Still I Rise: Agency of Black Collegian Women

by

Stephanie Morawo

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Approved by

Leonard Taylor, Chair, Associate Professor of Higher Education Administration
Hannah Baggett, Associate Professor of Research Methods
Reginald Blockett, Assistant Professor of Higher Education Administration
Travis Smith, Assistant Professor of Higher Education Administration
Felecia Commodore, Associate Professor of Higher Education

Abstract

The research and discourse surrounding Black women in college has continued to expand in its scope in recent years. Scholars have written about Black college women in several ways describing the intersections of their multiple identities, racial battle fatigue, and the unique adversities they face (McKinzie & Richards, 2019, Shahid et al, 2018, Corbin et al, 2018). Scholarship and societal focus on Black women have made it clear that the experiences of these women are unique and invisible. The experiences of Black college women are even more so with a limited body of scholarship isolating experiences of racism, sexism, and marginalization (Patton & Croom, 2017).

The support Black college women need to be successful in their collegiate career should be nuanced and specific to their experiences. To better support Black college women, higher education must first understand how these women navigate their success amid adversity, specifically at predominately white institutions. Therefore, I examined the conceptualization of agency for six Black collegian women at a predominantly white institution. Using sista circle methodology, Black college women discussed the relationship with and intentionality of their agency. The findings of this study offer important implications regarding culturally relevant approaches for advancing the support and scholarship of Black college women.

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List of Abbreviations

PWI   Predominately White Institution

HBCU   Historically Black College & University

SBU   SB University

NPHC   National Pan-Hellenic Council

BFT   Black Feminist Thought

Chapter 1: Introduction

Why Study Black Collegiate Women

"Nuances in the success story of Black women collegians beg the need for a deeper

understanding of the ways in which Black women successfully access, persist through,

and complete college while living at the intersections of race and gender in a society

riddled with white supremacy and sexism" (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 21) Although there was

significant increase in college enrollment for Black women from 1997- 2015, that number has

begun to decrease in recent years (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 21). This is because of many

barriers to access for Black college women which include narrowed access to specific

institutions, less opportunity for financial aid with college tuition rising, under preparedness of

K-12 programs from underserved communities, criminalization of Black girls K-12 and the ever-

growing gap in socioeconomic status (Commodore et al., 2018). These challenges along with any

other barriers that face society impact Black women with an even greater intensity; Black women

who can attain a degree have a direct impact on 'gaining economic independence' (Commodore

et al., 2018 p. 27). Additionally, "Black women are uniquely affected by the historical legacy

and dimensions of oppression that not only influence their development and success in college

but also positions them as invisible and hypervisible at the same time" (Porter & Byrd, 2021 p.

806). "Black women have deemed their educational experiences successful based on their

acquisition of social and cultural capital; ability to make meaning of their identities as Black

women, and ability to endure discriminatory institutional spaces/agents and stereotypical

expectations from peers" (Porter & Byrd, 2021). Black college women have unique lived

experiences based upon their multiple and unique intersections. Therefore, the support Black

college women need to be successful in their collegiate career should be nuanced and specific to

their experiences. To better support Black college women, higher education must first understand how Black college women navigate their success amid adversity. This chapter will give a history of the framework and theory that shape understanding of Black women experiences and make a case for why it is important to study and support Black college women at predominantly white institutions.

My Positionality

As a Black woman, I have considered my identities separately within different contexts and situations. Sometimes I identify with the challenges of being Black. Other times I identify the challenges of being a woman. But I never fully considered how the intersection of my identities, Black and woman, can create competing challenges within our society. In furthering my reflections, I realize that I have often been at odds with my intersecting identities. I have often felt more connected to my identity as a woman, than to my identity as Black. There are several hegemonic and interpersonal reasons for this. First, within my educational environment I did not see others who looked like me. Therefore, I did not always feel connected to or understand my Blackness. Since no one looked like me, I gravitated to the identity that was like others, my womanhood. I put a high level of importance on forming relationships with women, in my case mostly white women and so my identity of Blackness was in the shadows. As, I grew older and went to college, I wanted to know more about my blackness. College was the first time that I was able to form strong relationships with students who looked like me. It was the first time I was able to take courses and learn about African American history, politics, and culture. The only experience with my Blackness before college was in my spiritual/religious life growing up. Church was the only place where I saw others like me and experienced my culture. Therefore, I operated within the interpersonal domain and acted in accordance with the

environment in which I found myself. The identity that I embraced and accepted was different at church, than in the classrooms of the PWI's I attended. The changes of my behaviors and actions from one environment to another was an act of code- switching. Just as Mikki Kendall in her book *Hood Feminism* describes she learned to code- switch, as did I (Kendall, 2020, p. 138). At church I was able to embrace both my Blackness and my womanhood without fear or oppression. In college, when surrounded by white students, I embraced my womanhood to have a connection with others. When surrounded by students of color, I embraced my Blackness. Only at church did I embrace the intersection of my Blackness and my womanhood. I believe that the reason why I abandoned parts of my identities during specific situations, not considering or embracing the intersections of them, was a product of hegemonic power. I always wanted to fit in and to not be identified with negative images and representations that shaped the societal consciousness of my identities. What I now understand is that I was as Kendall describes developing "coping skills major and minor in the absence of better options" (Kendall, 2020, p. 114). I am an intersectional individual with a human experience that is different and unique from other individuals. The experiences and daily behaviors of Black women are the location for constructing Black feminist consciousness (Collins, 2002). Qualitative research uses reflexivity and positionality as tools to establish the relationship between the researcher and researched. The researcher should be consistently reflexive through all parts of a research study to identify how their bias and ethical considerations influence their work. Every researcher should be able to acknowledge their positionality and how it influences the research design of any study. Qualitative research tells a story through the interpretation of the researcher and so it is very important that the researcher is reflexive with themselves, with those they are working with, and with the data that is collected. Dillard (2000) describes the relationship between researcher and

participants as one that moves away from detachment and towards responsibility, "This is also where Black feminist knowledge provides an angle of vision from which to construct an alternative version of this relationship and a new metaphor in educational research, one that moves us away from detachment with participants and contexts and their use as ''ingredients'' in our research recipes and towards an epistemological position more appropriate for work within such communities. Thus, a more useful research metaphor arising from an endarkened feminist epistemology is research as a responsibility, answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry" (Dillard, 2000, p. 663). As a qualitative researcher, I want to center the voices and stories of Black women, specifically undergraduate Black women. In this study, I hope to be in a community with study participants, where they are conducting research alongside me. I hope to create an environment where these Black collegian women can be in spirit and community with one another and feel empowered by their lived experience. I hope to create an environment where we all learn from each other.

Black Feminist Perspectives

Frances Beal (2008) describes what it means to be Black and female through the concept of Double Jeopardy. She describes the Black woman in America as the "slave of the slave", impacted by the oppression faced by Black men. Systemic capitalism as the catalyst for the "social manipulation, physical rape, and the weakening of the Black household" (Beal, 2008). The Black woman is a victim of economic super exploitation. The economic opportunities afforded Black women are less because they are women but also less than white women. Therefore, their economic opportunities are dependent on their gender and their race. Audre Lorde also spoke to the importance of race between women. Lorde (1984) states that ignoring the differences of race between women and the implication of that difference is a serious threat to

the joint power of women. She goes on to say that white women have ignored their built-in white privilege and have gone on to define woman based on their own experiences, contributing to women of color as 'other', "an outsider whose experience and tradition is too alien to comprehend" (Lorde, 1984, p.117). Deborah King (1988) takes these ideas a step further in her description of multiple jeopardy. King suggests that double jeopardy, oppression on the basis of race and sex and even triple jeopardy, with the addition of class all represent a "single, direct, and independent effect on status" (King, 1988, p. 47). Double and triple jeopardy depict race, sex, and class as additive forms of oppression. Instead, King offers the concept of "multiple" referring not only to several, simultaneous oppressions but multiplicative relationships among them" (King, 1988, p. 47). In 1990 Patricia Hill-Collins discussed the definition of Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and its place within the matrix of domination. Black feminist thought changes how we see oppression. BFT embraces a paradigm of race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression. BFT challenges feminist theory and reconceptualizes how we access 'truth' (Collins, 1990). BFT rejects additive approaches to oppression and instead sees distinctive systems of oppression (i.e race, class, sexual orientation, age, religion), as "part of one overarching structure of domination. The matrix of domination describes the overall social structure where these systems of oppression intersect and develop. The matrix is the system where oppression occurs.

Black Feminist Thought

Collins continues her work in 2002, as she further explores Black Feminist Thought. Collins (2002), states that black women have had to struggle against the white male interpretations of the world. Therefore, black feminist thought is viewed as subjugated knowledge. She goes on to describe the experiences or daily behaviors of black women as the

location for constructing black feminist consciousness. "Traditionally, the suppression of Black women's ideas within white-male-controlled social institutions led African-American women to use music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations for constructing a Black feminist consciousness" (Collins, 2002, p. 252-252).

