of Black women's experiences in the U.S. being shaped by multiple identities and the transformational and novel approaches that focus on multiple-axis analyses.

Intersectionality theory was used for the current study to provide an understanding of the complexity of identities for Black women doctoral students. A Black woman can hold multiple identities and those can change at any given time (Carbado et al., 2013). Moreover, intersectionality is used to analyze and understand ways oppression is being addressed, including intersectional systems of support. Last, intersectionality theory supports centering the voices of Black women. This approach promotes collectivism and ensures that the research on Black women is conducted by Black women. This theory has not yet been used to explore the protective factor of radical healing, with Black women experiencing gendered racism while in a doctoral program. Incorporating this framework helped me to explore the literature on gendered racism by investigating both coping and radical healing. An intersectional lens can explain and conceptualize the experiences of Black women in academia that shape how Black women incorporate strategies of wellness (Joseph, 2003; Lewis et al., 2017).

Chapter Summary

This dissertation examines Black women doctoral students and their sense of coping and radical healing concerning their mental health. Research offers additional insight for understanding gendered racism and the mental health of Black women doctoral students. In the introduction chapter, I set the stage by providing background context to the historical roots of gendered racism in higher education institutions and its mental health implications for Black students. The next chapter is a comprehensive analysis of the literature on the Black women doctoral students' experiences in academia, emphasizing resilience factors of coping and radical healing. In Chapter 3, I outline the research methodology. Next, I provide findings from the study including the group experiential themes surrounding the relationship between gendered racism, mental health, coping, and radical healing. In the fifth chapter, I discuss the implications of the findings for research and practice and how the findings contribute to interventions that cater to Black women doctoral students' mental health.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The chapter highlights the significance of the intricate intersections of gendered racism, mental health, coping mechanisms, and the concept of radical healing for Black women doctoral students. The first section explains the multifaceted interpersonal and systemic layers of discrimination that Black women doctoral students encounter and could influence their mental health. Using this foundation, the second section focuses on the critical relationship between gendered racism and mental health, discussing the emotional and mental burden created by oppression and marginalization and impacting Black women doctoral students during their doctoral attainment. Next, the coping mechanisms adopted by Black women doctoral students while facing the psychological effects of gendered racism are reviewed. The fourth section of this chapter highlights the concept of radical healing, centering holistic approaches of community support, activism, and changes to structural inequality. The chapter concludes with implications that seek to contribute to the interlocking dynamics shaping the mental health of Black women doctoral students.

Critical Observations of Gendered Racism

In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action. (Lorde, 1984, p. 111).

Drawing on the double jeopardy of racism and sexism, or *gendered racism* (Essed, 1991), scholars have exposed the social construction of oppression (e.g., being Black and female) to explain why minority populations are less likely to have the same equitable opportunities as their counterparts (e.g., the majority White counterparts; Jones et al., 2020). Gendered racism is defined as discrimination and oppression against an individual based on their race and gender identities (Spates et al., 2020). More recently, Laster Pirtle and Wright (2021) identified

structural gendered racism encompassing structural racism and structural sexism, including discriminatory policies and practices that reinforce race and gender inequity among Black women. An example of these structural -isms was the unacceptable mortality rates in the United States during COVID-19 that arose from mandates on essential workers to continue working and lack of access to quality health care (Laster Pirtle & Wright, 2021). Gendered racism has also been defined as a stressor caused by a combination of biases and microaggressions (Womack et al., 2023). Another term that has been conceptualized and measured when exploring the mental health of Black women is *gendered racial microaggressions*. Although gendered racial microaggression refers to the subtle slights and insults that minimize the experiences of people of color (Hill-Jarrett & Jones, 2021; Lewis et al., 2016; Sue et al., 2007), it still encompasses interpersonal experiences of racism based on the intersection of one's race and gender.

Racism refers to the oppression and marginalization of a group of people based on their race or ethnic background (Gooden et al., 2020). *Sexism* is the oppression and marginalization of a group of people based on their gender, usually involves individuals who identify as a woman, and is based on stereotypes of gender roles and behaviors. Sexism also includes cultural messages and institutional policies that oppress and marginalize women (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2009). Thomas et al. (2008) noted that gendered racism is present when stereotypes take precedence and influence interactions between individuals from the dominant vs. subordinate group, and for this reason racism and sexism cannot be thought of separately. Feminist scholar bell hooks (2014) discussed this interconnection as "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (p. 1), which is the foundation for patriarchy insisting that women are inferior. Misogynoir also combines these concepts, including deficit-focused

stereotypes that display hatred for Black women (Bailey & Trudy, 2018), perpetuating harmful assumptions affecting individual and community perceptions.

The challenges that Black women face are not unique in that other marginalized groups do not experience them; however, Black women's intersection of race and gender poses a unique threat to their human rights (Carter-Black, 2008; Lewis & Neville, 2015; Williams et al., 2020). Stereotypes place on Black women include the mammy (docile, obedient) and Sapphire (Angry) (Slay, 2023). The mammy is seen as submissive, nurturing, obedient, and often in a domestic role of serving others (Collins, 1986; Miller & Lensmire, 2020). She consistently provides and cares for others to meet her own needs and for self-preservation (Willoughby-Herard, 2014). The controlling image of the mammy satisfies White privilege, power, oppression, and racism through the subordination and submission of Black women to White individuals (Walkington, 2017). In higher education institutions, the workplace, and even in her own home, she provides intellectual support, emotional guidance, and maternal care (Howard-Baptiste, 2014). Opposite of the mammy is the Sapphire stereotype depicting Black women as angry, assertive, loud, aggressive, and emasculating (Wade et al., 2023). She is confrontational and difficult to get along with, leaving no room for conflict resolution (Jerald et al., 2017). In the media, she could be villainized and oversexualized (Jeffries & Jeffries, 2015). These stereotypes are examples of the historical racist tropes originating in slavery and systemic racism, shaping the distorted narratives about Black women.

A significant aspect of gendered racism is the acknowledgment of stereotypical ideas toward a marginalized group (Szymanski & Lewis, 2016; Williams & Lewis, 2019), such as intellectual capability being questioned and the isolation of Black women and people of color compared to their White counterparts (Walkington, 2017). In other words, the various gendered

racism challenges and barriers experienced by Black women have become commonplace (Lewis et al., 2017). Direct experiences with gendered racism have been recently explored in the empirical literature, detailing the ongoing distress it causes for individuals and communities. Yet, higher education institutions, the workplace, and healthcare settings continue to be places where members of marginalized communities experience underrepresentation, stereotyping, and limited access to resources (Burton et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2023). Although the deleterious effect of gendered racism on health has been explored among Black women, there is still more to know about factors that support aspects of well-being. There is even more to know about gendered racism among Black women doctoral students (McGee et al., 2019; Shavers & Moore, 2014a).

Current scholarship examining gendered racism includes data from national samples or in-depth interviews underscoring its effects, and strategies to navigate and address discriminatory practices. For example, Jones, Womack, et al. (2021) highlighted factors of identity shifting (e.g., adjusting behavior and language to conform to societal norms) and gendered racial identity centrality (e.g., race identity is a central part of one's sense of self), which suggests that coping strategies can be detrimental to mental health. In "Resistance and Gendered Racism" Middle-Class Black Women's Experiences Navigating Reproductive Health Care Systems," Howell's (2023) found that the thought process Black women endure before and during an incident around their race and gender that is central to their treatment impacts how Black women show up in an environment/system (e.g., health care setting). Furthermore, scholars have elucidated the need for tailored programs, interventions, and assessments to promote healthy coping strategies that are culturally aligned and create a sense of community that is beneficial for marginalized groups in navigating gendered racism (Spates et al., 2020). This literature provided a foundation for

conceptualizing the relevance of gendered racism among Black individuals, and Black women in particular. However, a vital next step would be understanding the effects and coping strategies for Black women doctoral students.

Gendered Racism in Higher Education

Understanding gendered racism and how it contributes to the mental health of Black women doctoral students is crucial given the current societal and political landscape of higher education. Institutions of higher education including PWIs, HBCUs, and Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs) continue to be controversial in the ways marginalized groups are discounted, through harsh and hostile interactions (Davis & Brown, 2017; Haynes, 2019). At PWIs, racial stereotyping, microaggressions, and tokenism continue to elicit White dominance (Hollingsworth et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2013; Morales, 2014; Neal-Jackson, 2020; Sue et al., 2010). One example is Halloween costuming, where students use costumes or blackface paint to demean people of color, through their point of view (Meuller et al., 2007). Although HBCUs and HSIs are designed to uplift Black and Hispanic students, gendered racism can still occur toward Black women. Black women at HBCUs share stories as survivors of sexual violence, shedding light on the dynamics of race and gender oppression (Dickens et al., 2020; Lindquist et al., 2016). Additionally, more research is needed, but at HSIs Black women report experiences of emotional stress and isolation from gendered racism (Willis et al., 2019). Gendered racism exists across diverse higher education institution. Collins (2009) noted that stereotypes rooted in slavery continue to guide societal norms and policies in higher education settings and the culture generally.

Historical and current evidence suggests how social identity allows greater access to educational opportunities (American Association of University Women, 2023; National Center

for Educational Statistics, 2020), and in higher education research this inequity in treatment is identified as gendered racism through limited representation (Lewis et al., 2016). In the fall of 2023, the United States Supreme Court's decision on affirmative action consisted of prohibiting colleges from considering race as a potential factor for college admission (Nardi, 2024). Given BFT (Collins, 2009) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) suggest that race and gender must be considered to meet the needs of Black women, it is an ideal time to explore the extent of Black women's racist and sexist experiences in higher education as a doctoral student.

Gendered Racism in Higher Education Among Black Women Doctoral Students

Activist Malcolm X (1962), an advocate and supporter of Black women and altogether Black life, used his 1962 speech at the funeral of Ronald Stokes, who was killed by the Los Angels Police Department, to expose the covert policies and practices in America. He stated, "The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman." Malcolm X's stance is still relevant and true in the context of Black women in the United States. The term *Black* represents the race of individuals who are descendants of people of the African diaspora and may include individuals who report being Black or African American (United States Census Bureau, 2022). Over the past few decades, Black women's identity has been explained by gender-biased descriptions rooted in racial and gender oppression (Lewis & Neville, 2015; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Slay, 2023). These narratives attack and miss the value of who Black women are, particularly Black women in doctoral programs who face disparate obstacles throughout the doctoral process.

A considerable number of studies have concluded that Black women in college and graduate education are witness to or directly experience mistreatment related to their race and

gender (Clark & Adams, 2004; DeFour, 1996; Donovan, 2011; Evans, 2016; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Jean et al., 1997; Jackson et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2013; Neal-Jackson, 2020; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). Philomena Essed (1991), the coiner of *gendered racism*, suggested being a Black woman refers to a "hybrid phenomenon" (p. 31), involving the fusion or integration of discrimination occurring through many social identifiers including race and gender. This ideal is in direct correlation with the barriers that Black women doctoral students may face interpersonally (e.g., microaggressions) and structurally (e.g., access to resources). Additionally, biased evaluation practices (e.g., assumptions around academic merit) are a major disparity impacting Black women doctoral students. A 2021 study of 62 Black engineering and computing doctoral students conducted a phenomenological analysis to explore imposter syndrome/intellectual self-doubt (McGee et al., 2022). Findings from the study suggest that imposter syndrome is an extension of the racism already experienced, and students create narratives about themselves from stereotypes around intellectual inferiority and subordinate status (McGee et al., 2022). Similarly, Patterson-Stephens and Hernández (2019) revealed challenges of minority students including questions about Black women doctoral students' ability to matriculate in a doctoral program, including being discouraged from applying, and Black women's perceptions that this behavior stemmed from negative images and stereotypes that professors upheld. Their study confirmed stereotypes affecting how Black women are perceived academically and how Black women doctoral students make sense of their limited opportunities that create barriers toward academic success.

The literature to date describes what it is like for Black doctoral women to be a double minority in higher education institutions. Shavers and Moore (2014a) examined Black female doctoral students' perceptions of their experiences at a PWI. In this study, participants felt like

outsiders at school and at home, where peers in classroom settings and family members had skewed views and expectations, rooted in discriminatory norms, and neglected Black female doctoral students' unique experiences in academic settings. The theoretical concept of being an outsider is important to understand our work with Black women in Higher Education (Neal-Jackson, 2020; Wilder et al., 2013; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). In "Learning from the Outsider Within," Collins (1986) suggested continuing to conduct research that captures the barriers and discriminatory encounters, as well as Black women's perseverance in an unwelcoming environment. Conducting such research could shed light on the ways that Black women experience gendered racism and provide an opportunity for social change and equity in higher education institutions (Roland et al., 2021).

The research on Black doctoral women also identifies several other themes related to their encounters at PWIs, including "experiencing sexual harassment" (McGee & Bentley, 2017), being learners and educators in the classroom (Roland et al., 2021), and experiencing faculty trying to weed them out (Patterson-Stephens & Hernández, 2019). However, it is important to acknowledge the voice of this student, who was at the time enrolled at an HBCU, to understand the overlap in gendered and racist experiences no matter the cultural context. For example, in McGee and Bentley's (2017), study of Black women in college one, fourth year doctoral student discussed being solicited for sex from a potential male advisor and being dismissed by a male primary advisor when differences between the student and advisor arose. In addition to gendered and sexist experiences, this participant in McGee and Bentley also discussed feeling like an outsider and feeling isolated because of her race when she was left out of supportive networks among a group of international students. Understanding this area of research is imperative based on studies that underscore the challenges of prejudice and discrimination experienced by Black

women and the stark differences in experiences they observe compared to their counterparts, specifically White women (Abdou & Fingerhut, 2014; Blosser, 2020; Spates et al., 2020). It is equally important to understand how gendered racism impacts an individual's mental health and well-being (Lewis et al., 2017; Moody & Lewis, 2019; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016).

Gendered Racism and Black Women's Mental Health in Higher Education

Higher education research suggests that Black students' exposure places them at increased risk of mental health challenges (Burton et al., 2020; Collins, 2009; Donovan & West, 2015; Ingram & Wallace, 2019; Jones, 2000). These encounters are recurrent and have a detrimental impact on the well-being of oppressed and marginalized individuals (Jones, Leath, et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2016; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). For example, McClain et al. (2016) found minority status stress as a negative predictor of mental health outcomes among 250 Black college students at PWIs. The current literature has recognized the relationship between gendered racism and mental health among Black women in society and Black women college students (Jones, Leath, et al., 2021; Jones, Womack, et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2017; Spates et al., 2020), linking their outcomes to feelings of isolation (Martins et al., 2020) and anxiety (Jones et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2023). Busby et al. (2019) found that 17% of college students identifying as Black and female, screened positive for suicide risk. Additionally, in a cross-sectional study exploring Black women's experiences of gendered racism, Burton et al. (2020) found that 30% of the women reported depression and 54% reported severe psychological distress.