The interpretations of black women experiences by black women are at the forefront of black feminist thought. Knowledge validation and power relations reflect the interests of elite white men and therefore the interpretations of black feminist experiences have struggled to be validated. Collins also critiqued positivistic stances of interpreting experience. Collins (2002) described that knowledge claims are not explored in isolation in the African American community. She described how dialogue and connectedness are used to assess knowledge claims and are a component of validation. Dialogue in African American culture comes in the form of oral traditions, music, and call and response religious traditions. Collins quotes Jordan (1985), "Our language is a system constructed by people constantly needing to insist that we exist… Our language devolves from a culture that abhors all abstraction, or anything tending to obscure or delete the fact of the human being who is here and now/ the truth of the person who is speaking or listening" (Collins, 2002, p. 261). The African American community and its organizations are central to how dialogue serves as a dimension for black feminist epistemology. Finally, Collins (2002), described standpoint by discussing the four dimensions of black feminist epistemology, dialogue, lived experience, ethic of care, and ethic of personal accountability. She described standpoint as "rooted in a tradition of African humanism, each individual is thought to be a unique expression of a common spirit, power, or energy inherent in all life". (Collins, 2002, p. 263). Black women are agents of knowledge because they have access to experiences of black and female. Therefore, their standpoint can reflect the convergence of both experiences (Collins,

2002). "Therefore, when groups evaluate their experience from their own unique standpoints, they create a partial situated knowledge, allowing each group to better understand the standpoint of others without suppressing their own unique standpoint" (Collins, 2002, p. 270). Black Feminist Thought has expanded Black feminist theory. Using BFT, Collins centered the voices of Black women to understand their lived experiences. Black feminist theory and BFT have set the stage to better understand the experiences of Black women and how society can better support them. Although there is literature and dialogue about Black women, there is not enough inquiry about the lived experiences of Black collegiate women. There is a need to conduct more research with this population.

Intersectionality

In 1892, Anna Julia Cooper, communicated "what it meant to be confronted by both a woman question and a race problem and to be constructed as an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both" (Carastathis, 2016). Other Black women pioneers like Elise Johnson McDougald and Sojourner Truth confronted the struggles between sex and race and disputed the white women's experience to define women's oppression (Carastathis, 2016). These Black women were the first recorded to introduce the idea of intersectionality. Carastathis (2016), describes the origins of intersectionality as a concept that originates in social- movement discourses that identified the manifold manifestations of oppression, discrimination, and violence that structure the conditions in which women of color live in the United States, Britain, and other white settler and imperial states (Carastathis, 2016). Kimberle Crenshaw is credited with coining the actual term 'intersectionality'.

Crenshaw (1989) uses the concept of Intersectionality to demonstrate how racism and sexism interact to highlight the multiple dimensions of employment experiences of Black women. Crenshaw uses three Title VII cases to highlight the marginalization of Black women on feminist theory and antiracist politics, specifically looking at how the multidimensional experience of Black women are distorted when compared to a single axis analysis. Crenshaw makes the case that the intersections of gender and race for women of color can lead to double discrimination, arguing that these intersections are ignored erasing the identity of the black woman. Crenshaw (1991) explores how race and gender intersect looking at structural, political, and representational ways of violence against women of color. Crenshaw states that the problem is that there is not a portrayal of the narratives and images of the black experience.

Dill & Zambrana (2009), discuss Intersectionality as a field of study that provides a critical look at the intersections of multiple identities also focusing on structures of inequality. They continue and describe that intersectional analysis includes two levels- individual (individual identity) and social/structural level, looking at how systems of power have maintained inequality. Hegemonic power is mentioned as it refers to the cultural ideologies, images, and representations that shape group and individual consciousness. This of course affects how groups are viewed by society. In a critique of black feminists interactions with intersectionality, Nash (2019) asks the question of why black feminists scholars continue to produce the "figure" of the critic and therefore continue to participate in the intersectionality wars. Nash presents the intersectionality wars as looking to answer questions about the origins and history of intersectionality, but also asking questions about who intersectionality is for. Nash prescribes black feminists create the critic and participate in these wars to protect their intellectual labor. Nash suggests that instead of 'fighting with the critic that instead black

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feminists should sit with or sit beside the critic' (p.55). This will give the opportunity to further explore the questions presented by the Intersectionality wars. In a sense, making this an exploration with critics instead of a war. Although, black feminists have a reason to be wary of the critic, fearing not only that the origin of the topic will be erased, but also advocating for the meaning and how intersectionality should be applied. In the application of intersectionality and its interactions with Black feminism, there must be care to not "reduce intersectionality to an analytic tool that focuses on the confluence of multiple identities" (Harris & Patton, 2019). Harris & Patton (2019) created a study to examine how researchers in higher education do and un/do Intersectionality and how as an analytic it can advance a radical social justice agenda. Four themes emerge from their study, 1) Intersectionality as a buzzword, 2) scholars presenting origins that only align with feminism and not black feminists or black feminist thought, 3) the problem of citation practices which contribute to the erasure of the herstories and rich history and contributions of women of color, 4) Failure to engage in the complexities of Intersectionality, for example only focusing on the identity framework. There is a connection between these buzzwords used in higher education, such as diversity, multiculturalism, and Intersectionality. These words are used to put a band-aid on an issue without real plans to solve issues. A scapegoat or mirage, to appear to be interacting with and caring for those on the margins. But unfortunately, in many cases, these are just words with no meaning and no action behind them within the higher education structure. Higher Education has an adopted neoliberalism as a part of globalization. "Globalization and the knowledge economy have given rise to developments which apply pressures on universities to commodify teaching and learning and 'sell' it in the international educational marketplace, with an expectation that public universities contribute in a relatively unmediated manner to economic productivity" (Naidoo &

Jamieson, 2005 p. 38). Therefore, administrators focus on programs and policies that will lead to economic prosperity regardless of if these policies and programs support students, specifically marginalized and minoritized students.

The origins of intersectionality have been erased as the "concept is represented by white feminists as their own innovation, situated in a trajectory of white feminisms, rather than as an insight generated, and a theory elaborated, by Black feminists" (Carastathis, 2016). This erasure removes the component of race from intersectionality and opens the concept to be used to highlight other identities that do not include race. Specifically, the concepts of intersectionality were stolen and misapplied. What is often misunderstood is that concepts of Black feminism were the beginning of intersectionality. Concepts such as double, multiple jeopardy, interlocking oppressions, and matrix of domination. These concepts evolved and began to define Black feminism and Black Feminist Thought.

Black Women Collegians in Context

As outlined by Patton and Croom (2017), there are differences in the experiences of Black women collegians at historically Black college and universities (HBCU) and predominantly white institutions (PWI). For example, the institutional context of a predominantly white institution (PWI) versus a historically Black college or university (HBCU) is very different. In their book Patton & Croom (2017) examine the college success of Black women at HBCU's, at predominantly white liberal colleges and at an Ivy League University. In chapter 3, D.L. Stewart found that racism played a role in limiting the involvement of Black college women in high-impact practices, limiting their participation to only specific academic and religious involvement with exclusion from social and athletic activities (Patton & Croom,

2017). In chapter 11, Njoku and Patton describe the HBCU environment as both constrictive and supportive of expressions of Black womanhood. Constrictive in policing expressions of womanhood, influenced by respectability politics and 'heteronormative ideas of femininity' (Patton & Croom, 2017, p. 148). However, the HBCU environment is supportive in helping Black college women develop a strong sense of self -concept and to celebrate their cultural history. The leadership at HBCUs have some work to do to better support students who do not conform to the traditional views of Black womanhood, ie. LGBTQIA individuals or non-gender conforming individuals. However, the HBCU does create space for cultural exploration, celebration, mentorship, and participation. The predominantly white institution (PWI) does not create space for any of the above and reinforces societal and systemic oppression for Black women collegians. Although there is more research to be conducted on the experiences of Black women collegians at HBCU's, this study will focus on the experiences of Black women collegians at PWI's. This study will focus on how Black college women exercise agency within predominantly white spaces. Predominantly white spaces or PWI's are the appropriate environments to understand how Black women collegians use agency to overcome the challenges of race, class, and gender.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the agency of Black collegian women at predominantly white institutions. This study will employ Black Feminist Thought (BFT) to frame an understanding of the topic and will introduce my conceptualization of agency to guide analysis. This study will address the following research question and sub questions:

1. How do Black collegian women demonstrate agency throughout their undergraduate experiences at PWI's?
   a. What is Black collegian women's relationship with agency?

b.   How are Black collegian women intentionally agentic?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Black Women In College

Black college women are part of two groups that have been historically marginalized in the United States: women and persons of African descent. Additionally, Black college women are positioned in a way where they are depicted as strong, independent, and resilient, overshadowing exploitation and oppression experienced by this group (Shahid et al., 2018). Black college women often face high expectations of who they are and how they should represent themselves on college campuses; also facing racial hostility and gender discrimination (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). The high expectations alongside the oppressions faced, can have detrimental effects on Black women's health and well-being (West, Donovan, & Roemer, 2009). In a narrative study by Winkle-Wagner et al. (2019), four Black college women told their stories of navigating stereotypes and identifying pressures to find self -value and self-definition. These stereotypes included the tensions between Christianity, Blackness, beauty, and representation of Black women. The expectations placed on this population are often associated with specific stereotypes or schemas like the Strong Black Woman (SBW), a gendered and racialized role depicting a compliance with emotional restraint, independence, and caretaking (Nelson et al., 2020).   The SBW role advocates for strength which restricts emotions, therefore, to stay strong, these women are not able to embrace how they really feel, masking their pain. Coupled with masking pain, there is a vulnerability that comes with accepting and expressing emotions leading to an inability to ask for help. Finally, the SBW role involves caretaking and so it can be difficult for black women to prioritize personal needs above the needs of others. (Nelson et al., 2020). Black college women also inhabit a place of privilege, by the fact that they are in college. Therefore, Black college women are navigating an environment of privilege, while also

navigating a double oppressed body, oppression experienced by their race and gender (Commodore et al., 2018). Black college women are often having to choose between their race or gender when tasked with assimilation to their college environment, especially in predominantly white spaces.

Challenges facing Black college women

The challenges faced by Black college women are aspects of socially constructed homogeneity, isolation on college campuses, lack of institutional resources and supports, navigating identity and sense of belonging and financing higher education (Commodore et al., 2018, Porter & Dean, 2015).

Socially constructed homogeneity. Socially constructed homogeneity is a forced homogeneity for Black college women based on socially constructed idea of how to dress, act, color of her skin, and state of her hair. The negative socially constructed images of Black women are harmful to Black college women with educational and social implications (Commodore et al., 2018). These negative stereotypes or images can discourage Black college women from participation inside and outside of the classroom.

There are specific challenges that Black college women face that are not considered when providing resources and support for these women. The experiences and upbringing of these women are influenced by socioeconomic status, preparation for higher education, sexual orientation, and colorism (Commodore et al., 2018). Black college women from low socioeconomic status backgrounds face challenges with financing their education, access to information about higher education, and report lower amounts of interaction with faculty and campus life. The preparation for higher education for Black women can vary based on school segregation creating differences in performance. School segregation is often the product of

students in all Black schools due to low socioeconomic status. Also, teacher self -selection allows teachers to avoid teaching in lower income schools. Young Black girls also face disproportionate discipline from teachers (Blake et al., 2011, Commodore et al, 2018). Additional studies cited by Commodore et al (2018) reveal that young Black girls are more likely to have experienced traumatic experiences such as racial discrimination and sexual abuse (Commodore et al., 2018).

The next challenge faced by Black college women, sexual orientation, is expressed by Patton and Simmons (2008) as an experience of triple consciousness. These Black college women are living with three marginalized identities. Often these women are conforming to gender expectations and are 'minimizing their sexual identity' (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 37). When Black college women are not able to celebrate and express their identity, then they are subject to psychological stress.

The final socially constructed homogeneous challenge for this population is colorism. "Colorism is the process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts" (Hunter, 2007). The white standard of beauty gives privilege to lighter -skinned persons of the same race. Colorism and racism use skin color as a basis to determine how individuals are treated (Kendall, 2020). When Black college women reported an issue with their skin color they reported wanting lighter skin; These internal conflicts with skin color can affect how Black college women integrate in college (Commodore, et al., 2018).

Isolation. The next challenge facing Black college women on college campuses is isolation. Black college women often feel that they are alone or the only one. The lack of faculty and staff that look like them contributes to feelings of isolation on predominantly white campuses. Black college women may also feel that they must participate in code-switching.

Code-switching is changing behavior or language to assimilate with the majority. Code-switching is an example of the multiple context and consciousness that claim the experiences of Black people (Myers, 2020). Another aspect of isolation is the relationships between Black college women and their peers, building friendships and romantic relationships. Porter & Dean (2015) discuss the importance of Black college women relationships with one another. In their study some participants reported competition among their Black women peers (Porter & Dean 2015).

Regarding romantic relationships, Black college women face the challenges of 'gender parity' with Black men and fear of interracial relationships (Commodore et al., 2018). Black college women who identify as LGBTQIA may also have difficulty identifying partnerships. Black college women who are not able to form positive relationships with their peers or form romantic relationships will experience isolation (Commodore et al., 2018). Black college women can also experience hostile campus environments regarding feelings of belonging in their major, especially in male dominated fields such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) or fields with one specific demographic like teacher education (Commodore et al., 2018).

Hostile campus environments can be a major contributing factor to the development of identity for Black students. College campuses often offer the same support for all students or tailor support for all marginalized students. For example, cultural centers are often places for students to find a space to call their own. However, these cultural centers do not consider the within group differences of marginalized students, specifically of Black women college students. Therefore, the institutional support for Black women is focused on gender or race without consideration for the multiple identities of Black college women (Winkle- Wagner et. al, 2019). Lack of support that is specific to the needs of Black college women and the lack of

understanding from institutional actors that not all students that share identities are the same, creates a hostile environment.

Other contributors to hostile environments are microaggressions. Microaggressions are insults that may be conscious or unconscious (Commodore et al., 2018). Black college women often face racial microaggressions in three different ways; (1) stereotypes used to minimize race or gender, (2) marginalization, (3) assumptions about how Black college women should look. These microaggressions happen with interactions with faculty and interactions with peers. Although many of the microaggressions that Black college women face are experienced inside the classroom (Commodore et al, 2018). These microaggressions can also show up as threats of sexualized violence for women of color and gender non-conforming individuals. Black college women also must contend with the responsibility to educate their white counterparts, students, faculty and staff about race and racism (Linder et al., 2019). In a study conducted by Nadal et al. (2014), there was a negative significant relationship between racial microaggressions and mental health. "Individuals who perceive and experience racial microaggressions in their lives are likely to exhibit negative mental health symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, negative affect (or negative view of the world), and lack of behavioral control" (Nadal et al., 2014, p. 62). The study evaluated men and women from multiple racial groups and identified that specific racial groups may experience certain types of microaggressions more than others, for example Black individuals being treated as inferior or criminal (Nadal et al., 2014). These microaggressions and other challenges Black college women face can take a toll on their mental health and expose these women to sociostructural stressors. Sociostructural is defined by discrimination and stereotype stressors (Patton & Croom, 2017). Black women often experience gendered racism that often manifests through stereotype threat. "Stereotype threat is fear and

anxiety about the judgment of others about a salient piece of someone's identity manifesting itself as suboptimal cognitive performance" (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 49). As Black college women encounter stereotype threat, they deal with a fear of confirming stereotypes and must try to combat the stereotypes at the same time (Smith & Hung, 2008, Commodore et al., 2018).

Psychological stress is part of the college experience for Black college women. Unfortunately, these women do not have support to deal with these stressors and often do not ask for help. There are three main reasons why Black women do not ask for help, (1) mental illness is seen as a weakness, (2) the belief that one can manage stress or mental illness on their own, and (3) silence is better than disclosure of feelings or emotions (Ward, 2009, Nelson et al., 2020, Commodore et al., 2018). Schemas like the Strong Black Woman (SBW), hinder Black women from dealing with mental illness or asking for help, because they are conditioned to mask their pain and employ other coping skills to deal with the challenges and pain that they face. The help-seeking and coping behaviors of Black women are described in the literature through the Common Sense Model (CSM), and cultural connections to spirituality and religiosity. The Common Sense Model (CSM), describes coping behaviors by connecting seven dimensions of dealing with mental illness. The seven dimensions are identity, cause, timeline, consequence, cure, illness coherence, and emotional representation. This model illustrates how an individual evaluates facts, beliefs, and emotions to construct a conclusion about their mental illness. The coping behaviors used by Black Women outside of seeking professional help are informal supports in the community, religious coping, self-help, positive attitude, denial or avoidance.

Black women are more likely to process information about mental illness in different ways than other groups (Ward et. al, 2009). First Black women are likely to get support from their community before seeking professional help such as therapy, counseling, or medical

appointment. Secondly, Black women will rely on positive outlook or attitude or their faith to help themselves with their struggles or will simply deny that there is an issue (Ward et al., 2009). The historical and cultural roots of spirituality and religiosity plays a significant role in the mental health of women of color. Spirituality involves the belief in something greater than self, a faith that positively affirms life. Religiosity involves the institutional or organizational routines or processes of expressing that faith through worship or religious activities. Women of color have strong relationships to their faith and to their community. These women hold a belief in God and prayer as a health protective behavior.

Since slavery, the church has served a critical role for Black women. The Black church has played an important role in setting the tone for the normative values in Black culture (Lomax, 2018). These normative values played a role in policing 'dress, behavior, and gender performances (Lomax, 2018, p. 191). The church also reinforced a cisgender heteronormative patriarchy as the dominant role in the organization. Therefore, the church had a direct impact on reinforcing societal gender roles. Regardless of the reinforcement of societal oppressions on the basis of gender, Black women still have been able to find the church as a place of community, therapy, shelter, renewal and empowerment. Studies have shown links between spirituality, self-esteem, and health behavior. Religious institutions and faith-based community projects can be the sites of health-based interventions for minoritized communities, especially for Black women (Musgrave et. al, 2002). Spates & Slatton (2017), assert that Black women self- identify as the most religious group in the United States. Religious affiliation, religious service attendance, frequency of prayer and overall general significance of religion are consistently higher for Black women. In their study, Black women narratives revealed that faith and support systems serve as protective factors. Therefore, faith, whether in the form of religion or spirituality, plays a role in

the practice of agency for Black women. The two basic connections between the CSM and spirituality are community and faith. Community and faith are important to the culture of Black women and directly impact their beliefs and behaviors regarding everything they do, including interactions with mental health(Musgrave, et al., 2002).