Of the research available, mental health outcomes have also been examined with mediating or moderating variables aimed at helping individuals process navigating gendered racism. Mediating and moderating factors could suggest interventions to improve mental health outcomes. In Jones, Womack, et al.'s (2021) study assessing the roles of social support and

identity among 237 Black college women, social support mediated the relationship between gendered racism and depression. Thus, the care and comfort that Black women college students receive are associated with less depression. Szymanski and Lewis (2016) explored gendered racism among 212 Black college women and found disengagement coping (e.g., internalization/self-blame) mediated the relationship between gendered racism and psychological distress. While the literature is growing, it is scant in incorporating mediating and moderating models to explore the implications of gendered racism for Black women in college, or more specifically Black women doctoral students. Because findings from multiple studies specify mental health outcomes as a direct impact of gendered racism in college settings (Burton et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2013), exploring factors that can positively impact that relationship for Black women's well-being is imperative.

Thus, various aspects of racism can be attributed to adverse mental health outcomes. However, for Black women, the combined experience of sexism is also important to acknowledge. The research on sexism experienced by Black college women focuses on stereotypes associated with a Black woman's gender. Like racism, these objectifying narratives lead to adverse outcomes for Black women (Davis & Tucker-Brown, 2013; Morrison & Hopkins, 2019). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey revealed that in their lifetime 53.6% of Black women in the United States have experienced sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking (Leemis et al., 2022). On college campuses, Black women encountering sexual objectification report differences, where Black women are more hesitant to disclose their experience, and this is rooted in messages of not being heard, in comparison to White women who are protected from the backlash (Zounlome et al., 2019). The sexual advances and perception of not being protected directly affect Black women's mental health. For instance,

Black women, internalize the experience as being their fault, have low self-esteem, and develop negative perceptions about their skin tone and body image (Awad et al., 2015; Brown & Keith, 2003; Cheeseborough et al., 2020; Neville et al., 2014; Watson et al., 2019).

Currently, the sexism data indicating specific mental health concerns among Black women doctoral students are limited. However, in the literature reflecting gendered racism scholars have captured that overall well-being is impacted and should be explored further in future studies. In a study conducted by Shavers and Moore (2014a), Black women doctoral students' inception of the *strong Black woman* stereotype as a protective strategy impacts their knowledge related to managing mental health. Black women doctoral students realize they often ignore the signs of needing mental health services (Shavers & Moore, 2014a). Additionally, perceptions of being in an unwelcoming academic space are traumatic and can negatively impact the well-being of Black women doctoral students (Sanders-Thompson, 1996; Shavers & Moore, 2019). Also, Simon's (2020) study of being a double minority in the STEM sciences found that Black women doctoral students experienced imposter syndrome, which encompasses doubt, anxiety, and comparison as they navigate their program. Altogether, gendered racism creates a barrier to Black women's success in academia.

More research is needed to explore the types of racial and gendered oppression that are connected to mental health concerns for Black doctoral women, particularly quantitative studies that could yield what we need to know about the ways Black women doctoral students perceive acts of gendered racism. The literature may also benefit from studies that explicitly explore protective factors, and strategies Black women doctoral students use that contribute to positive mental health outcomes (e.g., improved quality of life; World Health Organization, 2002), and assist in navigating gendered racism. No study to date has explicitly examined gendered racism

among Black women doctoral students, but there is a call to investigate strategies that promote positive mental health and well-being among this population.

Examining Strategies to Navigate Gendered Racism

There has been a rise in scholarly literature on Black women in higher education settings. For instance, scholars have examined Black women college students, Black women graduate and doctoral students, Black women in administration, and Black women faculty. However, this topic of interest remains underexplored in social work. What is known about this topic comes mostly from the field of psychology and inferences are made about how Black women experience and cope with gendered racism. However, a significant gap in the literature for Black women doctoral students concerns how they respond to experiences of gendered racism. Some of the literature on Black women doctoral students' experiences explores factors like persistence, resistance, and mentorship, so an anticipated effect of gendered racism could be coping and radical healing.

The literature on coping and radical healing illuminates overlaps in conceptual understanding. For instance, Black populations incorporate core values of unity and collectivism from their African ancestors and have figured out ways to heal individually while also relying on the collective toward liberation (Alexander, 2021; Ginwright, 2010, 2018). The research discussed this as social support, in which individuals rely on their friends, family, and community members when combatting stressors (Budescu et al., 2011; Linnabery et al., 2014; Morrison & Hopkins, 2019; Patton & Harper, 2004; Seawell et al., 2014). Similarly, one core component of the psychological framework for radical healing is collectivism (French et al., 2020). For Black women doctoral students this may reflect same-race faculty mentor relationships (Jones et al., 2013). To fill a gap in the literature, I focus on the discrepancy in

definitions between coping and radical healing in the literature and seek to understand how Black

women doctoral students perceive radical healing in their lives and experiences.

Coping Strategies

Black women enrolled in doctoral programs rely both on adaptive and maladaptive

coping strategies when navigating oppression and mistreatment, and this is identified as the

double-edged sword (Shavers & Moore, 2014a) or the double lives (Collins, 1986; Jones &

Shorter-Gooden, 2009). Although the limited literature that exists suggests that coping is often

used to combat gendered racism, some of these strategies are unsuitable or avoidant, which may

indicate the greater effect of gendered racism on adverse mental health outcomes (Liao et al.,

2020). Hersey (2022) suggested the concept of rest as resistance is relevant when thinking about

coping for Black women doctoral students. Instead of the grind culture and working to constantly

prove their worth (Shavers & Moore, 2014a), Black women doctoral students can use rest to

prioritize a work/life balance that is authentic to their well-being.

Adaptive coping strategies offer relief that is essential to Black women experiencing

challenging and dangerous encounters, including creating self-definition, being assertive in

voicing thoughts, and relying on social support (Lewis et al., 2013). Adaptive coping highlights a

sense of confidence in one's voice and culture; as well as social support that is fundamental for

race and gender injustice (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2009; Lewis et al., 2016). Alternatively, or

in addition, maladaptive coping strategies are self-protective and desensitization to encounters

(Thomas et al., 2008). However, it is important to keep in mind that maladaptive approaches to

coping are a vital part of creating well-being for Black women because they often signify

strength (i.e., strong Black woman; West et al., 2016). Contrarily, maladaptive strategies can take

a toll on one's health (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). Adaptive coping strategies and a greater

understanding of the role of maladaptive coping strategies can develop the basis for improved mental health and collective healing. Knowing this for Black women in doctoral programs is especially critical (Corbin et al., 2018; Henderson et al., 2021).

The type of coping strategy used can have benefits or consequences on overall well-being (Everett et al., 2010; Liao et al., 2020); however, few studies explore the effect of adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies on gendered racism among Black women doctoral students. Some of the research uses gendered racial microaggressions, a term derived from gendered racism to explore subtle experiences of racism among Black women (Lewis & Neville, 2015; Lewis et al., 2016). In assessing microaggressions among a group of Black doctoral women, Robinson-Wood et al. (2015) et al. found that they coped by relying on supportive networks and recognizing that racism fuels oppressive encounters. Additionally, participants describe coping through prayer, focusing on better eating habits, attending therapy, and exercising. These strategies align with engagement coping as they illuminate empowerment among Black women (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). Black women also reported disengagement strategies, through armored coping "(a) Informing colleagues before the start of a project that a woman was capable and highly trained; (b) Being on the lookout for slights and digs; and (c) Engaging in constant preparation to intercept friendly fire (e.g., unintentional putdowns) from colleagues, classmates, faculty, and students" (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015, p. 233). Altogether, findings from the research suggest the importance of considering how to reduce negative mental health outcomes, yet more research is needed to address the unique position of Black doctoral women encountering gendered racism.

Higher education research and Black feminist scholarship have highlighted that coping strategies are essential to protecting Black women from the adverse effects of gendered racism

and that there are dissimilarities in coping strategies based on contextual factors (Harwood et al., 2012; Lent et al., 2002; Lewis et al., 2017; Robinson-Wood et al., 2015; Spates et al., 2020). In Ramos and Yi's (2020), qualitative study, Black women reported using defensive (e.g., avoidance), controlled (e.g., reflecting on how to respond), and direct (e.g., talking through it) coping strategies. Some participants report fearing the consequences of addressing gendered racism and therefore rationalize the behavior or oppressive encounter (Ramos & Yi, 2020). In this same study, Black women reported wearing an academic mask, indicating minimizing self-definition and culture to fit in and meet academic goals (Ramos & Yi, 2020; Shavers & Moore, 2014a). Ramos and Yi (2020) suggested using theoretical models to clarify Black women's responses to racial oppression versus coping strategies to shape positive narratives of Black women's approach to gendered racism.

The Concept of Radical Healing

Like the conceptualization of coping, the term *healing* has been used in the literature to refer to ways that individuals holistically address trauma (French et al., 2020; Ginwright, 2018). Whereas coping focuses mostly on those day-to-day activities and individual approaches to maintain a sense of well-being, radical healing includes critical steps and collective approaches that maintain wellness and eradicate systemic racism. Henderson et al. (2021) suggested addressing historical trauma through recognition of its existence and its influence on African Americans' well-being, as an act of healing. Specifically, French et al. (2020) noted that "healing involves identifying the source of trauma, engaging in active resistance against that source, and fostering hope as people of color and indigenous individuals (POCI) actively work to prevent recurring trauma not only for themselves but also their communities" (p. 19).

The term *radical* is a political term, directly associated with systems, as it focuses on complete transformation addressing social inequities, and means going to the root (Glass, 2005). By identifying the source of racism and sexism, French et al. (2020) asserted radical healing can occur, because "healing from racial trauma is a radical act" (p. 48). Thus, racially marginalized communities benefit from collectively resisting the source and identifying strategies to eliminate the negative experiences and outcomes of oppression (French et al., 2020; Mosley et al., 2020).

Healing is a concept that has been passed down generationally and has been defined and carried out in many ways among Black individuals. Healing focuses on a collective approach to resist oppression and improve society for self and the community (French et al., 2020; Prilleltensky, 2003) leading to liberation (Duran et al., 2008). Liberation requires a shared approach where members of the community uplift each other and work together toward wellness (French et al., 2020). For instance, healing includes not only being in communion with friends and family but also working alongside them to develop strategies that cultivate an experience that allows Black individuals to thrive and not just get by. Healing is also being aware of decolonizing and resisting White supremacist traditions and norms and engaging in social justice (French et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021).

The radical healing framework is rooted in components of psychology (e.g., liberation, Black and ethnopolitical), and intersectionality theory (French et al., 2020), indicating that implementation of the framework is context-specific in addressing racial trauma. This is essential considering gender dynamics between Black boys and men compared to Black girls and women (Ginwright, 2010). For Black women, people of color, and indigenous individuals, radical healing can endorse critical knowledge on possibilities of thriving, and social action for communities by challenging societal and political norms while living to their fullest potential

(French et al., 2020; Neville et al., 2016). Healing frameworks are often conceptualized through a systems framework highlighting individual, family, and community factors that are influential to an individual's well-being (Belkin Martinez & Fleck-Henderson, 2014). Thus, a model of radical healing can draw on individual and collective strategies that promote wellness for Black women.

Critical-race focused and interdisciplinary literature aims to establish a foundation in prioritizing a collective approach to advance individual and community consciousness. Ginwright (2010) provided an example of the implementation of this foundational framework and posited that social justice action and activism an essential protective factor for African American youth who are exposed to or experience negative and harmful racist acts. In *Black Youth Rising*, Ginwright humanized African American youth by highlighting their strengths, to promote a model of healing from historical oppression. This framework restores well-being and offers an opportunity for systematic change through community engagement (e.g., healing circles) and community care (e.g., social support). In this case, the role of healing can positively impact mental health through a grounded confidence in one's identity/self-definition and sense of belonging (Ginwright, 2010).

Recently, psychological framework of radical healing in communities of color was developed, expanding the conceptualization of addressing racial trauma to adult populations and other minority racial groups (French et al., 2020). The framework includes rectifying disempowerment through resisting oppression and working collectively toward freedom and well-being. French et al. (2020) et al. highlight a strengths-perspective that accounts for intersectional realities and includes (a) critical consciousness; (b) radical hope and envisioning possibilities; (c) strength and resistance; (d) cultural authenticity and self-knowledge; and (e)

collectivism. Altogether, the components of the framework may include critically reflecting and responding to oppression and inequity, belief in the possibility of community action being impactful, resiliency in the community, self-definition rejecting the definition of oppressors, and connection to one's racial/ethnic group (French et al., 2020).

Studies that explored radical healing, have used the model as a method for data analysis. These case studies have been examined among African American adolescents (Ginwright, 2010) and individuals in college (Langhout et al., 2021). One example is the CARMA (culture, agency, relationships, meaning, and achievement) model developed by Ginwright (2010) as a framework to illuminate radical healing while working alongside adolescents. Assessing an art expression program for Black adolescents, Alexander (2021) found that radical healing was achieved through the five components of CARMA and spiritual development as it allowed for a liberating space for adolescents to learn, discuss, and share common race-related experiences. Similarly, the same radical healing framework was used to explore its components in an afterschool program for high school students. The results reflect radical healing showing up as adolescents' exploration of their culture, activities rooted in social action, and critical reflection about barriers and opportunities they face (Meuller, 2010). Both examples mirror radical healing as a way for adolescents to process their encounters in a collective space of support and thereby resist trauma.

Currently, no study to date has explored radical healing among Black women doctoral students. The current focus on scholarship to identify positive processes and outcomes for oppressed and marginalized groups is growing. One scholarly article examines healing among college samples including students and faculty. In this detailed narrative of radical healing, facets of the healing justice framework, CARMA, were incorporated into a community psychology class during COVID-19. Instead of exploring how radical healing shows up for a particular

population, Langhout et al. (2021) described the process of aligning a healing justice framework into teaching in a trauma-informed environment as a way of facilitating healing for the students and faculty. Through educational and hands-on learning, the class participants engaged in mindful activities that pushed them to clear their thoughts from the social problems facing society (Langhout et al., 2021). Additionally, aligning with the healing justice framework, the course syllabus was revamped to reflect group activities and community service projects to be involved in social action in one's community. This is an ideal example of how academic disciplines, can center counter-narratives that directly influence how oppressed groups are often defined. However, there is not a substantial amount of evidence on the best approaches to measure healing, and not much is known about Black doctoral women and radical healing.

Chapter Summary

There is more to learn about Black women doctoral students' experiences with gendered racism. Of the available research, scholarship notes that although Black women doctoral students have been attaining doctoral degrees since the 1920s, they continue to experience "racial and gendered motivated marginalization" (Minnett et al., 2019, p. 214). Through the work of Black feminist scholars, research has recently focused on stories of strength and resilience. This dissertation contributes and builds upon the current literature to explore Black women doctoral students' strategies for coping and healing.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Budding scholars and practitioners will insist on gender and culturally responsive

research scholarship that will help them comprehend and combat these political assaults

and other social problems. (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 7)

Gendered racism, coping, and radical healing are the components of this dissertation that

I used to share the experiences of Black women doctoral students. My goal was to understand

their academic journeys from a strengths-based perspective highlighting narratives that counter

and challenge negative stereotypes. This chapter provides an explanation of my research design,

including the process for data collection and data analysis. I end the chapter with my position as

a researcher whereby my viewpoints and background could influence the dissertation study. A

qualitative research design using an IPA methodological approach is best to understand the

worldview and perspectives of others through their =76543& Poth, 2017). I highlight the use of

this approach in facilitating meaningful interpretations of Black women doctoral students'

narratives with gendered racism, coping, and radical healing, and how they make sense of their

experience from their worldview.