Finally, a challenge facing Black college women is financing their education. Black students are more likely than their counterparts to seek financial assistance to pay for college. Black women often borrow more than their peers and more than other women from other racial backgrounds (Commodore et al., 2018). As tuition costs rise and scholarships and grant opportunities decrease, Black families and students have had to turn to student loans. Student loans increase the debt burden for students and their families and Black students are often borrowing $5,000 to $10,000 more. Black students also carry the burden of repayment after college when they are not getting the same jobs that pay a salary to make repayment easier. This results in Black adults being more likely to default on loans than their white counterparts. Black students are also more likely to have private loans which means the interest rate is higher, making the interest accrued during loan deferment insurmountable (Houle & Addo, 2019).

Black college women face several challenges, isolation, hostile campus environments, microaggressions, threat to their mental and spiritual health and financial hardships. The first step to combat these challenges begins with institutional responsibility. Supports from the institution can help to support Black college women with the challenges they are facing.

Institutional Responsibility

There are some things that Black college women need from their institutions. According to Stewart (2019), there are four things the institution should do to support Black college women. First, institutions must institute recognition for the hard work and success of Black college

women. Secondly, the institution should invest in recruitment and retention activities for faculty, staff, and students. Third, the institution should implement programs and opportunities for Black college women to meet and network with one another. Finally, the institution should commit to financial commitments to the personal and educational success of Black college women (Stewart, 2019). Institution responsibility also should include providing positive role models, creating supportive environments, providing opportunities for leadership and to learn about oneself (Commodore et al., 2018).

Scholarship and societal focus on Black women have made it clear that the experiences of these women are unique and invisible. The experiences of Black college women are even more so with a limited body of scholarship isolating experiences of racism, sexism, and marginalization (Patton & Croom, 2017). The prominence of racism and inequitable experiences for Black students at predominantly white institutions has led to research about the negative experiences of Black students and not the positive experiences (Tichavakunda, 2021). Specifically, how the experiences of Black college women are shaped by their own agency is yet to be explored. Before exploring what agency means for Black college women, there is a theoretical framework that can help to further explore Black college women's practice of agency, Black Feminist Thought (BFT).

Thinking with BFT

According to Patricia Hill-Collins Black Feminist Thought examines oppression but is also concerned with resistance, activism, and politics of empowerment (Alinia, 2015). Hill-Collins also acknowledges that Black Feminist Thought is situated in a context of domination influenced by the reality of political and economic systems (Collins, 2002, p. 269). There are four tenets that characterize Black Feminist Thought (BFT), these tenets distinguish BFT from

other critical theories. These tenets focus on the unique knowledge that is manifested through the lived experiences of Black women. The tenets also focus on cultural knowledge and the support of community. The four tenets are criterion of meaning, criterion of assessment, criterion for members of the community, and criterion of knower adequacy. Criterion of meaning focuses on the importance of lived experiences as the foundation for making knowledge claims. Criterion of assessment refers to how knowledge is shared among community members. Criterion for members of the community refers to understanding what is required and shared for members of the community. Finally, criterion of knower adequacy, requires that the knower have a moral and ethical connection to any knowledge claims that are made (Dotson, 2015). Criterion of assessment and members of the community focus on how knowledge is produced, while criterion of meaning and knower adequacy focus on knowledge possession. Therefore, BFT makes clear that knowledge is produced within the community and is produced by knowers who understand the lived experiences and ethical relationships of their peers (Dotson, 2015).

BFT provides a lens to conceptualize the experiences of Black women in undergraduate programs and provides a model to examine the agency of Black college women facing economic, political, and ideological oppression. BFT is committed to centering identity, the interlocking nature of oppression, and the importance of African American culture (Wilson, 2018). BFT clarifies the standpoint of Black women by centering specialized knowledge of their unique lived experience. Therefore, BFT is a key factor to examine what agency looks like for Black college women.

Lived experience

Living life as a Black woman provides a subjugated knowledge of race, gender, and class essential to wisdom needed for survival. This wisdom allows Black women to create

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mechanisms for protection from a society that oppresses and suppresses their freedom (Collins, 1989). No two Black women are alike, and neither are their lived experiences, Black women are not a monolith. Therefore, their lived experience allows for a knowledge claim credible only by Black women. Specifically, Black women are one of the fastest growing groups of students completing their college degree programs (Snyder et al., 2006). Black women have multiple social identities and therefore need specific support.

In higher education there are systemic barriers and oppressions that affect minoritized and marginalized groups (Duran & Jones, 2019). The lived experience of Black college women is crucial for development and the practice of agency. This is evident in how the unique experiences of each Black college woman dictate how the relationship with self, impacts how she develops knowledge and skills needed to practice agency against daily challenges. A Black woman's identity is shaped by her unique lived experience, but also by how she is situated at the focal point of multiple systems of oppression. How Black women respond to the oppressions that they face is how their agency is operationalized.

Dialogue

Criterion of assessment is the validation and credibility that comes from vetting knowledge through dialogue with and among community members (Collins, 2009). Dialogue is about the importance of language. Evans-Winters (2019), a qualitative researcher who has researched innovate ways to create new methodologies in studies with Black women, focuses on the power and importance of language and looks to the idea of naming. Black people naming themselves as a cultural group, specifically (re) learning to name ourselves (Evans -winters, 2019). She went on to compare naming and framing, noting that naming functions in the sense of borrowing different languages to use to explain lived realities. Specifically, naming is about how

Black people are named by others, the names Black people give themselves, and the names Black persons have yet to create. Dillard (2000) introduced the importance of language as a 'powerful tool in the mental, spiritual, and intellectual colonization of African Americans and other marginalized peoples' (p. 662). She also posited that language should be able to do something, specifically transforming and producing knowledge. Language is linked to reality and how we understand the world, ourselves, and each other. Therefore, Dillard sees the importance of using language to tell the stories of those who are often voiceless. The goal of dialogue is to place the narratives of Black women at the center. The definitions of identity for Black college women are centered around language through the opportunity of dialogue, with self and with others. Dialogue for Black college women manifests in narrative form, the story, *her* story.

Trust

Members of a cultural community have a competence as a community of knowers (Collins, 2009). Part of culture is formed through communal funds of knowledge. Therefore, Black women often take on the Strong Black Woman (SBW) role. The SBW role is the prominent narrative in black culture. The characteristics include caretaking, resistance of vulnerability and emotion, success with limited resources, and prioritizing independence. It is a role assumed by black women used to shield societal misconceptions and denigrating stereotypes (Nelson et al., 2020, p. 265). However, the SBW role has been used against black women, casting them in a controlling or angry black women image which is highlighted as problematic by Black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill-Collins (Collins, 2000). When the SBW role is misrepresented in this way it can lead black women to internalize struggle as a normative experience and conceptualize depression or other challenges as weakness (Nelson et al., 2020, p. 265). Therefore, it can be difficult for Black women to build trust. Black college women practice

agency, through the trust built within the community of other Black college women. The practice of agency is connected to how Black college women develop their identity, through the idea of an ethic of care. This idea of ethic of care is that empathy and compassion connect knowledge to values (Collins, 2000). Values create a foundation for the practice of agency for Black college women and values are connected to faith.

Faith

Cultural knowers must be able to make knowledge claims with moral and ethical connections. For the Black community, religion, spirituality, and faith are key components to cultural wealth. Since slavery the church has served a critical role for Black women. The church provides spiritual renewal and empowerment (Musgrave et al, 2002, p. 2). The church is a place of community, therapy, and shelter. Studies show that there may be a link between spirituality, self-esteem and health behavior (Musgrave et al, 2002). Additionally, positive relationships have been found between believing in a higher power, life satisfaction, and health promoting attitudes Musgrave et al, 2002) Spirituality and religiosity are not only of significant benefit to women of color, also there are clear implications for prevention, coping and health -promoting behaviors (Musgrave et al, 2002. Spates & Slatton (2017), assert that Black women self- identify as the most religious group in the United States. Religious affiliation, religious service attendance, frequency of prayer and overall general significance of religion are consistently higher for Black women. In their study, Black women narratives revealed that faith and support systems serve as protective factors. Patton & McClure (2009) posit that Black college women use college to explore and take ownership of spirituality on their own terms. Specifically, Black college women possess the standpoint of "spiritual ways of knowing" used to guide their lives and cope with

challenges they face (Patton & McClure, 2009, p. 50). Therefore, faith, whether in the form of religion or spirituality, plays a role in the practice of agency for Black women.

Black college women use their lived experiences to understand and build a relationship with self. Dialogue and trust are the mechanisms for relationships with language, knowledge, and community, specifically building community with other Black women. Finally, faith is based on the relationship with a higher power through religiosity and/or spirituality. Development of identity for Black college women is built by their social beings, the intersection of race and gender, their narrative, and an ethic of care. Understanding agency for Black college women is to first understand that it is a conscious act that is connected to relationships with self, community, values, and faith. Agency for Black college women solely based upon *her* story.