Method of Investigation

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Conducting qualitative research is important for Black women scholars who "seek to

question, understand, and challenge, via the formal inquiry process, contemporary social

injustice, like the imposition of deficit-thinking, white supremacy, and racialized gender bias in

sociality as well the research process itself" (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 15). Participants' lived

experiences of a phenomenon are studied to gain an in-depth understanding of how they think,

act, and feel (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Thus, qualitative inquiry and IPA focus on "the participant

trying to make sense of what is happening to them while the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant's sense-making" (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 8). The uniqueness of this method is capturing how Black women doctoral students describe their meaning of gendered racism, coping, and radical healing (Marshall & Rossman, 2014), aligning with feminist methodological and theoretical approaches centering race and gender domination and oppression (Creswell, 2313).

Phenomenology is a foundational framework in qualitative research. This study uses a phenomenological approach, IPA requiring me as the researcher to have a thorough understanding of the data, going line-by-line to build knowledge about each participant (Smith et al., 2009). The first scholar to write about phenomenology was Edmund Husserl. Smith and Nizza (2022) explained that Husserl's approach was to understand a phenomenon through individual consciousness, meaning an individual's everyday experiences are a grounding space for qualitative science. Phenomenology focuses on the human experiences of individuals who have a shared phenomenon and how they perceive, interpret, and understand how they experience the phenomenon (Bhattacharya, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, phenomenology aligns with both guiding conceptual frameworks BFT and intersectionality (Collins, 2009) focusing on creating an understanding of one's experiences with oppression and marginalization and their goals toward justice and wellness. According to Moustakas (1994), experience and behavior are integrated, thus Black women doctoral students' experiences with gendered racism may be connected to coping and radical healing. Thus, this study aimed to understand Black doctoral women's experience with coping and radical healing practices to manage encounters with gendered racism.

This study uses an IPA methodological approach to capture rich descriptions of the important experiences of the participants (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA is an exceptional analytic approach to get an in-depth perspective on interpretation into the ways participants understand, perceive, and conceptualize their experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Smith et al. (2009) posited a strong emphasis of IPA on understanding meaning-making from the participants' lived experiences. IPA has theoretical underpinnings that guide researchers through a set of actions that support the exploration of experiences from the participants (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The double hermeneutics process draws on the way data is interpreted. Using a hermeneutic approach, allows scientists to dig deeper into the research (Bhattacharya, 2017; Smith et al., 2021), by focusing on how the participants make sense of their experiences while the researcher also interprets their point of view. The idiographic approach focuses on a particular case of a participant and then compares data between cases (Love et al., 2020). The purpose is not to generate generalizable findings but to focus on the richness of personal experiences of each participant individually. In conducting IPA, the researcher attains detailed narratives directly from the participants' point of view, extracts deep meanings from each narrative, and conveys the meaning to a larger audience (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The use of this analytic strategy invited and made space for Black women doctoral students to reflect and focus on the meaning of their own experiences.

Researcher Positionality

As a Black woman doctoral candidate, I am keenly aware and passionate about the role of coping and radical healing for students pursuing an advanced degree. I bring a unique perspective that is shaped by both the disadvantages and triumphs of my educational trajectory. My determination for this research began during my role as a master of social work student in

Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I served as president of the Association of Black Social Work Students for 1 year. In this role, I gained insight into the students' ongoing experiences of racial microaggressions, which related to my own, so I felt compelled to begin conducting research in this area. With more questions about students' ability to navigate these experiences, I decided to embark on a doctoral degree, which would award me with an opportunity to explore coping and radical healing strategies.

Through IPA, the researcher has an integral part in the data and acknowledging how their role shapes the research process (Smith & Nizza, 2022), thus I understand how my personal experiences and beliefs can shape the interpretations of the data. Sharing an identity with the participants as a Black woman informed establishing rapport and building trust and confidence through the sharing of vulnerable stories. It is also important to recognize the heterogeneity in our shared identities, including our cultural background, relationship status, and income to name a few. Although Black women are similar in having an identical race and gender, their diversity offers a range of perspectives about their lived experiences as doctoral students. This became central for me while analyzing and interpreting the data. Using the insight from Evans-Winters (2019), I used my awareness of intersectionality to understand the participants' challenges and strengths. In addition to Smith and Nizza (2019), Evans-Winters also focused on centering the voices of the marginalized and oppressed, so this means that although I am the researcher, my experiences are still central to my understanding of the participants' lived experiences. I felt empowered to research participants with a shared identity, creating a safe and culturally responsive space for Black women to explore their thoughts and feelings without judgment.

Research Design and Procedures

Sample

Smith and Nizza (2022) posited that conducting IPA is best achieved through purposive sampling. This is because the participants selected will directly reflect the phenomena of interest. Additionally, Smith and Nizza suggested IPA be conducted with a small sample size of 10–12 participants, which will yield a "sophisticated design" (p. 16) and is an ideal point for saturation to be met (Creswell, 2013). The recruitment yielded 15 Black women doctoral students from an array of higher education institutions in the United States.

Participant Recruitment

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Washington University in St. Louis approved the design and methods used to conduct this study. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling on social media (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter). The following groups agreed and were approved to distribute the flyer on Facebook: Black Girls in Social Work, PhinisheD/FinishEdD (Drs/Future Doctors) #WhoGotNext, and Black Girl Doctorate. The flyer was also shared on my personal Instagram and Twitter accounts. Due to the limitations of face-to-face interaction during COVID-19, it was ideal to recruit participants through virtual platforms. A flier detailed the purpose of the study, participant eligibility, and the interviewer's contact information. The recruitment flyer is in Appendix D. Participants were also recruited through snowball sampling (Smith & Nizza, 2022), whereby prospective participants and my contacts shared the flyer on online platforms and among their academic networks. The purpose of this strategy was to share the flier with Black women in doctoral programs, and although my personal contacts included faculty members, they also are part of social media groups that are

saturated with Black doctoral students. If a participant noticed the flier and found interest in the study, they contacted me via email to begin the process of data collection.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Participants for the study were carefully selected based on criteria that are necessary to attain data on the experiences of Black women doctoral students. Eligibility for the study included the following: (a) self-identified as Black/African American, (b) a woman, (c) over the age of 18, (d) currently enrolled in a doctoral program, (e) currently residing in the United States, (f) fluent in English, and (g) reported experiencing racism and sexism as a Black woman doctoral student.

Consent

After the initial email, I provided an electronic link through Google Forms for participants to complete a demographic questionnaire and to provide consent for participation in the study. The Google Form provided a detailed description of the study and eligibility criteria. If a participant was still interested after reviewing the study details, they completed the form. Informed consent was provided when participants reported their agreement to be audio and/or video recorded on the electronic link. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked to list potential dates to schedule an interview. The end of the questionnaire also provided space for participants to provide a pseudonym, which is how they are identified in the findings section of this dissertation. Once the form was complete, I received an automated email notification. If a participant was eligible, I then contacted them through email to confirm an audio and/or video-recorded interview. The demographic questionnaire is provided in Appendix A.

Prospective Participant Screening Process

Eighteen individuals expressed interest in participating in the dissertation research study. Participants were contacted via email and provided a link to a private Google Forms survey to complete a demographic questionnaire used to determine whether participants met inclusion criteria. One individual was not a good fit for the study because they were predoctoral and enrolled in a program but had not yet begun. Another individual opted out because she did not believe she had experienced gendered racism. The third individual did not complete the survey. After the link was provided, 15 individuals completed the questionnaire. The online survey asked participants to consent to being audio and/or video recorded. Once the survey was complete, interviews were scheduled with the 15 participants who completed the demographic questionnaire.

Incentives

Participants who completed a full interview received a $25 Amazon gift card as an incentive for their participation. The gift card was provided at the end of each interview and was sent via email through the Amazon website.

Data Collection

For this qualitative dissertation study, a 1-hour video and/or audio interview were conducted. Due to COVID-19, data collection was conducted through ZOOM videoconferencing, which is HIPAA compliant through Washington University in St. Louis. ZOOM videoconferencing is ideal for online interviews, recording and storing video sessions discretely and confidentially, which is vital for sensitive data (Archibald et al., 2019). Data for this study were audio recorded and encrypted for security through Wash U's Box Drive system which is HIPAA compliant.

Each of the interviews began with rapport building. In semistructured interviews it is imperative to establish rapport with the participants to "go into novel areas, and produce richer data" (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 59). During the interview phase of the study, I provided another overview of the study and informed participants of the standards of confidentiality. Participants were encouraged to ask any questions about the research study at any point during the interview. The interview protocol is provided in Appendix B.

The interview protocol focuses on several topic areas, including gendered racism, coping, and radical healing. Questions were also posed about COVID-19 experiences. The questions explore participants' experiences as Black women doctoral students, mistreatment, strategies to cope and support mental health, and strategies to resist oppression through radical healing. Overall, the interview protocol is used to uncover the intersectional experiences of Black women doctoral students. Sample questions are provided below:

Topic: General

- To begin, what is your race?

Topic: Educational Journey

- Thinking on your undergraduate educational journey, how would you describe the types of schools you've attended?

- How did you make the decision of pursuing a doctorate?

Topic: Gendered Racism

- What is it like being a Black woman in a doctoral program?

- Can you describe experiences when you were treated unfairly because you are Black and woman?

Topic: Coping & Healing

- Thinking about how you are treated because of your race and gender in your doctoral program, can you discuss how you cope, how do you take care of yourself?

- May you describe individual/collective healing practices used to resist oppression for the well-being of the community that you identify with?

- If you could instantly change how Black women in doctoral programs experience treatment based on race and gender, what would you do?

- What advice would you offer to current or prospective Black doctoral women on taking care of themselves

Topic: COVID-19

- Did the COVID-19 pandemic influence your experience as a Black doctoral woman? If so, may you describe some of the changes that occurred in your life as a Black doctoral woman due to COVID-19.

- May you describe how you are taking care of yourself as a Black doctoral woman through COVID-19?

Topic: Additional Questions

- What was it like for you to share your experiences?

Data Analysis

Following data collection, this study used IPA as a method to analyze the semistructured interviews. According to Smith et al. (2021), some fundamental principles guide researchers to interpret the participant narratives, free of theoretical limits. The systematic steps of IPA data

analysis help the researcher capture pure experiences. As outlined by Smith et al. (2021), the analysis of interviews encompasses several key steps.

- The first step includes "reading the data and recording exploratory notes," which includes the researcher reading the transcript and relistening to the recording while recording any initial reactions (Smith et al, 2021, p. 78). This is a process of familiarization with the data. The exploratory notes are used to help the researcher "think more in-depth about what the transcript contains" (Smith et al, 2021, p. 33), and include descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notations (Smith et al., 2021). Descriptive comments are parts of participants' stories that include objects, events, locations, and keywords that highlight participants' thoughts and experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Next, are the linguistic comments with a focus on the use of language and how words are spoken. Conceptual notes are also essential requiring reflection as the researcher asks questions of the data while considering the participants' standpoint. For this dissertation, I went through each transcript line by line to pull out all three variations of comments (Larkin et al., 2006). The transcript was copied and pasted into an Excel document. I used the three columns to the right of the transcript to jot down these notes.

- The second step involves "formulating experiential statements" (Smith et al, 2021, p. 86) to capture the meaning of the experience described by participants. This process involves a succinct and specific assertion of the "important psychological process and the context or content of that process being invoked by the participant's response" (Smith et al, 2021, p. 87). Experiential statements included words from the participants' statement along with my interpretation of what the participant stated. In

the Excel document, the experiential statements were in the column to the left of the

transcript. I jotted down each of the experiential statements, with their page numbers

in the Excel document to complete the next step of the data analysis process. This

step also created an audit trail, which is important to establish the rigor and

trustworthiness of the study (Smith et al, 2021; Smith & Nizza, 2022).

- In the third step of data analysis, the researcher is "finding connections and clustering experiential statements" (Smith et al., 2021, p. 76) as a way of synthesizing the data. Using the experiential statements in the Excel document, I wrote each one on a sticky note, placed them on a whiteboard, and combined them into clusters based on similarities. This process resulted in themes and subthemes, organizing the clusters of experiential statements into subthemes, and naming each cluster as a theme, creating personal experiential themes.

- In the fourth step of data analysis, the researcher is "searching for connections across experiential statements" (Smith et al., 2021, p. 93) as a way of synthesizing the data. Using the experiential statements in the Excel document, I wrote each one on a sticky note, placed them on a whiteboard, and combined them into clusters based on similarities. This resulted in themes and subthemes, organizing the clusters of experiential statements into subthemes, and naming each cluster as a theme.

- The fifth step included "naming the Personal Experiential Themes (PETS) and consolidating and organizing them in a table" (Smith et al., 2021, p. 94).

- In the sixth step, the same process occurred for the remaining transcripts "continuing the individual analysis of other cases" (Smith et al., 2021, p. 99).

- Next is "working with Personal Experiential Themes to develop Group Experiential Themes across cases" (Smith et al., 2021, p. 99-100). This step includes analyzing commonalities, differences, and patterns across all the cases. Initially, the analysis process assessed meaning-making from an individual, while this final step captures the collective meanings of the participant's experiences. The shared perspectives of participants are interpreted altogether to create group experiential themes. A table of themes with supporting themes is provided in the findings section of this dissertation.

Academic Rigor and Trustworthiness

Strategies for rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative research were included to achieve reliability and consistency in the research process (Bhattacharya, 2017). This process ensures consistency in the way interpretations of the data are made, which is different from quantitative research which seeks to replicate studies in the same way (Varpio et al., 2017). "Qualitative research has a different subject, and it tends to focus on meaning, sense-making, and communicative action" (Smith et al., 2021, p. 39). The accuracy and trustworthiness of study findings should be achieved through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Trustworthiness was established through researcher reflexivity through memos, peer debriefing, audit trail, and providing thick descriptions through hermeneutics.

Researcher Reflexivity Through Memoing

Reflexivity is the continual awareness that a researcher encompasses to examine personal experiences, assumptions, and biases that are intertwined with the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). This reflective practice also aligns with the ethical aspect of transparently depicting the researcher's subjectivity in influencing the participants and the data (Gentles et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Tracy (2010) pointed out the importance of subjectivity, as self-awareness

and self-critique make explicit the researcher's positionality in understanding its impact on the interpretation of the data. In IPA, hermeneutics provides a philosophical foundation for understanding subjective meaning, valuing the role of the researcher's interpretation of historical and cultural contexts, while uncovering the meanings participants ascribe to their experiences (Gadamer, 1977). Inspired by the work of Tracy, reflexivity was an instrumental part of the integrity of my dissertation research study.

As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), memoing is a formal reflection process. I used the process of memoing to document my initial thoughts and insights into the data to maintain transparency and enrich the credibility of choices for the data collection and analysis processes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The keywords and phrases, tone of participants, and language used (Smith et al., 2021), were all captured using memos following each interview. This process helped me get a greater understanding of the data and how participants are making sense of the data (Larkin et al., 2006). For instance, through memoing, I posed questions to myself based on my position and role as a researcher, who is Black, a woman, and a doctoral student. Given the intersection of my identity and similarity to the participants, I used memos to write down my own experiences and biases, which highlights how the researcher's identity can impact research findings (Finlay, 2002).

Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing is essential to ensuring credibility and trustworthiness in an IPA study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This includes the process of ongoing meetings with colleagues in the field to discuss findings from the data analysis, including how the researcher arrived at emergent themes. Peer debriefing aids in enhancing confirmability (Creswell, 2013). For this study, I engaged with a peer debriefer outside of my institution to address any potential biases that could

influence the interpretations of the participant data. In this case, confirmability shows the researcher's transparency about their perceptions and those of the participants. Peer debriefing also expands the dependability of qualitative research, through obtaining feedback on the researcher's approach to consistency with data analysis across the cases, perceptions, and conclusions drawn (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Smith et al., 2009).

Three meetings were scheduled with a peer reviewer for theme familiarization and identification. In the first meeting, the reviewer and I discussed the data analysis process and initial theme development. During this meeting we discussed my positionality as the researcher, how biases were addressed, and cases where my positionality led to any challenged. In this meeting I shared my process for memoing and rereading the participant data. I also mentioned one challenge I had in interpretation regarding two participants who stated they had not experienced unfair treatment because of their race and gender. The reviewer was able to empathize sharing this sentiment in their research. This was navigated through the identification of the purpose of IPA, which highlights the participants sharing narratives from their point of view. During the second meeting, an initial review of the themes with an invitation for feedback occurred. Questions around uncertainties and commonalities were explored. Going back to the data and clarifying discussions helped to synthesize the themes. For instance, the peer reviewer challenged my initial interpretation of the data where participants' narratives highlighted their internalized stereotypes to consider this as imposter syndrome. Because participants mentioned imposter syndrome, it was important to illuminate this as I shared the findings. During the third meeting, a second review of the themes was conducted. Additionally, the final refinement of the themes was shared with the peer reviewer, and consensus was built.

Audit Trail

An audit trail strengthens the transferability and validity of study findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994) because it provides a detailed outline of the steps taken by the researcher to collect and interpret data and draw conclusions from the results of the study (Smith et al., 2009). For this study an audit trail is provided in the data analysis section of this chapter and includes the process of data collection, data analysis using the suggested steps included in Smith et al. (2021), and how interpretations were made (Shinebourne & Smith, 2010). The table with emergent themes and a summary of findings are provided in Chapter 4. Including this thorough process makes the study replicable in various settings confirming the study's transferability (Morrow, 2005).

Providing Thick Descriptions Through Hermeneutics

The application of hermeneutics in IPA guides the interpretation of participants' experiences, by "trying to make sense of the participant's sense-making" (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 8). This sense-making involves a double hermeneutic where the participant is trying to make sense of the phenomenon, and the researcher is responsible for making sense of how participants interpret their experience (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This process is applied to provide thick descriptions that can generate detailed and in-depth descriptions of participants' experiences that can enhance the transferability of the findings across settings (Smith et al., 2009). For this dissertation, I am interpreting the perspectives of Black women doctoral students' relationship with gendered racism, coping, and radical healing, using the double hermeneutic to dig deeper into participants behavior, thoughts, and feelings (Heidegger, 1962; Smythe & Spence, 2012).

Protection of Human Subjects

Several measures were used to ensure the protection of individuals participating in the current study. First, approval was obtained from the IRB, at the university to ensure compliance with ethical regulations and standards. Agreement to participate in the study was obtained from all participants through them checking yes to being audio and/or video recorded for an interview. Participant pseudonyms were created to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Additionally, participant data was privately stored with restricted access on a password-protected laptop and the Washington University in St. Louis' HIPAA-compliant Box Drive.

Study Participants

Fifteen Black women who identified as doctoral students were recruited through purposive sampling. The participants ranged in age between 26 and 54, and their years of study in a doctoral program varied from first year to sixth year or beyond. Thirteen of the participants were enrolled at a PWI and two were enrolled at a HSI. Eight were in an education program, two were in organizational leadership, two were in social work, one was in clinical psychology, one was in couples and family therapy, and one was in public health. Six of the participants received a fellowship or scholarship. Exactly 60% of the participants were students and employed full time, and approximately 35% were students and employed part time. Approximately 5% of the participants were full-time students. Many of the participants were concentrated in the Midwest, primarily in Michigan, Missouri (St. Louis), Illinois, and Minnesota. The remaining participants resided in the Northeast in New York and New Jersey and the South in Virginia, Alabama, and Texas. Most of the participants identified as heterosexual (n=12), and one participant identified as pansexual, another participant identified as fluid, and one participant identified as queer. The participants' relationship status varied. Four were married, five were single, and six were in a

romantic relationship. Seven of the participants had one or more child. To protect the anonymity

of participants, IPA suggests creating pseudonyms, so I asked the participants to create a

pseudonym of their choice. Table 1 presents the participant demographics.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age range	Relationship status	Area of study	Scholarship	Institution type	Geographic location
Nico	30–49	Married	Org. leadership	Yes	PWI	Northeast
Rochelle	18–29	Single	Counselor ed	No	HSI	South
Nova	30–49	In a relationship	Counselor ed	No	PWI	Midwest
Taylor	18–29	Single	Clinical psych	No	PWI	Midwest
Emily	30–49	Married	Education	No	PWI	Northeast
Mary	50–64	Single	Social work	No	PWI	East Coast
Nicole	30–49	In a relationship	Org. leadership	No	PWI	Midwest
Queen	18–29	Married	Couple & family therapy	No	PWI	Midwest
Spiritual Child	30–49	In a relationship	Social work	Yes	PWI	Southeast
CooWife	30–49	Married	Ed. leadership	No	PWI	Midwest
Shavon	30–49	In a relationship	Higher ed.	No	PWI	Northeast
Nyla	30–49	In a relationship	Higher ed.	Yes	PWI	Midwest
Uniqua	18–29	Single	Ed psych	Yes	HSI	Midwest
Naija	18–29	In a relationship	Public health	Yes	PWI	Midwest
Lynn	18–29	Single	Education	Yes	PWI	Midwest

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this IPA study was to explore from the experiences of Black women doctoral students with gendered racism, coping, and radical healing. The use of semistructured interviews allowed for rapport building, which was vital to yield comprehensive data. Following data collection, I used a systematic process for analysis provided by Smith and Nizza (2022). The final study results, discussed in Chapter 4, provide rich and detailed descriptions that center the voices of the participants.

Chapter 4: Findings

Because different behaviors have various meanings, depending on the cultural context, it

would take cultural insiders to determine the authenticity of the occurrence. (Evans-

Winters, 2019, p. 7)

This IPA qualitative research study provides insight into the perspectives of Black

women enrolled in doctoral programs to better understand the role of coping and radical healing

while navigating gendered racism. This chapter highlights the findings gathered through

semistructured, in-depth interviews with 15 participants. These rich narratives highlight the

intricate interplay of race, gender, and education to provide a comprehensive understanding of

how identity shapes Black women's academic journey. The chapter discusses key themes that

emerged from participant stories.

Sociocultural Context of a Dual Pandemic

For this dissertation, the sociocultural context of the COVID-19 crisis and heightened

events of police brutality against Black communities should be considered. This dual pandemic

simultaneously presented health disparities, economic challenges, isolation, and social unrest,

that disproportionately impacted Black women (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Limited access to health

care, and overrepresentation as frontline workers, leading to increased exposure to the COVID-

19 virus contributed to Black women being at the forefront of these disparities (Adler &

Bhattacharyya, 2021; Roberts et al., 2020). The longstanding concern of police brutality received

more attention due to the multiple murders of Black individuals, including Breonna Taylor, a 26-

year-old Black woman, and George Floyd a 46-year-old Black man. As Black women doctoral

students, participants in this study may have been exposed to the infiltration of dialogue around

these social issues, while also being a negatively impacted individual. The findings from this

dissertation study on the experiences of Black women doctoral students should be interpreted with an understanding of the intersecting challenges that these women faced.

Discovery of Group Experiential Themes and Subthemes

The findings from in-depth interviews of 15 Black women doctoral students resulted in three group experiential themes and subthemes that are detailed in Table 2 below. The first theme, navigating identity and social dynamics of academia highlights the complexities of intersecting identities and social interactions while pursuing a doctoral degree. The second theme, incorporating coping strategies and wellness explores how Black women make meaning of mechanisms of self-care and resilience. The third theme, healing and activism in the pursuit of equity, examines Black women's effort to challenge and change systemic oppression. The rich narratives of Black women doctoral students are organized to provide insight into how they perceived and made sense of coping and radical healing while navigating gendered racism.

Table 2

Group Experiential Themes and Subthemes

Group experiential themes	Navigating identity and social dynamics of academia	Incorporating coping strategies and wellness	Healing and activism in the pursuit of equity
Subthemes	Encounters of mistreatment because of identity	Exploring supportive networks across communities	Prioritizing self
	Navigating internalized stereotypes and self-perception	Cultivating Relaxation	Celebrating solidarity
	Impact of experiencing mistreatment		

Theme 1: Navigating Identity and Social Dynamics of Academia

Theme 1 addressed the first goal of this dissertation which was to explore how Black women experience gendered racism while pursuing a doctoral education. Participants were asked to describe their meaning-making around what it was like being a Black woman in a doctoral program. This query and discussion encompassed how a Black woman's social identity is central in an academic environment.

The participants expressed a dual experience reflecting both empowering and challenging aspects of their academic journey. The women reported experiencing a sense of accomplishment and frustration with inequities. This was coupled with their previous knowledge of racism in America and how it has impacted the support necessary for Black women.

The participants expressed a need for academic institutions to recognize and accommodate Black women's needs. Two of the women reported their frustration with inequities at a systemic level. One participant, Rochelle, a third-year doctoral student at an HIS expressed a dual experience reflecting both empowering and challenging aspects of her academic journey. She voiced, "I'm very happy that I'm a candidate now and I'm also very sad that it's just like, why are there not more people like me in these spaces." Rochelle went on to explain how she has begun to feel like her voice is being acknowledged and that she is finally having meaningful discourse in classroom discussions. Amid, this personal recognition, Rochelle is curious about the representation of Black students and faculty. Rochelle's experience is filled with irony and inconsistency around inclusivity for Black women.

For Taylor, a student in her sixth year or beyond and enrolled at a PWI, being a Black woman doctoral student is synonymous with a lack of support. She expressed, "*Exhausting,* to use one word, it would be exhausting…being a Black student, and being female, and having so

many previous fights, like generational trauma...I think that's really left out of the support that we need." Taylor posited that professionals in the field and her peers, have a level of entitlement but should however be responsible for considering the burden of generational trauma and the challenges that Black women face. Similarly, some of the participants discussed their multiple roles as a student, wives, moms, employees, and many other commitments all placing a strain on them. Coowife shared how it is "hard being just a Black woman period, we have so much on our plates all the time, I'm a wife, I'm a mom, at work full time having to go to school, having to write like it can be overwhelming." This experience, like some of the other participants, highlights the challenges of systems that create barriers and pressure for Black women as they work to meet expectations to thrive in society.

The following subthemes are used to reflect Black women's stories of negotiating their identities and navigating the social dynamics inside academic institutions: (a) encounters of mistreatment because of identity, (b) navigating internalized stereotypes and self-perception, and (c) the impact of experiencing mistreatment.

Subtheme 1: Encounters of Mistreatment Because of Identity

Many of the participants in the study described experiences of being treated differently because of their race and gender. Some of the participants emphasized the influence of societal biases on their interactions in academia. This shared perception of treatment occurred among doctoral student peers, faculty, and the larger institutional administration or in their workplace.

Nicole, a third-year doctoral student at a PWI shared an interaction she had with a peer in class: "We were commenting or talking about women in leadership, and I brought up Black women leadership and he was just kind of like dismissive." Nicole's experience represents being

belittled and her voice being ignored, although she is technically an expert in the area she was discussing.

Queen, a third-year doctoral student at a PWIs, shared two acts of blatant racism from peers. She made meaning of being treated unfairly through interactions she witnessed against Black women. "Somebody had called a Black girl, not a Black girl, a Black queen of ours on campus a n**** b****"" and "Somebody had came into one of the Black professor's classrooms with an ape suit on saying that is how she was being." Queen was appalled that individuals would use such hateful stereotypes to perpetrate racism and discrimination. To hold individuals and systems accountable, students like Queen hold positions on campus such as being president of the Black Student Association. In addition to being subjected to unfair treatment, participants often feel obligated to combat it.

Nine of the participants revealed cases of the presence of microaggressions from faculty members. Rochelle shared her sense of feeling the weight of being expected to advocate on behalf of marginalized communities. She expressed,

> I was called in for just general discussion and ideas of what can we do for our students of color to sort of put them at ease, I guess, or calm them down for what's going on surrounding George Floyd's murder. I offered several suggestions and one of them was a peer support group for students of color and immediately, it was like, Okay, well, how are you going to do this? And I immediately had to say back that I don't want it to be (me) doing this, I would prefer that it be, you know, our White faculty who lead this group. Also, just sort of being overlooked for opportunities, speaking of research opportunities…but my White, two of my White peers received the opportunity.

Following the murder of George Floyd, Rochelle offered suggestions for systems of support for Black students, and she was asked to lead these groups. She made the comparison of how she felt tokenized because when it came to other opportunities, particularly research opportunities that would help advance her career, she has been overlooked. Being singled out when it benefits others and left out when it can benefit Black women is a common thread for Rochelle.

Nyla, a third-year doctoral student at a PWI, made meaning of being treated unfairly when her academic abilities were being questioned. She stayed steadfast when her academic abilities were questioned, "and I remember telling her I may be getting engaged and she's like 'Oh my God, how is that going to impact your program are you going to finish?'" Nyla called this blatant disregard for her ability to excel along with life's changes, as the perceptions others have of Black women, and reaching "the glass ceiling." She saw the comments as indicating there is only so much Black women can do and only so far they can go before they choose something or someone else over themselves.

Participants also shared their sense of the meaning of their experiences with faculty, whereby they were being mistreated in the presence of others. Uniqua, a fifth-year doctoral student at an HSI, made the meaning of being treated unfairly in a public celebratory space and connected this to her feeling like she constantly had to prove herself as a doctoral student:

> And then this White lady comes and she's asking me my name and my program and what fellowship I want…my advisor just told her the fellowship I have…so she literally went around to audit staff to see which one I wanted and then they told her like actually she already has a fellowship and was more competitive than other people here…I felt like

that was probably the start of where I feel like I kind of have to prove myself in the

program.