Agency

Black college women can resist the narratives and the unique challenges they face through agency. There is not just one action that constitutes agency, but multiplicity of actions taken up by Black college women with the intention to defy systems of oppression and domination (Davidson, 2017). "Agency is the ability to act and to be recognized as an actor" (Davidson, 2017, p.18). The hallmarks of agency are to be ones'self, self-define, and to self-name. Agency is the capacity to manage conflicting relations of power, act in a different way to introduce new and unanticipated modes of behavior, and the capacity to engender change within the socio- cultural context (Davidson, 2017, Fernandez- Morales & Menendez- Menendez, 2016). The conceptualization of agency is manifested in three ways as emotional labor, as resistance, and as empowerment. Agency as emotional labor is to constrain your own feelings to provide suitable space for others (Kelly et al., 2021). Agency as resistance is to resist the unique

challenges and oppressions faced by Black women. Agency as empowerment is to celebrate one's identity and to find positive ways to overcome obstacles.

Agency as Emotional Labor

Agency as emotional labor shows up in four ways, (1) erasure, (2) performance, (3) coping mechanisms, and (4) advocacy for others. The erasure of Black women voices while using their labor has been evident in the last few years through movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLives Matter. Both movements were created by and for Black women, however the #MeToo movement only came to prevalence after its adoption by white celebrity women. And #BlackLivesMatter has been promoted and used to highlight the killing of Black men (Kelly et al., 2021). In the 1960's during the Civil Rights Movement women like Ella Baker, Dorothy Cotton, Rosa Parks and Ruby Bridges, led the movement but all the recognition went to men, like Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis. Additionally, adultification of young Black girls, thrusting them into adulthood missing the milestones that safely lead to woman hood is another way to erase Black women (Anderson & Anderson, 2021). The erasure of Black women begins with young Black women. Young black women are often victimized in schools and subject to racial and gender bias (Commodore et al., 2018) Black women are also more likely to be raped or sexually abused as a child. Additionally, many young Black girls are missing due to sex trafficking (Anderson & Anderson, 2021). Scholars have also participated in the erasure of Black women writers and researchers. For example, Zora Hurston's work was erased and silenced by Black male authors such as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright (Anderson & Anderson, 2021). Specifically, erasure of Black college women on college campuses is also embedded within the higher education language. Higher Education uses language such as at risk and first generation, just a different way to categorize marginalized and minoritized students.

"This language, like all racialized language, erases student's culture and humanity" (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 48). Specifically, 'first generation' is a psychological threat to Black students and a propagation of white superiority (Evans- Winters, 2019). Crenshaw (1989) makes the case that the intersections of gender and race for women of color can lead to double discrimination, arguing that these intersections are ignored, erasing the identity of the black woman. Historically, Black women have been denied the "privilege of pure thought and pure rationality without having to ask for it"(Davidson, 2017, p. 39).

Black women performances are framed by controlling images or representations born from the mistreatment of Black women bodies. These images include the mammy, the matriarch, jezebel, and welfare mother, all portraying Black women as sexually other (Kelly et al., 2021, Wilkins, 2012). These images provide ideological justification for oppression and pinning the responsibility of "failed" gender performances on Black women (Collins, 1990). These images make it difficult for Black women to occupy a social position that is not marked or tainted (Wilkins, 2012). Judith Butler describes agency, "In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which to proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time-an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988). Performance for college students manifests as identity performance which is influenced by peers within the collegiate environment (Stewart, D.L., 2015). D.L. Stewart (2015) conducted a study to examine the meaning and performance of Blackness on three college campuses. The study identified three themes. First, how Black students negotiated racial performances, which considered how these Black students felt their behaviors and preferences were perceived by others. Second, embodying racial performances, the intersection of gender and expected racial performance. Finally, centering race, how the white space influenced the identity of Black students. The negotiation on

racial performance always happened for the benefit of others and created a disconnect for the meaning of identity for Black students. The embodiment of racial performance took the shape of the physical appearance playing a role in racial display i.e. displaying natural hair. The students in the study at the predominately white campus expressed how race played a significant part in their experiences (Stewart, D.L., 2015). The study did highlight that Black woman faced more challenges with racial performance than their Black male peers (Stewart, D.L., 2015). Therefore in college, Black women are struggling with their identity, choosing gender or race, and are constrained by performance.

Agency as emotional labor is evident in the coping mechanisms employed by Black college women. These coping mechanisms include disengagement, engagement, living within unique consciousness and use of support systems. Kelly et al. (2021) discusses disengagement and engagement. Disengagement can look like detachment and distancing yourself from people, activities, and resources. Engagement involves development of a co-interpretation of one's own identity and needs and expression through involvement in student organizations, student activism, and mentorship programs (Kelly et al., 2021). Coping can also mean living within a unique consciousness. Davidson (2017) describes the idea of double consciousness coined by W.E.B Dubois. "Double consciousness occurs when the often-positive image that one has of oneself competes with the often- negative image that the other has of you" (Davidson, 2017 p. 41). DuBois describes that 'dogged determination' is how one survives a double conscious reality (Davidson, 2017). Patricia Hill Collins, a foundational black feminist scholar, takes the idea of double consciousness and specifically describes how Black women live in an outsider within status. Black women live in two unique consciousnesses, one that emerges while in a white context and the other that emerges in a Black context. **(**Pennant, 2021**)**.

Therefore, Black women cope by changing their actions and behaviors in different contexts. The idea of behaving differently in specific contexts or environments has been referred to as living 'double lives' or 'shifting', enacting behaviors to protect one's true identity (Spates et al., 2020, Brown et al., 2017). Other coping mechanisms used by Black college women are informal support within their network or community, religion or spirituality, and family support (Ward et al., 2009, Barnett, 2004, Musgrave et al., 2002).

Finally, agency as emotional labor can manifest as advocacy for others. Black women's agency is only realized when it is linked with the struggles of others, white women for injustices regarding gender and Black men for injustices regarding race (Davidson, 2017). Black women advocate for the women's movement, but the concerns of the movement are not in alignment with the concerns for Black women. Black women face concerns such as domestic violence, rape, hate speech and food insecurity. Black women also face disparities in healthcare and opportunities for education (Kendall, 2020). Black college women have continued to use their privilege of being in college to advocate for women's issues (Commodore et al., 2018). Black women often focus on causes and concerns that impact the Black community. For example, "Too often, black men are willing to appropriate the labor and energy that black women put into social movement activism and collective action that is designed to highlight issues facing black communities. While black women like Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometti do the work to draw attention to police violence, somehow the default victims of this brutality frequently become men, obscuring black women's vulnerability to state violence" (Harvey Wingfield, 2019). However, Black women continue to support Black men and the Black community.

Agency as Resistance

    Agency as resistance shows up as creating safe spaces and social networks and using non-traditional means as forms of resistance. Agency as resistance can show up as using "education as the primary vehicle to racial autonomy, economic opportunity, upward mobility, and social justice (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 15). Agency as resistance also takes the form of creating safe spaces and social networks through mentoring and organizations like Black sororities (Kelly et al., 2021; Commodore et al.,, 2018). Other ways of resistance are non-traditional means, disrupting normative ways of knowing and forms of oppression by using disruptive ways to challenge the status quo. This means challenging the perceived norm of who should be in a space, what they should look like, and what they should wear (Pennant, 2021). Resistance can take the form of student activism and digital activism. Stewart (2019) conducted a study to examine the use of the Twitter hashtag #BlackGirlMagic by black college women. Stewart discovered that the hashtag was used to celebrate the accomplishments and achievements of Black women. Additionally, it was used to support, uplift, promote Black women owned businesses and highlight the actions of Black women making a difference in the world. The Stewart (2019) study revealed three main themes. First, existence is resistance. Existence unapologetically in a white space, while being your authentic self is resistance. Existence as resistance can show up in many ways. For example, the existence of Black women faculty, Black queer faculty, Black gender non-conforming faculty can be a form of resistance to normative discourses of the respectability politics and the 'image' of what faculty should look like and how faculty should behave. Existing and showing up as their authentic intersectional selves, Black faculty can disrupt the racist and heteronormative stereotypes (Haynes et al., 2020). The existence of Black faculty as their authentic intersectional selves serves as resistance and

empowerment for Black students. Another space for resistance has been #BlackGirlMagic. #BlackGirlMagic created a space for a community of Black women to have that is all their own. Secondly, the women in the study described the hashtag as a war cry to build capacity for belief in self, development of a community, and an engagement tool. The hashtag created a digital and physical space for a community of Black college women to express pride, love, resistance, and utility. The success of Black college women on campuses is due to their own efforts to build their own community. This study confirmed that Black women receive the greatest support from themselves and other Black women and when Black women thrive, institutions thrive (Stewart, 2019). Storytelling can also be a form of resistance. Evans- Winters (2019) uses storytelling in her work to illustrate that "writing and reading the lives of Black girls and women should be pleasurable and communal; the liminal space of our existence as a state of resilience and researching, theorizing, and writing are acts of resistance" (Evans- Winters, 2019, p. 69-70). Solorzano & Yosso (2002) use critical race theory and narratives from participants to challenge biological and cultural deficit stories through counter-storytelling, oral traditions, historiographies, corridos, poetry, films, acts, or by other means (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002 p. 37). The importance of language, of social constructs, and the socialization that Black girls/ women experience when in white spaces is part of the resilience and resistance that defines the Black woman experience.

Agency as Empowerment

Agency as empowerment is the celebration of identity and the creation of new knowledge. Embracing identity can be a means of survival for Black and minority students (Pennant, 2021). Davidson (2017) explores agency with young Black women. Davidson discovers that young Black women take ownership of their agency by celebrating their identity

as Black women instead of identifying as victims. Celebration of identity for Black college women begins with a sense of self. Porter and Dean (2015) found that sense of self is a process that began in the early stages of socialization for these college women "nurtured by supportive staff, social circles, learning to make meaning of their identity development as African American women in relationships with others, specifically with other African American women" (p. 136). In addition to relationship building, Black women are agents of knowledge because they have access to experiences of black and female identities. Black college women exist in a structure that is built on a system of oppression of race, gender, and class. The agency of these women comes into play when they can define their own reality (Collins, 2002). Therefore, Black college women produce their own situated knowledge that specifies their standpoint (Pennant, 2021). Collins expands on the idea of standpoint in her discussion of black feminist thought. Collins (2002), states that black women have had to struggle against the white male interpretations of the world. Therefore, black feminist thought is viewed as subjugated knowledge. The experiences or daily behaviors of black women are the location for constructing black feminist consciousness. Black feminist consciousness is developed from family storytelling, first- hand experiences with struggle to spirituality and physical survival in segregated spaces, witnessing the modern-day lynching of the murder of innocent Black people and existence in white spaces solely for the purpose of "speaking for the race" (Evans- Winters, 2019, p.16). The interpretations of black women experiences by black women are at the forefront of black feminist thought. Knowledge validation and power relations reflect the interests of elite white men and therefore the interpretations of black feminist experiences have struggled to be validated. As previously mentioned, Hill- Collins describes black women as agents of knowledge because they have access to experiences of black and female. Therefore, their standpoint can reflect the

convergence of both experiences (Collins, 2002, p. 269). As scholars and practitioners evaluate the experiences of Black college women from their own unique standpoints, they create a partial situated knowledge, allowing each group to better understand the standpoint of others without suppressing their own unique standpoint (Collins, 2002, p. 270). The unique experiences of each Black college woman dictate how the relationship with self, impacts how she develops knowledge and skills needed to practice agency against daily challenges. A Black woman's identity is shaped by her unique lived experience, but also by how she is situated at the focal point of multiple systems of oppression. How Black women respond to the oppressions that they face is how their agency is operationalized.

Another view of knowledge is how Dillard (2000) explores knowledge through language. Language is a "powerful tool in the mental, spiritual, and intellectual colonization of African Americans and other marginalized peoples" (Dillard, 2000, p. 662) Language should be able to do something, specifically transforming and producing knowledge (Dillard, 2000). Language is linked to reality and how we understand the world, ourselves, and each other.

Intentional Agency

In review of literature, I have found that there are three ways Black college women can be intentional with their agency. These three ways are the development of individual agency, development of collective agency, and reflection and inner dialogue. The development of individual agency is the ability of Black college women to exhibit self- expression, commitment to self-efficacy, and self-advocacy. Self -expression for Black college women is inevitably linked with their self-identity. Self -expression may take a physical form, how a person dresses or wears their hair (Pennant , 2021). But also, Black college women have embraced self-expression through spoken word, art and music. Henry (2010) describes the self -expression of Black

college women as a new genre of hip-hop culture called hip -hop feminism. "Hip-hop feminism connects feminist ideologies, Black feminism, and contemporary culture through cultural awareness" (Henry, 2010, p. 141). Hip- hop feminism is a means to combat patriarchal hip- hop that produces images of sexism, racism, and gender prejudice. New representations of Black womanhood have been highlighted through the artistry of women like Erykah Badu, Alicia Keys, Mary J. Blige and Queen Latifah (Henry, 2010). Black college women are also embracing artists like Beyonce, Lizzo, and H.E.R, to guide their own self- expression. Beyonce has used her alter ego of 'Sasha Fierce' to remove herself from the hypersexualized moves that make up her performances. This behavior alludes to Beyonce distancing herself from 'controlling image of the hypersexual Black woman (Weidhase, 2015). At an MTV awards performance Beyonce claimed the word feminist and was later chastised by bell hooks, 'terrorist' who potentially harms black girls with her sexualized performances (Sieczkowski, 2014). "Within its pro-sex framework in the context of the lingering legacy of respectability politics, Beyoncé's performance can be understood as an exploration of the potential of hip-hop feminism: her combination of explicitly feminist content with performances of sexual agency signifies an exploration of black female sexuality beyond respectability politics" (Weidhase, 2015, p. 130). The second part in the development of individual agency is self- efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief in your own ability to exert control over your own motivation, behavior, and social environment (Kelly, 2021). In a study by McNeely Cobham & Patton (2015), self-efficacy of Black women to succeed was in familial influences, overcoming adversity, and support networks. The Black women in the study revealed that family support, specifically from their mothers pushed them to earn a solid education and to pursue everything with excellence. The women in the study learned to handle challenges and adversity by learning to ignore messages

from faculty, staff, and other students that were demeaning regarding race, gender or both. "Self-efficacy is integral to helping students to see such disheartening experiences as motivators for success rather than detractors from educational goals" (McNeely Cobham & Patton, 2015). Finally self-efficacy is developed through support networks. These networks can be built through mentoring relationships (Patton, 2009) or through social networks among peers (Winkle-Wagner, 2015; McNeely Cobham & Patton, 2015). The final part of developing individual agency is self - advocacy. Self -advocacy is speaking up for yourself and what is important to you (Kelly et al., 2021). Self -advocacy can take the form of using voice to speak up and identify your needs.

Developing collective agency begins with creating safe spaces and social networks. Participation in identity - based organizations, student activism, and mentorship programs are all ways to create these spaces. Black college women also get the greatest support from themselves, and relationships built with other Black women (Stewart, 2019; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019, Donald et al., 2020). Black college women can gain support through Black sororities. The four National Panhellenic Council (NPHC) sororities have had a foundational impact on the experiences of Black college women and the narrative of Black college women. These organizations allow Black college women to have a space all their own on white campuses, allows these women to provide service and to advocate for themselves in the fight for social justice (Commodore et al., 2018). Other spaces that have been created on college campuses are identity centers. For 40 years Black culture centers or identity centers have provided programming and services to benefit Black students and contribute to positive racial identity development (Harris & Patton, 2017).

Mentorship is a way that Black college women can create social networks and support systems. The benefits of these mentoring relationships are self-esteem, motivation, and self -

confidence (Patton, 2009). Due to lack of representation of African American scholars and professors and staff on predominantly white campuses, Black college women often must reach outside of the University environment for mentoring relationships. These mentors may include community members or faculty from other institutions. In a study by Patton (2009), Black college women were seeking other Black mentors who could understand their emotions and experiences. The study participants described their Black women mentors as trustworthy, someone who looked like them, someone who 'kept it real', someone who cared about them, and someone who provided opportunities for them (Patton, 2009, p. 523-525).

Finally, intentional agency for Black college women requires reflection and inner dialogue. Reflection and inner dialogue can manifest from ideals of self- authorship and transition to self-definition. Okello uses the term self -definition "as a means of advancing a theoretical construct that will speak acutely to the lives of minoritized bodies, validating their knowledge production and establishing a framework by which they might cultivate an embodied sense of self" (Okello, 2018, p. 536). Okello describes the tenets of self-definition as "(a) validating and integrating standpoint knowledge of minoritized bodies; (b) prioritizing self-love; (c) emphasizing agency in a matrix of domination; (d) foregrounding identity as performative; (e) and dreaming and imagining futures not yet known. An existential practice, self-definition is a process: a deliberate warring of deconstruction and reconstruction" (Okello 2018, p. 538). This self-definition process can create a means for Black college women to seek hope and joy. Hope aids in facing daily challenges when feeling discouraged or unsure (Nganga & Beck, 2017). "Hope is needed to survive the academy. It keeps us resilient, and allows us to maintain our sense of power and agency in the face of adversity. Hope allows us to embrace the anger we sometimes feel and also question the ways we resist and

conform to external pressures. Because we were resilient, this anger also gave us fuel to keep going and fight to attain our professional aspirations" (Nganga & Beck, 2017, p. 563).

In addition to hope, how Black students experience joy in white spaces is Black joy (Tichavakunda, 2021). In a study by Tichavakunda (2021), Black students experienced Black joy through being, achievement, and collectively. Black joy as being was described as pride in who you are, your culture, and your color. Black joy as achievement was described as academic or personal achievements of self and other Black students. Finally Black joy as a collective, joy found in the company and strength of being in community with fellow Black peers (Tichavakunda, 2021).

Conclusion

Higher Education has a responsibility to expand the definition of student success as it relates to Black collegian women. First, higher education institutions, specifically predominately white institutions (PWI) must create counterspaces where Black college women can center their experiences and expand their understanding of their identity. The creation of counterspaces must go beyond the creation of identity centers, but instead to "foster communication and interaction between groups of students and to develop a sense of campus ownership for the African American females" (Sims, 2008). PWI's must also create programs to support Black college women in access and persistence in STEM majors, providing career guidance and mentorship. Many Black college women abandon STEM majors due to lack of support (Russell & Russell, 2015). Additionally, the creation of counternarratives must be championed by faculty who provide academic resources and materials that dispel dominant discourses. Specifically, "Faculty should engage in culturally relevant pedagogy by including assignments and readings by and

about Black women throughout curricula and across academic disciplines" (Porter & Byrd, 2021, p. 821).