In addition to this happening publicly, Uniqua's voice was dismissed as what she was saying was

not initially being valued. Taylor was also criticized publicly, but in a classroom setting, and

highlighted the costs of Black women's well-being when faculty feel offended by Black

students' harmless actions:

> I had a White male teacher that I sent an email asking a question regarding like,
>
> homework, or something…so in order to be inclusive to everybody to answer, I replied
>
> all, and the teacher instead of replying back to me asking me to speak, he had this whole
>
> yelling bashing session right outside of the class and so that was like super embarrassing.
>
> Lynn, a first-year doctoral student at a PWIs, shared her view on making sense of a

faculty member attempting to kick her out, and an unsettling feeling as she thinks about returning

to class in person:

> The director is one of our professors…and so he made the assumption that I wasn't
>
> paying attention, or I wasn't even there, and he was just like "I'm just gonna kick her out
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> because she's probably not paying attention anyway," and I'm not sure if it's because I'm
>
> Black. I'm not sure if he was joking or not…so it'll be kind of interesting to see what it's
>
> like when we go back in person with everybody else.

When asking Emily, a fourth-year doctoral student at a PWI about times she felt like she was

treated unfairly, she described an experience where her needs as a doctoral student were not met

"I needed to take a leave of absence…I explained to my chair everything that was going on and

her only reply was you know, everybody goes through these things." Emily's concerns were

dismissed and met with a lack of empathy, and this was similar to her experience while navigating the process of taking a leave when she had COVID.

Participants reflected on a lack of accountability from faculty causing harm to marginalized communities. Queen and Spiritual Child expressed their sense-making around relying on faculty as leaders. Queen made meaning of the consequences when faculty, who are responsible for teaching cultural competence are still oblivious and insensitive to racism: "My department chair…she was just like I am so glad that now I get the chance to raise my banner to stop racism." Queen further discussed her annoyance with this comment, and how offensive it is to believe that a banner alone will solve one of the most daunting experiences in the United States.

SpiritualChild a second-year doctoral student at a PWI, had a similar experience to Queen in that a faculty member ignored the privilege in their position to disseminate knowledge. She made meaning of how Black students become responsible for educating faculty and the class:

Talking about research and talking about poverty within certain communities that they didn't even realize what they were saying "Okay well this is a predominately Black area, so we already know they're impoverished." And someone in the class, another Black individual in the class having to call the professor out saying, you can't equate Black to being impoverished…and so that ended up turning into a longer discussion, it took up class time.

Four participants discuss their perceptions of gender bias and unequal distribution of opportunities and attention in academic settings. They described male students being prioritized compared to their female peers. Taylor shared her perceptions on White men being the most protected: "I feel like for this field to be predominately woman…the support that men get is

more like the NSA…the opportunities they get are more and I think there's support more there as well." Men's protection is made sense of as the highest level of support, like that of the National Security Administration. It is surprising that while the field is dominated by women, men still are given preferential treatment, and thought of as superior in an academic space. The systemic bias and barriers for women are apparent and have major consequences for their career development.

Similarly, understanding how men are favored more, Mary a first-year doctoral student at a PWI, stated,

> There are just a few men in the program, and I do think that they're called on more by the professors." And I think when they're talking, they're like never cut off, so they have more time to talk, so I do feel like there's a bias there for male students.

Having this experience of male students being able to speak more often and without interruption creates and may reinforce a culture of silence and minimal engagement, stifling her learning process.

Many of the participants mentioned diversity in their program, and some discussed a failure in adequate representation of Black students and faculty in academia. Nico made a connection between the lack of diversity and Black women being silenced:

> So, they say per capita that Black women are the most educated group in the US, I believe that, but I don't see that. I'm the only Black person in my cohort…but then when you speak up as a Black woman, you're still silenced.

Once again, systemic challenges infiltrate the classroom, where Black women are siloed and othered in a space they are highly qualified to be in. Recognizing a double standard in the way dress is judged for Black women, Uniqua conveyed, "I feel like when I was teaching, and I had on jeans, and the professor says something to me, but then the male who had on jeans taught

the class." As doctoral students, women are subjected to their clothing choices being questioned. Uniqua's experience reflects how these gendered perceptions and stereotypes have the potential for unequal distribution of opportunities and in this case more teaching opportunities.

Two of the participants made meaning about the lack of support received from administrative personnel on campus. Naija, a third-year doctoral student at a PWI, highlighted moments when stereotypes impacted how staff interacted with her in multiple spaces on campus:

> But I remember going to the financial aid office or to the tech center and people assuming that I wasn't a student…assuming that I worked for the institution, like vividly I can remember going into the computer lab and asking a simple question and them telling me that they couldn't tell me that information because I wasn't a student.

Nova shared her story, making meaning of the research approval process and who had access, including a focus on racial differences:

> So, the majority of my cohort had White chairs or White support, and were able to be pushed through with little to no pushback from IRB…My other cohort members have an all-Black community. My other peer has a Black chair, a Black reader, and a White reader. Um pretty much everyone in the hat, the Black people, had an issue with IRB and was getting pushback.

Two participants felt they were being treated differently in the workplace while a doctoral student. In her on-campus job, Nyla described being tokenized by her supervisor to enhance program objectives:

> I had a lot of clashes with my supervisor who was also a woman of color, she would want to pick and choose when she wanted to use my identities as capital to further initiatives…and then it was time for me to step away for little bit because I have things

going on with school and she was like "Well you know as a Black woman and as a woman of color we have to show up and do other things."

Rochelle's work experience included her being overworked in an on-campus job: "But I would notice that he would not be in his office nearly as long as me. He would decide to be out talking to some of the other student workers while I'm literally bogged down in trying to get certain reports done." The perception of Black women having to carry the load prompted Rochelle to become burdened with more work than her colleague. Rochelle shared that she has "a very strong work ethic," and there becomes a discrepancy between what she can do and her being taken advantage of.

Subtheme 2: Navigating Internalized Stereotypes and Self-perception

Participants expressed how stereotypes were a lens through which they perceived and understood how they should show up or how they would be treated as Black women in an academic space. Many of the participants discussed pressure from expectations they perceived others held and pressure they put on themselves. When discussing this level of pressure, Nicole, SpiritualChild, and Naija described the pressure they felt to be an advocate for research and service for the Black population. Nicole expressed the way she made meaning about the pressure she put on herself:

> You know, I can just imagine like, Nicole you're the only Black girl in class, and you're studying Black girls, you know, I don't know, carrying that, so I do feel a bit of uneasiness or maybe pressure…I think it's something I've put on myself more than anything I've directly experienced.

SpiritualChild, articulated, "I feel that extra layer of, okay if you want there to be an antiracism curriculum in the classroom, you need to be the one amongst other people like advocating for that." Naija stated,

> But I feel like there's a lot of pressure with doing like those social determinants work. And it's just so cliché to me, like I haven't folded under that pressure. But I think because people see me as a Black person, the first assumption is that I do some type of research for like Black people.

Participants also discussed this sense of pressure as imposter syndrome, which is the unrealistic expectations they have adopted through pervasive stereotypes. Emily, articulated learning about her experience through the relatability of other stories: "And imposter syndrome, just the push back, a lot of things that the ladies were describing is things I think I went through that I just didn't know what it was just that fear of not being good enough." Uniqua shared her thoughts about how she feels she is expected to show up as a Black woman. "I always feel like I have to kind of like, prove how smart I am…Because when you come across like Black people, you know you can be yourself, you don't have to code switch." CooWife a fourth-year doctoral student at PWI, shared, "I really do know what I'm talking about and so having to feel like you have to prove that…I'm here for the same reasons you all are here, and I got admitted on the same criteria." Navigating these stereotypes, and being responsible to think through how they are perceived and how they should react were ways that these Black women doctoral students faced imposter syndrome.

Subtheme 3: Impact of Experiencing Mistreatment

When asking participants about times they experienced mistreatment because of their race and gender, participant narratives led to stories that delved into their feelings, actions, and

well-being. Participants expressed emotional responses toward an event where they perceived they or members of their community were being mistreated. They also shared thoughts that may lead to behavioral actions rather than directly responding or deciding to disengage. Last, they discussed changes in their mental and physical health because of mistreatment based on their identity or the stress associated with it.

Eight of the participants facing mistreatment had an emotional reaction directly following an incident. They made meaning around the toll of feeling like it was their duty to advocate for others. CooWife discussed how she felt when reflecting on how stereotypes of Black women being angry are a common perception of others: "It can be exhausting…you constantly have to advocate for your people and for people who look like you and constantly want to make sure I'm showing myself in a positive light." Similarly, SpiritualChild shared her feelings of exhaustion around differences between her experience as a Black woman compared to what White students experience:

> I think just being exhausted, simultaneously, knowing that I have to keep going, and I'm going to always have to advocate for what I need…just kind of suck it up. But I would say, a White counterpart, there's some of those layers, I don't think they know. I know for a fact they don't necessarily have to shoulder.

A lack of support from an advisor prompted Emily to make meaning of the importance of her success to others. She began by expressing that she felt "overwhelmed, yeah, and the support I had like an advisor who you know…there was only a 30-day check-in or a 60-day check-in." The number of meetings suggests a lack of commitment from the advisor to appropriately mentor Emily in achieving her milestones.

Dissatisfied with oppressive actions from peers, Mary's sense-making of power dynamics, reflects constructive criticism being bypassed for White students and a lack of support for Black women who are being subjected to these actions:

> I do feel like in this one class, with this one student who was a Caucasian male, I felt like he was allowed in this one class to denigrate some of the students in there. And I feel like it was because he was a White student…and I felt like this professor wouldn't say it happened in any other class but I felt like he was allowed to just have a tone that was disrespectful, and he was disrespectful to me…I was resentful of that, I didn't appreciate that.

After experiencing a microaggression, Queen shared her feelings about making sense of a faculty's members incomprehension of true allyship for racism. Queen was "upset and heated. And I'm looking at somebody within our program, somebody who is teaching us that we need to be culturally sensitive and aware and she's being a huge Karen."

Naija went on to discuss annoyance rooted in her perception that staff on campus assumed she was not a current student. When she described her experience, her tone heightened with irritation and she said, "Girl annoyed, because as I said, I've never seen my blessing as a deficit."

Lynn expressed anger following the incident where the professor discussed kicking her out of the virtual class and shared that it "felt like a punch to the gut…to like anger, like I've learned to tone down like my reaction to people, but my immediate reaction was like anger."

Rochelle also had an emotional response to being unfairly treated by being overlooked when she needed support from a faculty member: "It is definitely a very sad feeling, and also upsetting as well. And speaking on the question of feeling different, or that experience, just this

past semester, I was in my very last statistics course, and it was very, very difficult." Rochelle

further explained her meaning-making around being overlooked in comparison to other students

in the class:

> So this past semester, my brother was set on fire by the truck…I was logging on to class,
> and I sent a chat letting the professor know what was going on or what had just happened.
> And, you know for this particular class, I would just like to have my camera off. Did not
> acknowledge my message. I just remember thinking like, does she see it? She does not
> want to respond. But as other chats started to come in…she was responding to those and
> so it made me feel like maybe she just chose not to respond to me. I don't know I can't
> assume. But it definitely felt like I was looked over.

> Taylor's emotions, thoughts, and responses were explained as she continued to make

meaning of her experience with a professor who publicly shamed her in class. After discussing

being embarrassed, she shared,

> I am a type of person who is fine with raising my hand and asking questions. It doesn't
> really faze me. I don't need you to force me to practice it based on when someone tries to
> call on me. When I decide, I don't want to participate that day, I feel some type of lag, so
> I'm just not going to participate. Obviously, I'm in my own state of mind for whatever
> reason…Yeah so the feelings that come up, I definitely would say are like annoyance,
> anger, embarrassment, kind of fear to have a lot of things to carry. We was already
> carrying them before we got in here. Now it's like being masked.

Taylor's comfort with participating in class becomes diminished as her encounter with

mistreatment is compounded by her emotions and what she has previously experienced and

continues to carry as a Black woman in an academic space. This is an additional layer of pressure for Black women to be responsible for protecting themselves.

The participants expressed how their thoughts were central to their meaning-making of gendered racism and being mistreated because they are Black women. Participants discussed the process of interpreting the experience through an understanding of it occurring because of their identity.

SpiritualChild also experienced a sense of fear reflecting on preparation for potentially harmful events in the future. Encountering one incident now shifts her perspective of believing something will occur again, "Alright, now you have to come back to this class next week, and hopefully he doesn't say anything, then I'm offended next week and it's just unnecessary." SpiritualChild is using mental energy to process an event and she is anticipating another encounter. She also makes meaning around her thoughts about the impact of White privilege that subjects' Black women to disturbing and uncomfortable conversations:

> So I'm on the admin committee and one of the conversations we were talking about were trigger warnings and it ended up being a pretty big deal. Now it's on the agenda for the admin committee, so in one way at least it's being discussed at a higher level. But if you think about going back to my role as a Black woman, it's like now that's another space where I have to talk about it. It doesn't just stay in the classroom, and it's just his White privilege.

Rochelle shared how she navigated her thoughts of a lack of support in her role as president of the honor society and having to work independently to complete a project:

> I started in the fall, and I was responsible for doing so much. I don't remember the president before me having to do nearly as much as me. And she was also supported…So

it was just a lot of everything falling on me and having to delegate. Even the chapter

faculty advisor will take days for me to hear back from her. And so definitely I'm like, is

it because I'm Black? It is because I'm a Black female in this space, in this position...I

just had to take it up on my own self to type up all of the positions because the

nominations were coming up.

Some of the other participants had a behavioral response that occurred from experiencing

mistreatment because of their race and gender identity. Nicole discussed how she made meaning

of her responses to mistreatment by focusing on actions she must take to protect herself and her

image as well as the image of other Black women. When she experiences her role as a doctoral

student being questioned with "kind of like the head tilt" she shared, "I feel defensive, I feel like

I have to defend." Nicole is combatting stereotypes by claiming her place and in disbelief that

others are confused by a Black woman being capable of such achievements.

Like Rochelle, Emily decided to respond to a lack of support by navigating the journey

independently. Instead of solely relying on her advisor, Emily used mentorship relationships

outside of her advisor:

Navigate and figure it out on my own, the most progress I made was reaching out to

another mentor, like one of those people who will guide you through the dissertation. I

actually hired an editing service to look over my chapters that I wrote. And then I found

clubhouse and ended up finding all of these support groups there, and that's how I ended

up on the Black woman PhD support group, so I was able to find a lot of my own

support.

Many of the participants perceived that acts of gendered racism and systemic inequalities

contributed to the psychological distress and physical health concerns they experienced. They

discussed specific challenges that caused a point of reflection on the harm caused and meaning-making of being compelled to take on the responsibility of navigating challenges while simultaneously pushing forward.

Concerned with students using class time to gain knowledge from marginalized communities, meaning they turn into educators, Queen posed a thought of inquiry: "Why does learning about marginalized experiences have to happen at the cost of my mental health? My sanity, at the cost of my emotional balance, why is that?" She further shared,

> For the past few years this has impacted my doctoral experience. Like me being a Black woman in the sense of me then becoming a mom for Black people, for Black women and that sets heavy on me as I continued my doctoral experience because nobody saying, Queen you need to do this, hey you need to do that. Society lets me know this is something that I need to do by God, right from society. Nobody has to name it or say it for me.