These institutions must also offer co-curricular opportunities, often referred to as high - impact practices (HIP) that fit the specific needs of Black college women and increase access to HIPs that have been proven to impact all student groups such as undergraduate research. PWI's must also increase the representation of students, faculty, and staff on campus. Black college women need to be able to see and interact with students, faculty, and staff that look like them. Programs must be put in place to increase enrollment and access of students, faculty, and staff of Black women. Ultimately the changes employed by the institution must be systemic change, creating access, resources, and opportunities across curricula and co-curricular programs and initiatives, financial aid and scholarships, mentoring, creation of counterspaces and counternarratives, increased representation of underrepresented groups in the campus community, support programs and systems that are specific to the needs of Black college women and other marginalized and minoritized groups.

Black college women are navigating an environment of privilege, while also navigating a double oppressed body, oppression experienced by their race and gender (Commodore et al., 2018). The challenges faced by Black college women are aspects of socially constructed homogeneity, isolation on college campuses, lack of institutional resources and supports, navigating identity and sense of belonging and financing higher education (Commodore et al., 2018, Porter & Dean, 2015). Black college women face these challenges through their practice of agency. "Agency is the ability to act and to be recognized as an actor" (Davidson, 2017, p.18). The hallmarks of agency are to be ones' self, self-define, and to self- name. Agency is the capacity to manage conflicting relations of power, act in a different way to introduce new and

unanticipated modes of behavior, and the capacity to engender change within the socio- cultural

context (Davidson, 2017, Fernandez- Morales & Menendez- Menendez, 2016). Agency is

manifested in three ways as emotional labor, as resistance, and as empowerment. The

conceptualization of agency as emotional labor shows up as engagement with emotional and

physical performances to conform in white spaces, developing coping mechanisms to combat the

erasure of their intersectional identities by changing actions and behaviors, and advocating for

others and not for self. Agency as resistance for Black college women is about creating safe

spaces and social networks, working to disrupt the status quo. Finally, agency as empowerment

is the celebration of identity and the creation of new knowledge through support systems and the

centering of Black college women experiences. The theoretical lens of Black Feminist Thought

(BFT) will be used in this study to conceptualize the experiences of Black college women and

provide a model to examine how Black college women exercise agency through lived

experience, dialogue, trust, and faith. Furthermore, this study will explore Black college

women's relationship to agency and how they are intentionally agentic individually and in

community with their peers. The conceptualization of agency as described in this chapter

examines the relationship between agency and Black college women through emotional labor,

resistance, and empowerment. The conceptualization further examines how Black college

women are intentionally agentic through the exercise of individual agency, collective agency,

and reflection and inner dialogue.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I describe the methodological approach used to understand and make meaning of the experiences of agency for Black undergraduate women at a predominately white institution (PWI). Through this study I sought to identify how Black undergraduate women define and and are intentional regarding agency throughout their college experience. As part of this research, I used sista circle methodology to center the voices of Black undergraduate women as they shared their individual and collective experiences with agency. This chapter will outline my approach to research design, data collection and data analysis for this study. The research design for this study engaged with sista circle methodology (Johnson, 2015) and employed Black Feminist Thought (BFT) to frame an understanding of the topic, introducing an conceptualization of agency to guide analysis. This study addressed the following research question and sub-questions:

1. How do Black collegian women demonstrate agency throughout their undergraduate experiences at PWI's?
   a. What is Black collegian women's relationship with agency?
   b. How are Black collegian women intentionally agentic?

The purpose of this research study was to explore the agency of Black collegian women at a predominately white institution. These research questions using the frame of Black Feminist Thought (BFT) not only identified Black college women experiences with agency but also defined agency and explored the characteristics that embody agency for Black college women.

Research Design

Role of the Researcher

      I believe quality qualitative research uses reflexivity and positionality as tools to establish the relationship between the researcher and researched. Because of this, I as the researcher should be consistently reflexive through all parts of a research study which allows me to identify how my bias and ethical considerations influence my work. I believe every researcher should be able to acknowledge their positionality and how it influences the research design of any study. Qualitative research tells a story through the interpretation of the researcher and so it is very important that the researcher is reflexive with themselves, with those they are working with, and with the data that is collected. Dillard (2000) describes the relationship between researcher and participants as one that moves away from detachment and towards responsibility, "This is also where Black feminist knowledge provides an angle of vision from which to construct an alternative version of this relationship and a new metaphor in educational research, one that moves us away from detachment with participants and contexts and their use as ''ingredients'' in our research recipes and towards an epistemological position more appropriate for work within such communities. Therefore, Black Feminist Thought (BFT) was used as the catalyst to center the voices and experiences of Black college women to examine the meaning of agency for these women.

Role of Black Feminist Thought

      As previously mentioned in Chapter Two, BFT provides a lens to conceptualize the experiences of Black women in undergraduate programs and provides a model to examine the agency of Black college women facing economic, political, and ideological oppression. Therefore, the tenets of Black feminist thought are connected to lived experience, dialogue, trust,

and faith. The methodology for this study, sista circle methodology embodied the tenets of BFT. Sista circle methodology provided a community space where Black college women were able to have an open dialogue regarding their collective and individual lived experiences. Sista circle provided a safe space for Black college women to build a community of trust and dialogue as they explored their own experiences and identities. Sista circle methodology animated BFT, as Black college women came together to define and express their experience with agency.

Sista Circle Methodology

Sista Circle is the most salient methodology to understand how agency is operationalized by Black college women across disciplines at a predominately white institution (PWI). Sista Circle methodology is an ethnographic method that is gender specific and culturally relevant for Black women (Johnson, 2015). The research design for this method was focused on the individual and shared lived experiences of Black college women. Our Sista circles functioned as a support group encouraging trust and dialogue between participants. These circles allowed the participants to share their lived experiences in ways that are congruent to their cultural norms. These circles took place outside of the university environment to remove participants from oppressive environments, to create a safe space. The sista circle became a place of empowerment for participants through dialogue and support (Johnson, 2015). Participants were given a topic and explored the topic, in this case agency, they were able to center their voices through a shared conversation. Finally, I, the researcher, was a participant within this methodology, within each sista circle conversation. I as a participant shared my experiences and served in a mentorship role, empowering the other participants (Wilson, 2018).

Distinguishing Features of Sista Circle

Sista circles are group discussions organized by the researcher for Black women. During the group discussions the participants and researchers explore a specific topic and or experience. Sista circles are different from focus groups because these circles function as a space for Black women to not just tell their stories but also to build community in an environment where participants feel empowered and supported (Johnson, 2015). Johnson(2015), describes three distinguishing features of this qualitative research method, communication dynamics, centrality of empowerment, and researcher as participant.

Communication dynamics. Black women have unique communication methods, through verbal and non-verbal means. The cultural history of Black women includes oral traditions of storytelling and using language to form community with one another (Johnson, 2015, Dillard, 2000, Evans-Winters, 2019). Therefore these sista circles are conversations among a community of Black women who share unique and common experiences.

Centrality of empowerment. Black college women develop their identity, through the idea of an ethic of care. This idea of ethic of care is that empathy and compassion connect knowledge to values (Collins, 2000). Empowerment is the celebration of identity and the creation of new knowledge. The sista circle allows for Black women to access personal and collective power , creating a cultural capital that strengthens one another. Black women are able to create community with one another through sharing their experiences and their wisdom (Johnson, 2015).

Researcher as participant. The final distinguishing factor of sista circles is the role of the researcher. The researcher does not only facilitate the conversation but also participates in the conversation. The researcher shares her own personal experiences as necessary to encourage

empowerment and to offer support (Collins, 2009). Sista circles offer an opportunity for the researcher to give back to participants (Johnson, 2015).

Sista Circle in the Digital Environment

Traditionally, scholars who have used sista circles in their research have held these conversations within an in-person environment (Johnson, 2015, Lacy, 2017, Wilson, 2018). However, considering the impact of the 2020 Global pandemic on how we communicate, educate, and support students, it is important to explore this methodology within a virtual environment. The intersections of Black and woman in higher education shape expectations for success, competition, engaging with mentors and building and maintaining support systems and community (Robinson et al., 2022). Additionally, with lack of institutional support in higher education spaces, Black college women are faced with creating their own community, through sista circles, writing groups, and digital communities. These spaces serve as an avenue to combat and survive racism, sexism, and any other forms of oppression (Robinson et al., 2022). In a study by Tykeia Robinson, Felecia Commodore, and Jennifer M. Johnson, Black feminist thought was used as an conceptual lens to examine how friendship, support, and mentorship was maintained in digital environments, such as text messages, group chats, Google Hangout, and Zoom. "Technology allows us to support one another in real time and beyond the barriers of physical distance. These digital spaces exist in resistance to the isolating and sometimes oppressive nature of academic spaces because we can lean on each other for strength as often as we need" (Robinson et al., 2022 p. 94). The findings for this study found that digital communities play a critical role in retaining Black women in higher education and that technology is a valuable tool to "expand and enhance communication and community building" (p. 97). These findings served as a model for creating a sista circle community for this research study in a digital

environment, specifically, using the Zoom platform. Traditionally, A key component of sista circle methodology creates a safe space for dialogue among Black women, in an neutral, in-person, non-university affiliated space. The creation of such a community in a virtual space was challenging. However, we were able to create community in the virtual space using the Tuckman (1977) stages of group development, forming, storming, norming and performing. In the first sista circle sessions, participants got to know each other during the forming stage. As the sessions continued, participants tested the limits of the community, beginning to form trust among each other, creating a safe space for authenticity and speaking their truth. During norming participants formed the needed level of trust and were able to be open and share freely. Finally in the performing phase, participants were able to build relationships with one another, forming bonds based on shared experiences and cultural norms. The use of a new modality for sista circle methodology provided an opportunity to expand including participants from various locations and participants were able to be flexible with their time and location. Also, due to the COVID pandemic, the virtual environment allowed participants to meet in a safe space where our health was protected. This use of a new modality for sista circle provided an opportunity for sista circle to not only be used as a research methodology but also as a way for Black women across academia to form spaces of support and empowerment in the future.