A few participants expressed anxiety as a new experience for them after becoming a doctoral student. Rochelle spoke about the increase of symptoms and the strategies she uses to support herself:

> I am definitely more anxious than not…occasional shortness of breath, where I'm like okay just breathe deeply. Practice some deep breaths, really fill your lungs with air because you're just in a state of like panic or worry, or like why does it always have to be you. Definitely impacting my sleep beyond what a doctoral program would impact. So many just, many restless nights, which also impacts sometimes I've had to take mental health days already for work.

After being ignored when posing a question seeking support for Black students during a town hall discussing recent acts of police brutality, Nyla disclosed being anxious: "I had a physical reaction to it. Like I was sweating. Like I feel my stomach just like churning…I just felt a lot of anxiety."

Nova, on the other hand, shared that at two different times her physical health was impacted and in one instance her mental health provoked a physical response. Following disparate treatment with IRB approval, Nova began to feel stressed and noticed a difference in her "emotional and physical well-being." Nova shared, "The results of the MRI showed that I had lesions on my brain that showed that I had a stroke" Then with immediate policy changes influencing her defense date, she noted,

> So as a result, my body went into like traumatic shock, like a trauma response…so physically I broke out in hives…anytime that I am anxious or overwhelmed, my body will break out. That has never happened to me in life until this program.

She is not alone as physical activity became limited for Rochelle, who mentioned,

> I've noticed a lot of chronic pain lately, just like the stress and anxiety carrying it in my shoulders, carrying it in my lower back different joints and stuff. It just very sad to think that something like this has caused such a significant issue or issues, rather mentally I'm like really, like faking.

Theme 2: Incorporating Coping Strategies and Wellness

The next two sections address the primary research question: How do Black women doctoral students describe and identify strategies of coping and radical healing as a way of navigating gendered racism? I begin by sharing participants' coping strategies.

All the participants discussed an array of ways coping was essential to their wellness during a doctoral program. They described many practices that they engaged in alone to promote a sense of inner peace, as well as how they fostered connections. When asked how participants cope and take care of themselves, a few mentioned that they are still discovering their coping process. Nico shared "I'm still working on that. It's changed from year to year." She noted how some strategies in the past did not serve her and now she is being intentional about strategies that will be beneficial for her wellbeing. Taylor feels excited that her coping has become "so much better" for her. The way participants make meaning about the strategies they employ to cope with challenges and survive in a higher education setting is shared through the themes: exploring supportive networks across communities and cultivating relaxation.

Subtheme 1: Exploring Supportive Networks Across Communities

The participants shared that coping included connecting with individuals in their supportive network. They shared how connections with family members, friends, and doctoral student peers, are integral to the ways they take care of themselves. Nova and Naija shared the support they received from their family. Nova stated, "I have a phenomenal partner, the father of our son. He is just amazing. He supported me throughout my entire master's program all the way up through this doctorate." For Naija, her understanding of how isolating a doctoral program can be inspires her to maintain relationships with family: "A PhD can be an isolating experience, but a lot of time we may get isolating, like it's us that isolate people, so when it gets to that point where it's like I really want to talk to my grandma…my mom and dad."

In some instances, it can be a struggle to receive support from family. Two participants shared how a lack of understanding about doctoral program requirements or jealousy around doctoral student achievements influences a hindrance in support from family members. Nicole

shared, "My family, as much as they want to help…they've been to college and have their master's, but the doctoral program is a whole different ballgame." Obtaining a master's degree differs in academic expectations and challenges making support difficult to achieve at times. Shavon's experience with family has also had some struggles. She talked about a "negative side" coming from family and shared that "they have this disdain like I think I'm better."

Mary discussed the importance of having support from both family and her friends who are outside of her doctoral program:

> And talking to family and friends, I try to squeeze that in just about every day. I'll talk to someone on the phone and where I have time, I'll try and meet. I visit my family every week, and I try to meet my friends as much as I can…so just trying to stay in touch with supportive people.

Uniqua used the support of her friends in being vulnerable about her experiences as a doctoral student. She explained, "Talking to people, talking to my friends about those experiences are ways that I cope." For these participants, friendships are viewed as ways to escape some of the normalcy of experiencing gendered racism in a doctoral program. After discussing her connections with Black students, Nyla emphasized the benefit of friendships outside of academia, and stated,

> Being in community with my girlfriends, I will also say like breathing as memories. As they're more intentional about reading books that I actually like to read as opposed to like just being bogged down in the research and theory all day that some White man probably wrote.

Rochelle discussed further how friendships outside of academia shape an essential part of

coping:

> And then connect to my old friends that I don't really get to talk to as much…and so also
>
> just having that as a safe space actually to just like release but I'm experiencing them also
>
> providing encouragement and I definitely feel much better after talking to them.
>
> Upholding relationships with cohort members, and previous or current doctoral students

is also essential to the participants. In addition to relationships with friends, there are unique

moments when peers can uplift each other. Rochelle made meaning about the differences when

reflecting on her cohort and stated, "It's eight of us in my cohort but it's four of us who've gotten

really close, and we stick together." SpiritualChild shared how she makes decisions around who

she can lean on for support based on her needs: "I heavily rely on my cohort...maybe debrief

things that are happening within my program, I'm probably not doing it with some of my

friends." Nicole can navigate the flexibility of these relationships: "The Black doctoral study

group, because it's like we cannot be doctoral students for a minute and then be like okay, we

gotta study."

Subtheme 2: Cultivating Relaxation

Participants were asked to think about the ways they take care of their mental and

physical health, and they shared many strategies that help them cope. Participants discussed

mind-body practices. Several of the participants described coping strategies that were beneficial

for individual well-being. Emily shared her meaning-making experience of coping:

> I've started doing yoga lately but now I do a lot of self-care, I work out, eat healthy and
>
> just find that balance. I used to have days in my schedule where I used to stay up at night

not sleeping, just to get the work done. So sleeping more, taking care of my mental health and wellness.

Mary acknowledged the ways she copes, "Well I try to exercise most days, so if I can go for a walk that really helps, meditation I try to do that. I don't do it every day, but I try to do it most days." Meditation is also enjoyed by SpiritualChild, who articulated,

So, for me, I'm really big into like mindfulness meditation, so for me, it's starting my mornings with a 10-minute meditation or if I'm rushing and I forgot that day, by the end of the night that's when I am processing thing in real time. Also, we always exercise, even when the semester get pretty hectic, I try to work out at least you know, two or three times a week. I think that is something that has been helping me.

She went on to further discuss similar meaning-making to Uniqua, such as relying on the support of friendships to discuss experiences of being treated unfairly.

Two of the participants focused on setting boundaries and having time alone to cultivate relaxation through coping. In using prayer for guidance, Queen also revealed, "And I feel as though me giving myself some space from folks that has always helped me mentally." Taylor articulated separation from content and discussions that can negatively impact well-being: "I'm not about to subject myself to retraumatization if I'm not in the place to be able to see."

Theme 3: Healing and Activism in the Pursuit of Equity

The third theme derived from the data is healing and activism in the pursuit of equity. The sections also address the primary research question: How do Black women doctoral students describe and identify strategies of coping and radical healing as a way of navigating gendered racism? For this theme, I highlight participants' healing strategies. For this study radical healing is defined as the participants meaning making on being intentional about resisting oppression.

The stories illuminate how Black women center their voices to express their experiences, recognize how oppression presents itself, and make meaning of intersectionality and its role in creating inclusive spaces. The stories highlight the struggles they and their community face, the importance of supportive networks of individuals with whom they connect, and perseverance and hope. The two subthemes of prioritizing self and celebrating solidarity emphasize Black women reclaiming their positions in a doctoral program.

Many participants began by defining radical healing, and collectively they believed that it is rest and resilience. Overall, they emphasized the time needed to pause or be intentional about the responsibilities they take on. Taylor articulated, "Picking your battles like knowing when to rest." The participants also discussed that for Black women to have been historically and currently mistreated in the academy, resilience is an example of their belonging. CooWife stated, "I think just showing up in a space that wasn't designed for me." Nova expressed the same:

> I think my healing is going to come from my day-to-day when I stand in front of these folks that tried to oppress me this entire doctoral journey that tried to oppress me at the end, and essentially almost made me want to give up on something I've worked so hard for.

Subtheme 1: Prioritizing Self

Eleven of the participants communicated how making themselves a priority has allowed them to resist oppression. These participants felt like prioritizing themselves through self-care was essential to Black women challenging negative stereotypes and the narrative that they must work hard to prove their worth. It was their act of choosing for themselves, choosing to invest in their well-being and reclaim agency over their narratives. Uniqua revealed how caring for oneself is an act of challenging and resisting oppression:

I will probably add passively and intentionally because I think anytime you can do things

to heal yourself you automatically resist oppression. Because think about it with

oppression, it's like they try to keep you down. They try to keep things from you and that,

they do to like to get to your psyche. But if you are healing and taking care of yourself,

some Black women or Black men may not intentionally be like, yeah you know, I'm

doing this to fight the power. But it's like unintentionally when you build yourself up,

you are fighting oppression.

Naija disclosed how she ensures basic needs are met individually and collectively to

resist oppression and prioritize self-care. Naija was asked about how she incorporates radical

healing, and she conveyed,

And the things that often you know, will deprive us, and lead us to deprivation is a lack

of nourishment, and you know, a lack of serotonin and a lack of rest. Because you don't

get to reset, so if I'm not eating well, it's like every day I wake up with three quarters of

the pain…so that's what I do on a regular basis just make sure that I meet my basic

needs. So that's an individual act of resistance that I do, maintaining, you know discipline

for myself being the disciplinary for myself to be able to maintain those boundaries

around my basic needs.

SpiritualChild shared how prioritizing self, and the community is a personal act of

achieving wellness for herself and others whom she cares for:

Challenging oppression because that is part of my well-being and part of my healing, part

of me feeling okay. Relieving stress can't happen if that radical intentionality is not

happening…alright another Black person got killed by the police. I don't want to watch

this today or another, you know an oppressive thing happened to someone in my

community like I just don't have the energy for it. But more so than not, I allow myself to have the energy for it because it literally impacts me and people that I care about.

Nicole shared a sentiment similar to that of SpiritualChild and is empowered by her healing processes. She explained,

> Helping others I think helps to heal me…But now I've taken the responsibility of helping with the diversity efforts, but also standing up for myself and saying what I can help to assist with. But my job is to do this, and if you want to pay me to do this…kind of protecting, myself in that way.

Subtheme 2: Celebrating Solidarity

All the participants found solidarity in their relationships with other Black women. A few shared a sense of support and connection through social media on Facebook groups for Black women in higher education. Nico voiced her sense of connectedness with online platforms, "I've joined all these different groups on Facebook, so there is just validation." She discussed the validation through shared experiences which is like Emily's comment early on. Many of the other participants conveyed their joy in building connections with Black women in their academic communities where they uplift, support, and advocate for each other. CooWife stated,

> So I think just having the audacity to show up and work hard and tap into other Black women who look like me and support each other like and care and honestly carry one another through this program, I think that's probably the biggest form of resistance is just the kind of sisterhood that we established. We standing together, we all are, making it across this line.

Queen expressed excitement about mutual support and embracing diverse identities:

> Being around Black women because that's necessary, seeing folks that look like you is always always great. They're always so beautiful because yes, we are not a homogenous group. But there's certain things that we do that are very similar. Within group it's really nice to see, to witness. Black woman's excellence Black woman's power. Its goodness, their love. Oh my god, healing all by itself. I'm getting teary eyed about that. Thinking of like the different moments when Black woman told me I was beautiful.

Mary shared how this support among Black women can also occur through programs affiliated with the institution. After reflecting on life after social unrest because of police brutality she expresses,

> I'm in a Black social workers group as well and that group has been really helpful because they are talking about it, we have like, almost like a ceremony every time we met. And so they were doing a lot of Black history, discussions and a lot of activism as well.

Chapter Summary

The findings section of this dissertation illuminate the stories of 15 Black women doctoral students to address the research question: How do Black women doctoral students describe and identify strategies of coping and radical healing as a way of navigating gendered racism? Through IPA, interpretations revealed three prominent themes (a) navigating identity and social dynamics, (b) incorporating strategies of coping and wellness, and (c) healing and activism in the pursuit of equity. These themes highlight individual and collective experiences of Black women grappling with external pressure and simultaneously fostering empowerment and provide insight for a deeper discussion on implications for Black women's well-being in a

doctoral program. The next chapter is a discussion of the themes that emerged from participant

interviews.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In the United States, for example, African American social and political thought analyzed institutionalized racism, not to help it work more efficiently, but to resist it. (Collins, 2009, p. 11)

For Black women, the journey of obtaining a doctoral degree in the United States is often met with barriers and challenges. Amid stories of gendered racism, Black women doctoral students are using coping and radical healing for individual and collective well-being. However, how Black women doctoral students identify and describe strategies to maintain mental health and combat racism is an understudied area in social work research. Using the lens of BFT and intersectionality, this dissertation contributes to scientific knowledge by (a) exploring how Black women experience gendered racism while pursuing doctoral education, and (b) examining how coping and radical healing are used as protective factors for navigating gendered racism in institutional settings.

Coping is defined as the interpersonal strategies that individuals employ to manage stress and promote resilience in their lives and radical healing has been defined as a transformative approach to individual, community, and societal well-being and liberation through reclamation of one's identity and resisting oppression. Both are valuable to understand and validate the experiences of Black women and have been conceptualized as empowering for navigating adversity (Shavers & Moore, 2019). This study suggests that Black women may encounter barriers to coping and radical healing that impact their ability to exude resilience but also work to overcome those barriers by incorporating strategies that promote well-being. As highlighted in the findings section of the dissertation, Black women establish supportive networks and relaxation techniques, prioritize their self-care, and foster solidarity.

Theoretical Lens

BFT and intersectionality are used as the theoretical frameworks guiding how this study was designed. Through the lens of BFT and intersectionality, this study prioritized the narratives of Black women, emphasizing the intersectionality of their race and gender, recognizing ownership, and telling stories from their perspective. Collins (2009) explained the importance of amplifying and centering the voices of Black women while simultaneously understanding the interconnected systems that impact their experiences and well-being. Stories of resilience are impactful to research and practice, and it is just as crucial to understand the reasons requiring resilience, and to address the oppression and marginalization faced by Black women (Bowleg, 2017; Crenshaw, 1989; Davis & Brown, 2017). Every aspect of the study design was guided by these theoretical frameworks, shaping the research questions, instrument, methodological approach, data analysis, and interpretation of participant narratives. A comprehensive exploration of the data resulted in addressing a gap in knowledge that Black women doctoral students are continuously resisting and challenging the oppressive impacts of hegemonic systems of racial and gendered hierarchies through their engagement in practices of coping and radical healing.

Identifying the Social Dynamics of Doctoral Programs

The first theme derived from the data is navigating identity and social dynamics. Some of the Black women doctoral students were conscious of the systems of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism) that exist in higher education, leading them to perceive they are obligated to personify being a strong Black woman (e.g., reliant on self and resilient). For many of the participants, being a Black woman meant exuding strength as a means of survival by balancing multiple roles and responsibilities. For instance, many of the participants worked either full time or part time

while also a doctoral student, working jobs and holding leadership positions in campus organizations that are meant to serve others (e.g., therapist, community organizer, program manager for first-generation college students, president of Black Student Union, peer mentor), with the insight that although it can be overwhelming their contribution would help others, society, and themselves. CooWife, SpiritualChild, Queen, Nova, Nyla, and a few other participants leaned into these roles and responsibilities as strength was seen as a positive attribute to help them continue. This is consistent with current scholarship on the strong Black woman (Jones, Harris, et al., 2021; Woods-Giscombé, 2010), which scholars have found is a common strategy to combat oppression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Donovan & West, 2015) but may place Black women in a position to silence themselves and ignore their needs (Nelson et al., 2023). In this study, some participants discussed being exhausted and overwhelmed stemming from the role strain, and perceived expectation to balance work and their personal life without support. Black women are doing this while navigating multiple dimensions of their identity (Wingfield, 2007), for instance, navigating the stereotypes attached to being Black, being a woman, how hard they must work, and the professionalism they exude.

Of notable importance is how these Black women doctoral students spontaneously presented their perspectives on feeling compelled to "prove" that they deserve to be doctoral students, which falls under the theme, of navigating internalized stereotypes and self-perception. The meaning-making was a natural emergence as they reflected on their experiences as doctoral students and is consistent with what we know as the imposter phenomenon (e.g., sense of inferiority, feeling othered; Allen et al., 2019; Bernard et al., 2020). Many of the participants articulated how being a Black woman in a doctoral program led them to engage in actions to feel equipped and ready to assert their presence and navigate potential biases. Throughout her

doctoral journey, Uniqua used her knowledge about what it means to be a Black woman in academia to prove how smart she is and similar to some of the other participants, preparing themselves academically by reading all the material and ensuring they participate in class discussions and code-switching. Therefore, through the findings, it is revealed that many of the participants initiate coping strategies before a negative racialized or gendered encounter. For the participants, this could be because of cumulative exposure to microaggressions in previous educational experiences (Nadal et al., 2021).

The findings from this study extend the current scholarship highlighting coping processes before a current stressful situation. So, in addition to the being a strong Black woman, Black women also engage in John Henryism by using active coping by persevering and fulfilling their goals (Hudson et al., 2016; James, 1994). These actions can be ideal for Black women imploring coping strategies to manage perceived expectations and stereotypes (Bernard et al., 2020). By doing this there is a phase where Black women are mentally preparing themselves around conforming or not conforming to the norms expected of them. In some cases, this could occur through what Lacy (2007) discussed as the ways African Americans intentionally assert themselves to challenge the stereotypes about them. Through "mirroring the norms" of the dominant group, McCluney et al. (2021) explained Black individuals in the workplace using codeswitching to be well accepted and to decrease stereotypical perceptions. The findings from this study showed that when many Black women think about being in a doctoral program, their thoughts are rooted in both excitement and despair. It is difficult to solely focus on the privilege of being a doctoral student, when they also are exposed to interactions that make them second guess their place.

Encounters of mistreatment because of identity were also discussed as a common experience among the majority of the participants. Many of the participants described both microaggressions (e.g., assumptions around race/gender, being dismissed, tokenism, questioning of academic capabilities, and exclusion from opportunities) and overt racist actions (racial slurs, racial profiling, hate speech, and institutional racism related to representation). Black women in society and higher education report navigating limited resources and opportunities and cultural messages around beauty and dress (Lewis et al., 2013; Spates et al., 2020), and scholarship continues to reveal gendered racism among Black women (Womack et al., 2023). Although mostly all the participants shared stories of experiences being treated unfairly, some of the initial reports from some of the participants were that they had not encountered racism or sexism. Through the interviews, some of the women realized that they did have experiences in various spaces on campus. For instance, Naija's encounter with an assumption that she was not a student or the expectation of her to conduct social determinants of health research. Determining if an offensive act against someone has occurred has been a longstanding area of exploration in the literature, acknowledging that failing to see a pattern of bias and not knowing if an act is done in bad conscious may influence one's perception of their experiences (Sue et al., 2007).

Many of the Black women doctoral students discussed the impact of experiencing mistreatment including feelings of overwhelming anxiety, and exhaustion, and Nova even described breaking out in hives. These effects illustrate the toll that mistreatment because of identity has on mental and physical health. When discussing the impact of experiencing mistreatment, participants also discussed the manifestation of behavioral responses where they would think through their next steps, including using their voice to defend their race, mentally preparing themselves for an event to occur again, and seeking additional resources to help them

achieve their goals. This coincides with the process of coping with gendered racial microaggression (Lewis et al., 2013), detailing an encounter being assessed, picking and choosing battles, and using resistance, self-protective, and collective coping strategies. Again, participants were using suboptimal, but also optimal resistance or the ability to "name discrimination and identify its effects on her feelings while purposely, managing her thoughts and behavior in support of health and healing" (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015, p. 224). Although Black women participants are actively coping, the oppressive acts against them are essential to explore in continuing to understand the coping strategies Black women doctoral students are using specifically to navigate gendered racism.

This context is all consistent with what is outlined in BFT and intersectionality with Black women facing oppression and marginalization in various contexts specifically, higher education (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991). Similarly, this finding supports the work of Shavers and Moore (2019), who also found that Black female doctoral students reported being unwelcomed and tokenized at PWIs. Although, empirical scholarship has been grounded in the theoretical insights of intersectionality (Collins, 2012) and gendered racism (Essed, 1991), current evidence reflects the presence of gendered racism, imposter syndrome, and adverse health outcomes for Black women (McGee et al., 2019; Shavers & Moore, 2019). Moving this work forward, Shavers and Moore (2014a) suggested that future research focuses on the overall well-being of Black women doctoral students. Navigating identity and social dynamics was found to be a journey of experience and exploration for Black women, shaped by both the space of higher education and the multiple intersections of their identity. This journey is important for a study on Black women doctoral students because it reflects Black women's recognition of how their experiences in academia are being shaped by and rooted in systemic inequality.

The Role of Coping

Shavers and Moore (2014b) suggested that Black women doctoral students experience a double-edged sword, relying on coping mechanisms like proving them wrong to manage the stress of overt forms of racism and sexism. However, when prompted to discuss the ways that they take care of themselves, the participants did not reveal any coping strategies that led to negative consequences for them. Initially, when asked about coping strategies, a few of the participants shared how they were still discovering a lifestyle of coping. Overall, they described strategies like listening to music or podcasts, cooking, attending therapy, getting massages, prayer and spirituality, reading, and journaling. They shared how coping encompasses, being in a community with their supportive network and cultivating relaxation. The participants discussed relying heavily on family members, friends, and doctoral student peers to express themselves and their experiences and to receive encouragement. Ultimately, using them as a resource for support. A few of the participants described also having time for solitude, as a way of coping and having time alone to disconnect and engage in self-care that caters to relaxation. The participants described using coping that would benefit their mental and physical health. Breathwork, meditation, and mindfulness appeared to be vital for five of the participants. One participant stated, "I never used to meditate before I started a PhD." Five participants also discussed physical exercise through working out and going on nature walks as essential to their coping. For many of them, the nature walks began or increased during COVID-19. According to Lewis et al. (2013), these strategies for relaxation and seeking social support are part of resilience and promote positive outcomes, including individuals navigating challenges and maintaining well-being. Many of the participants recognize coping as essential for their well-being and withstanding the responsibilities of and negative encounters in a doctoral program.

The Role of Radical Healing

Many of the participants shared stories of feeling placed in a Mammy role of selflessness and focus on the needs of others when describing what it was like to be Black women doctoral students. However, they constantly worked to combat this stereotype. When discussing how they incorporate radical healing, they shared their beliefs and strategies for prioritizing self. Through analyzing participant narratives, prioritizing self stood out as a transformative process of self-affirmation and self-care. The participants discussed nurturing themselves daily as an act of resistance and by doing so Black women affirm their worth. In a doctoral program, the workload can be strenuous, and these participants have decided that prioritizing self means that their needs and their well-being through work matters. This prioritizing coincides with their discussion on setting boundaries with work to have ownership over their intellectual resources, time, and energy. The participants were also able to validate and affirm themselves through celebrating solidarity with other Black women. They discussed how the shared and diverse identities and experiences help them to feel seen and counter feelings of isolation in a doctoral program. They also shared their perspectives on celebrating solidarity through the collective strength they witnessed in advocating for systemic-level changes together. By celebrating solidarity participants resist oppression through community building and advocacy.

These findings are in alignment with the five anchors of the radical healing framework proposed by French et al. (2020). When facing systemic inequalities, French et al. suggested reclaiming agency and autonomy and creating nurturing and supportive relationships. For Black women doctoral students, the French et al.'s emphasis on the interconnectedness of oppression across multifaceted identities resonates with the use of an intersectional lens. Centering

marginalized voices and embracing intersectionality fosters well-being and liberation for often oppressed populations (French et al., 2020).

Research and Practice Implications

Research

A major finding of this study is Black women navigating internalized stereotypes. During the initial collection of demographic information, some of the participants noted that they did not have experiences with racism and sexism. Although, having this experience was part of the inclusion criteria, these participants were still interviewed to understand their perspectives. Throughout the individual interviews, these particular participant narratives revealed feeling silenced and overlooked and expressed instances of being mistreated in campus spaces outside of the classroom setting. One participant stated that they did not realize they were being mistreated until reading stories from women on social media, and she was able to relate. This indicates that while some individuals may not describe their experience as overt racism and sexism, covert experiences, and microaggressions sometimes become more apparent.

Many of the women express their constant exposure to gendered racism and simply the awareness of being a Black woman in a doctoral program invoking a psychological perception they have of how they will be perceived and treated. Their stories inform us that imposter syndrome is not where Black women begin, but rather a manifestation of the marginalization they experience. For instance, they discussed experiencing bias in research and career opportunities compared to their White peers, indicating microaggressions. The findings suggest that there is a need to explore the long-term effects of gendered racism and imposter syndrome on Black women's mental health and educational trajectories. Understanding the impact of these experiences is vital to the development and implementation of tailored interventions that support

their needs. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2009) highlighted "how difficult it is to survive in a culture that constantly stereotypes Black women as unintelligent, lazy, unmotivated, unattractive, difficult to deal with, and unable to maintain a functional family" (p. 13).

Investigating the long-term effects of imposter syndrome because of gendered racism can be impactful as a next step (Shavers & Moore, 2014a; 2019). In addition to the findings highlighted in this study, researchers have shown the detrimental consequences that overt acts of racism and discrimination have on mental health outcomes (McCoy, 2021; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016), which is crucial considering Black women's experiences in higher education (McGee et al., 2019). Still the effect on mental health spanning doctoral students' admission until degree completion is unknown (Shavers & Moore, 2019). A mixed methods longitudinal study can provide insight into the types of actions (e.g., microaggressions, institutional policies, representation of other Black students and faculty) that influence Black women's feelings of imposter syndrome. Quantitative data can be used to track changes occurring throughout matriculation. Qualitative data can provide a space for individuals to share their stories about their lived experiences as they transition year to year in the doctoral program and provide insight into the practice implications of individuals and institutions being responsible for educating themselves on their biases and systemic inequalities in higher education.

As noted, the participants in this study shared perceived bias in access to research and career opportunities. This has research implications for further investigating policies and practices around decision-making for who does and does not get access. Using an intersectional lens can help to better understand where programs and departments in higher education institutions are reinforcing biases. It will also give insight into who is involved in monitoring student experiences and exposure to opportunities that will advance their research career.

The findings in this study show that Black women doctoral students' coping strategies embrace cultivating relaxation and exploring supportive networks. Thus, it is clear that despite experiencing gendered racism, these doctoral students used coping strategies that specifically addressed those challenges and protect mental health. There is an opportunity for future research that can use these findings to inform intervention science. In addition to the findings presented from this study, previous empirical studies have found that positive coping strategies employed by Black women include enhanced vocal expression, managing emotional stress, fostering advocacy and community connections, and promoting academic engagement (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2009; Lewis et al., 2013; Lewis et al., 2016). The current literature highlights the protective role of coping in alleviating mental health concerns and fostering mental well-being (Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). However, the extant literature suggests that some coping strategies (e.g., proving your worth) can negatively impact mental health and well-being (Ramos & Yi, 2020; Thomas et al., 2008). The findings from this study inform us of the cultural experiences and beliefs that influence coping strategies that Black women incorporate in their lives. This research can inform the design of culturally sensitive interventions.

Implementing radical healing into future research among Black women doctoral students will extend awareness of strategies to resist and challenge structural inequality. This study has highlighted ways Black women resist oppression and findings revealed, the injustices Black women face and ways that they prioritize themselves and celebrate solidarity. The goal is to continually reveal narratives on the diverse radical healing strategies that they use, improving the understanding of their lived experiences. Participants in the study shared how they were stunned by others' lack of comprehension regarding Black experiences, having reliance on stereotypes and a disregard for the strengths of Black women. Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, bell hooks,

Kimberlè Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and Sojourner Truth, all contributed significantly to the discourse on intersectionality offering insight for Black women on using it as a guide to uncover their truth and their power (Oyewuwo & Walton, 2023). Continuing to apply radical healing will offer a holistic framework that addresses oppression and individual and community transformation (French et al., 2020; Ginwright, 2018). Stories of inquiry could explore (a) the collective strategies and community-based interventions that facilitate radical healing among Black women doctoral students and (b) how Black women doctoral students engage in activism and advocacy as a form of healing and resisting oppression.

Research on the indoctrination process for students that influences their coping and radical healing strategies is suggested. Students from diverse university settings may navigate and respond to mistreatment because of their identity differently. This study's participants were enrolled at PWIs and HSIs at the time of the study, which limited the ability to consider perspectives from students at HBCUs. Yet, the research is clear on the cultural acceptance and support of students who attend HBCUs (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020). This support may contribute to their trajectory and their decision-making for coping and radical healing.

Many of the participants were working either full time or part time while also a doctoral student. Some of them also shared having a scholarship or fellowship as financial support. However, exploring the implications of funding is recommended for future research to uncover how financial support influences the resources students use to navigate gendered racism. One participant shared the importance of programs being fully funded for Black women because of their underrepresentation. The participant believed that the full financial support could potentially increase the percentage of Black women doctoral students and future PhDs. Participants also discussed role strain and the many roles and responsibilities they have.

Exploring financial support in future research could have implications for decreasing the strain of having to work and be a student simultaneously.

Practice

The findings reflect that participants' encountered mistreatment from faculty, peers, and administration in the larger institutions, indicating the presence of biases regarding Black women and Black communities. Individuals upholding systems of oppression are responsible for acknowledging their privilege and understanding the ways their biases may manifest in an academic setting (Sue et al., 2010). Although programs of higher education host courses on cultural competence, there is not much training on self-reflection of unconscious bias, dialogue on systemic inequalities, and strategies to challenge oppressive systems (Sue et al., 2010). Often, students of color are placed in the position of educating others about structural inequalities and leading change initiatives, but Black women have endured enough and should not bear the responsibility for spearheading change. Rochelle shared her sentiments:

> Why should it be the students of color leading the group, we are the ones needing the support. And so just thinking about that experience of it, just having it fall back on my shoulders to do that part of, even advocating for students of color in our department. By ensuring individuals are held responsible for their knowledge-building and awareness, Black women doctoral students can be free to exist without the damage of additional labor. In addition to individuals educating themselves, the institution can also support efforts to create inclusive and welcoming environments for Black women. One thing the institution can do is offer resources for self-education including, books, articles, and workshops. They can also have regular conversations with faculty, students, and

administrators educating them on systems of oppression and strategies for inclusivity in daily practices.