Recruitment and Data Sources

The participants for this study included a small group of six participants who identified as Black or African American women who were alumni of or currently enrolled undergraduate students at a predominately white institution(PWI). Participants were between the ages of 18 - 28 years. The recruitment process included distribution of flyers in high -traffic areas at the PWI and included contacting student organizations that have a large group of this population (i.e

NPHC organizations and Black student union). Recruitment information was also shared with the university honors college, the first -year seminar course instructors, academic advisors campus -wide and the University library. The screening process included one initial virtual individual meeting with each participant to pick final participants for the study and gather background information on each participant. After final participants were chosen, participants were asked to create a college journey profile, this profile gave a summary of experiences in college thus far for each individual participant. Participants were encouraged to create their profile using any method they saw fit. Participants were given examples of how to present their profile, record video, write an essay, or take photos. Participants were encouraged to use any method to express themselves and their college journey thus far. Participants were asked to bring their profile to the second sista circle conversation. All participants were invited to four virtual sista circle conversations via the Zoom platform. Additionally, at the final sista circle conversation participants completed an electronic post- sista circle reflection survey. Data was collected from the following sources for this research study: Sister Circle Conversations (4 virtual meetings for 90 minutes each), Artifact: College Journey Profile, and Electronic Post - Sista Circle Reflection.

Figure 3.1 Data Collection Process

Screening Interview

Virtual Interview with each potential participant

Demographic Survey

Sista Circle Conversations

Sista Circle #1- *Building Community*

Sista Circle #2- *Undergraduate Experiences*

Sista Circle #3- *Understanding and Intentionality of Agency*

Sista Circle #4- *Reflection: Self Love & Black Joy*

Reflection

Electronic Post- Sista Circle Reflection
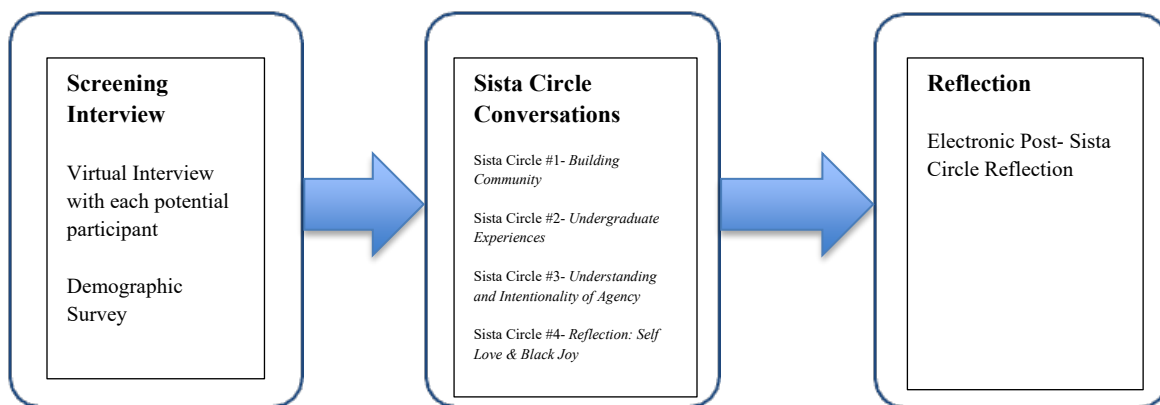
Sista Circle Conversations and Participants

The participants in this research study included three alumni and three currently enrolled undergraduate students attending a four - year public university in the Southern United States. The youngest participant was 18 years old, and the oldest participant was 28. Of the three currently enrolled students, two identified as freshman or first -year students and one as a senior. Of the three alumni, all graduated within the last five years, 2017, 2020, and 2021. Participants and the higher education institution in this study have been given pseudonyms. See Table 3.1 for detailed information for each participant.

Table 3.1 Participant Profile Chart Fall 2022

Pseudo Name	Age	SES	Student Status/ Classification	Degree Program	H/S- Undergrad GPA	Religion (Spiritual Affiliation)	Race	First Gen Status
Ally	24	Middle-class	Recent Grad (2020)	Management	3.83	Christian	African American	No
Haley	18	Middle-class	1st year	Architecture	H/S 3.4	Christian	African American	No
Z	18	Working-class	1st year	Mechanical Engineering	H/S 2.0	Christian	African American	No
Jackie	28	Middle-class	Recent Grad (2017)	Human Resource Management	2.7	Spiritual	African American	No
Sara	24	Middle class	Senior (2023)	Mechanical Engineering	3.0	Spiritual	African American	No
Carrie	23	Middle class	Recent Grad (2021)	Marketing	3.0	Spiritual	African American	No
SM	35	Middle class	Grad (2011)	Political Science	3.27	Christian	African American	Yes

Sista Circle #1: Building Community: Getting to Know You & What is your Why?

The first sista circle was centered around relationship and community building. We began with some reminders about confidentiality, scheduling of remaining sista circle sessions, and revisited the purpose of the study. All participants were then asked to complete a google form with demographic information including name, age, major, graduation year, religion, socioeconomic status, student organization involvement, class standing, how they identity, GPA, first generation status, and why they chose to participate in this study. We then began with introductions and completed an activity called what is your why. Each participant described their 'why', what that meant for them in this moment. We ended the conversation with a discussion based on two question prompts: 1) What soothes your spirit when you are unhappy or in a bad mood? , 2) What are three things you would change about your school environment to be a more successful student? Themes emerged around identity and community during our conversation. Participants were able to bond and start to build a community that served as the foundation for future sista circle conversations. The conversation was a 90-minute discussion.

Sista Circle #2: Undergraduate Experiences

We began the second sista circle with participants sharing their College Journey Profiles, 4 of the 6 participants shared their profiles with the group. After sharing I led the group in a discussion of agency, based on the Davidson definition, "Agency is the ability to act and to be recognized as an actor" (Davidson, 2017, p.18). I then asked participants to define agency in reference to their college experiences. Each participant offered their own individual definition of agency and then as a group we created a collective definition.

Sista Circle #3: Understanding and Intentionality of Agency

  The group continued our discussion of agency with a deep dive into what is the meaning of emotional labor, resistance, and empowerment. There was a large focus on self-expression and ideas and thoughts emerged about the difference in Black culture at a PWI.

Sista Circle #4: Reflection: Self Love and Black Joy

  During our final sista circle we focused on the definitions of self-love and Black joy and what these two manifestations look like as a young Black woman in college. After discussion, each participant was then asked to complete an Electronic Post-Sista Circle reflection. The reflection document asked 12 questions, including what did they learn about themselves and Black culture, what challenges do they or did they face in college, how do they or did they exercise agency in their college journey, and what support and resources do they or did they need to be successful.

Artifact: College Journey Profile

  Participants were asked to complete a college journey profile. Participants were told to create a representation of their college experience. I asked participants to be creative with their profile and gave examples of ways they could represent themselves and their experiences in college. I suggested presentation, image collage, photography, or video. Two of the six participants created a collage, one participant created a timeline, one participant created a painting with a description, one participant completed a one-on-one interview with me, which I then used to create two artifacts, one reflecting the voice of my participant and one reflecting my voice about her experiences. And the final participant did not complete a college journey profile, however she did participate in all other aspects of the research study. Each college journey profile was unique and expressed the experiences of these young Black college women.

Electronic Post-sista circle reflection

During our final sista circle, I asked the young ladies to complete a 12- question reflection document (See Appendix 7). I gave the ladies about 40 minutes to complete the reflection questions. The questions were a variety of multiple -choice and short answer questions, on a google form. Some participants finished in the time allotted and others finished the form after our sista circle session ended. I asked all participants to have the form completed by the end of the same week. Some participants shared their responses with the group before the end of our final sista circle session.

Timeline

The data collection process began with IRB Approval in August 2022. Following IRB approval recruitment began and was aligned with the start of the Fall 2022 semester. Recruitment emails (See Appendix 2) were sent to student organizations, academic advisors, honors college, academic support services, first year seminar courses, and the library. Recruitment was also done through word of mouth by former students of mine and campus colleagues to student organizations. Potential participants were directed to contact me by email or phone. As participants began to contact me by email or phone, I set up an individual screening interview with each interested student in the final two weeks of September 2022. Participants were asked three questions during the screening interview, 1) Tell me about yourself -who are you and how do you identify, 2) What is your affiliation to the university? 3) Why would you like to participate in this study? I also gave more information and details about the study and asked the participants to confirm that they wanted to participate. During the screening I also described the college journey profile. Each participant who confirmed their interest was emailed the informed consent form (See Appendix 3) to their university email address and was asked to email the