A need remains for clinical recognition of culturally appropriate counseling and mental health services for Black women doctoral students in social work practice. Considering the mental health challenges stemming from adverse racial and gendered encounters, there exists an opportunity to bolster culturally responsive mental health services (Fields & Franke, 2023; Hargons et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2023). Access to quality mental health services is essential for educational training and programming (Shavers & Moore, 2019), and the findings from this study reveal that services could create therapeutic spaces that validate Black women's experiences and empower them to navigate and heal from gendered racism. Mental health services that are rooted in BFT and intersectionality, acknowledge the interconnectedness of social identities, and the impact of external stressors on mental health outcomes (Evans et al., 2018). Research has supported incorporating BFT frameworks when working with Black individuals (Carr & West, 2013); however, investigation and implementation of interventions in higher education is lacking (McCallum et al., 2022). McCallum et al.'s (2022) mixed-methods study of 149 participants assessing the lived experiences of Black graduate students with mental health challenges, found that mental health services were unsuitable as students were unaware that the services existed, hesitant to use services because of stigma, and noticed that the services did not align with their schedules and need for confidentiality. However, the study population included a sample of men and women and may not fully represent the needs and experiences of Black women. Casey et al. (2024) assessed the implementation of mental health interventions among doctoral students and found that students benefitted through increased social support and coping strategies, clearer expectations, and a sense of control; however, this study was conducted

in the UK and its generalizability to Black women in the United States is unknown. There

remains hope in using intersectional approaches to enhance the mental health concerns of Black

women (Walton & Boone, 2021). My study posits that interventions that address the needs of

Black women and seek to understand their experiences can support their healing process and

mental health. It also gives Black women an opportunity to share their healing practices

illuminating strengths-based narratives in research.

The development of a healing toolkit (Community Healing Network, & the Association

of Black Psychologists, 2016) through the lens of BFT and intersectionality, for prospective and

current Black women doctoral students could benefit their mental health and help them navigate

gendered racism in higher education institutions. The participants collectively shared narratives

of coping and radical healing that merged into themes of relaxation, communal support, and

fostering a sense of solidarity and empowerment. Their perspectives revealed a need for

peer/faculty mentorship, self-esteem, racial centrality, racial socialization, affinity groups, and

emotional intelligence, which are all resources that can be suggested and provided in a healing

toolkit. By adopting a healing toolkit, Black women can focus on moving toward liberation and

justice and not focusing solely on oppression (French et al., 2020). The toolkit could include tips

for maintaining relationships with family and friends, developing relationships with cohort

members whom they will feel supported, developing relationships and building safe spaces with

other Black women, strategies for rest and relaxation, and affirmations around cultural

authenticity or strategies to develop it.

Celebrating solidarity emerged as an important finding of this study. This celebration

coincides with the fourth aspect of BFT encompassing Black women fostering relationships

within and outside of academia and acknowledges the diversity of Black women's experiences

shaping how they view the world. To establish this as a practice for Black women, assistance in forming alliances could be beneficial. A formal collaboration, for instance, with the National Association of Black Social Workers can connect community members, community organizations, and institutions of higher learning to build solidarity across social contexts. This merges Black women's intellect and plans for activism (Stewart, 2019). This formalized group bringing Black women together consistently can help programs better service them within and outside of academia.

Strengths and Limitations

An area that has received minimal attention in social work and academic research is radical healing among Black women doctoral students. One strength of this study is that it addresses a significant void in the literature by examining individual and community practices of healing and support when being treated unfairly. Particularly, the study explored how they resist oppression, and this inquiry highlighted the power of solidarity among the participants. This showcases how coming together is central for Black women and creates a strong sense of unity.

Qualitative research and the use of IPA is also a strength of this study. Using IPA allowed for centering the exploration of Black women doctoral students' lived experiences, focusing on the meaning they attribute to their experiences. Individuals can construct their realities and their voices shape the interpretations of the data (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This offers an authentic representation and empowerment in the telling of their stories.

Researchers sharing an identity with their participants can be a strength to help build rapport and contribute to further authenticity from the participants. The insider perspective allows the researcher to ask thoughtful questions and empathize with the participants' narratives. This is important when thinking about interpreting the data from the participants' perspectives.

For instance, a few of the participants discussed imposterism, and initially I did not create a theme for this experience. I did not want to describe Black women in the literature as experiencing imposterism as I felt it would contribute to deficit perspectives. Through peer debriefing, I was encouraged to think more deeply about how to highlight imposterism in the findings. I was able to interpret and share narratives of this from a strength's perspective, acknowledging systemic oppression as the root of these feelings and the coping strategies that Black women doctoral students incorporate. Additionally, my training as a clinical therapist has provided me with the skills for compassion to ensure that the participants feel understood. Participants mentioned often feeling overlooked and silenced in their interactions, and conducting this study allowed an opportunity for them to feel seen. I was able to draw on my clinical expertise in motivational interviewing while meeting with the participants. Furthermore, my clinical experience provided strength for me in being able to assess what participants are communicating through active listening and summarizing their stories back to them to check that their narratives are being understood the way they intend.

Findings from this study highlight the ways Black women doctoral students identify and describe coping strategies and mechanisms of radical healing while navigating gendered racism. While this study offers thick descriptions and insight into the experiences of Black women, the findings are not generalizable to all doctoral students. However, Smith and Nizza (2022) suggested that incorporating idiography, a case-by-case analysis within IPA, allows for the development of rich descriptions, allowing the reader the get a detailed understanding of the phenomenon and how it applies to the lived experiences of Black women. Additionally, many of the participants were attending schools and residing in the Midwest during the time of the interviews. Although this study was not context specific some of the students' stories may be

influenced by factors based on their geographic location. Future studies might consider

quantitative or mixed methods to facilitate generalizability to a variety of institutional settings.

Most of the women in the study attended PWIs, while only two attended an HSI. Understanding

the experiences of Black women in various educational contexts including PWIs, HSIs, and

HBCU can illuminate the diverse experiences of Black women based on institution type. Future

studies may engage in conversations with Black women at different institutions to gain a deeper

understanding of the role of context in shaping their experiences and coping and radical healing

strategies.

Social desirability bias can significantly influence the way individuals respond during

qualitative interviewing. The Black women in this study may have felt compelled to present

themselves in a favorable light to the researcher or minimize the telling of their stories of

gendered racism while overemphasizing stories of coping and radical healing. The participants'

recollection of their experiences could also be a limitation because of the length of time since an

encounter had occurred. It could have been years of difference between an incident where

participants perceived they were being mistreated and the current study meaning participants

may selectively share based on what their memory can recall.

Conclusion

A story of resilience and triumph through Black women doctoral students' identification

and description of coping strategies and approaches toward racial healing while simultaneously

navigating systems of oppression, and gendered racism, were revealed through this study.

Through the illumination of their narratives, I have created a deeper understanding of the power

of amplifying marginalized voices. As researchers continue to explore the experiences of Black

women as students in higher education institutions, the wisdom from this study could help propel

our conceptualization of gendered racism, coping, radical healing, as well as social factors and contexts that contribute to Black women's wellness. The insights from this study present opportunities for equity and promoting mental health. The field of social work would benefit from centering the voices of Black women to create inclusive environments that cater to and support them as they matriculate through a doctoral program.

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Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. The purpose of this questionnaire is to obtain demographic information for study participants. Eligibility is based on:

Identifying as Black

- Identifying as woman

- Enrolled in a doctoral program

- Residing in the United States

- A belief that gendered racism exists among African American women (i.e., concurrent experience of racism and sexism)

- Has experienced gendered racism

Please answer each of the following questions.

Do you consent to be audio and video recorded through ZOOM? Participant recordings will be kept private on a password protected laptop. The file will only be accessed by the primary investigator, Phylicia.

Yes or No

1. What is your age? _____

2. How do you currently describe your ethnicity? (e.g., African American, Jamaican American)

   a. _____

3. Do you have children?

    a. Yes

        i. How many_____

    b. No

4. How do you currently describe your gender identity?

    a. _____

    b. Prefer not to answer

5. How do you currently describe your sexuality?

    a. _____

    b. Prefer not to answer

6. Are you currently in a romantic relationship with a partner or partners? (Circle One)

    a. No

    b. Yes, one partner

    c. Yes, I have multiple partners

    d. If yes, are you?

        i. Married

        ii. Not married

7. Where do you live? (Circle One and list the name of the city)

    a. Midwest—Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wisconsin

    b. Northeast—Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont

c. South—Arkansas, Alabama, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia

d. West—Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming

e. Puerto Rico or other U.S. territories

f. Name of City: _____

g. Other, please specify: _____

8. Do you identify as religious or spiritual?

a. Yes

b. No

5a. If yes, please explain

c. _____

9. How would you describe the institution in which you are enrolled?

a. Predominately White Institution (PWI)

b. Historically Black College or University (HBCU)

c. Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI)

d. Other institutions, please specify: _____

10. Please specify the name of your institution

_____

11. Please specify your program, department, or college (i.e., Social Work)

_____

12. What is your year of study in the doctoral program?

    a. First Year

    b. Second Year

    c. Third Year

    d. Fourth Year

    e. Fifth Year

    f. Sixth Year or beyond

13. Do you receive a fellowship/scholarship?

    a. Yes

    b. No

    c. Explain. _____

14. Are you affiliated with any on-campus organizations?

  List them: _____

15. What type of employer do you have? (Select one or more)

    a. Full-time Student

    b. Employed

        i. Private for-profit company or business

        ii. Private not-for-profit organization

        iii. Local, state, or federal employee

        iv. Self-employed

    c. Unemployed

Appendix B: Interview Guide

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE for the research study:

A Phenomenological Study Exploring Gendered Racism, Coping and Radical Healing among Black Doctoral Women

I would like to thank you for your participation in this interview for my dissertation study. My name is Phylicia, and my study seeks to understand how Black women in doctoral programs experience gendered racism and the unique coping and healing strategies Black women use.

The interview will last approximately one hour, and I will ask you about your experiences being a Black woman and ways that you take care of yourself. The interview will cover some personal topics and questions that may make you feel uncomfortable. If there are any topics that you do not want to answer it is okay to skip that discussion or stop the interview. This interview will be audio recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

GENERAL

I want to start off by asking a few general questions about your background.

1. To begin, what is your race?
    a. What is your ethnicity?
    b. May you discuss your cultural background?
2. How do you describe your gender?

Now, I want to hear about your educational journey.

EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY

1. Thinking on your K–12 educational journey, how would you describe the types of schools you've attended?
   a. May you describe any similarities between your K–12 educational journey and your doctoral journey?
   b. May you describe any differences between your K–12 educational journey and your doctoral journey?

2. Thinking on your undergraduate educational journey, how would you describe the types of schools you've attended?
   a. May you describe any similarities between your undergraduate experiences and doctoral journey?
   b. May you describe any differences between your undergraduate experiences and doctoral journey?

3. How did you make the decision of pursuing a doctorate?
   a. How did you decide on your program of study?
   b. What are your research interests?

Now, let's shift our discussion and talk a little bit more about your experience as a Black woman in a doctoral program. I want to hear about experiences with racism and sexism and the role these experiences have in your life as a Black woman in a doctoral program.

GENDERED RACISM

1. What is it like being a Black woman in a doctoral program?

   a. Can you describe experiences when you were treated unfairly because of your race? Faculty, staff, students? How did it make you feel?

   b. Can you describe experiences when you were treated unfairly because of your gender in your doctoral program? Faculty, staff, students? How did it make you feel?

2. Can you describe experiences when you were treated unfairly because you are Black and woman?

3. How were you impacted?
   a. Can you provide examples?
   b. Probing (mental and physical health, daily activities, behaviors)

4. Tell me about how you responded to these experiences?
   a. What was the outcome of your response?

Now, let's focus on how you take care of yourself. There are two mechanisms that I want to

focus on, which are coping and healing.

COPING & HEALING

1. Coping is defined as the behavioral and psychological strategies used to manage stress (these may be negative or positive). Thinking about how you are treated because of your race and gender in your doctoral program, can you discuss how you cope, how do you take care of yourself?
   a. How have you taken care of your mental health? Physical health?

2. Healing encompasses critical consciousness, radical hope, strength and resistance, cultural authenticity, and collectivism, whereby individuals take a holistic approach, creating space for themselves and their community and actively holding systems accountable to make the academic environment inclusive and safe.

   I believe the idea of Black women healing is radical and encompasses being intentional

   around resisting oppression. What do you think?

   May you describe individual healing practices used to resist oppression for the

   well-being of the community that you identify with?

   May you describe collective healing practices used to resist oppression for the

   well-being of the community that you identify with?

3. Are there aspects of your identity as a Black woman that influences how you respond to treatment based on your race and gender in your doctoral program?
   a. If so, can you provide a few examples?

4. If you could instantly change how Black women in doctoral programs experience treatment based on race and gender, what would you do?
    a. What do you recommend faculty and staff, and students do?
    b. What do you recommend the doctoral program does?
    c. What do you recommend the university does?

5. What advice would you offer to current or prospective Black doctoral women on taking care of themselves?

Thank you for sharing with me. Before we close, I have a couple more questions about your

experience as a Black doctoral woman through COVID-19.

COVID-19

1. Did the COVID-19 pandemic influence your experience as a Black doctoral woman? If so, may you describe some of the changes that occurred in your life as a Black doctoral woman due to COVID-19.
    a. Did COVID-19 influence academic output related to doctoral studies? If so, what did this look like for you?

2. May you describe how you are taking care of yourself as a Black doctoral woman through COVID-19?

3. Is there anything else you want to share about COVID-19 and doctoral studies?

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

1. What was it like for you to share your experiences?

2. Is there anything else about your experiences as a Black woman doctoral student that I didn't ask that you would like to share?

3. Do you have any questions before we finish the interview?

Thank you again for sharing your story with me today about the ways you cope and heal while

experiencing gendered racism as a Black woman in a doctoral program. Following this

interview, I will email you a $25 amazon gift card.

Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Are you an African American woman in a doctoral program in the United States?
Do you want an opportunity to discuss your experiences around coping and radical healing?

If so, please consider participating in my dissertation, exploring coping and radical healing strategies among African American women enrolled in a doctoral program. The aim of this study is to illuminate stories among African American doctoral women who experience gendered racism at their institution. A $25 Amazon Gift Card will be provided for participation in the research study. To receive the gift card, an email address will be obtained and stored in a secure database.

Participation in the dissertation research study includes a 45–60-minute confidential interview with me and it is voluntary. At any point, you may decide to withdraw and stop the interview.

For study details, the informed consent and demographic questionnaire, click here: ***Link will be provided after approval from IRB.***

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Washington University in St. Louis. IRB Number

Principal Investigator: Phylicia Allen, MSW, allenpc@wustl.edu

Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer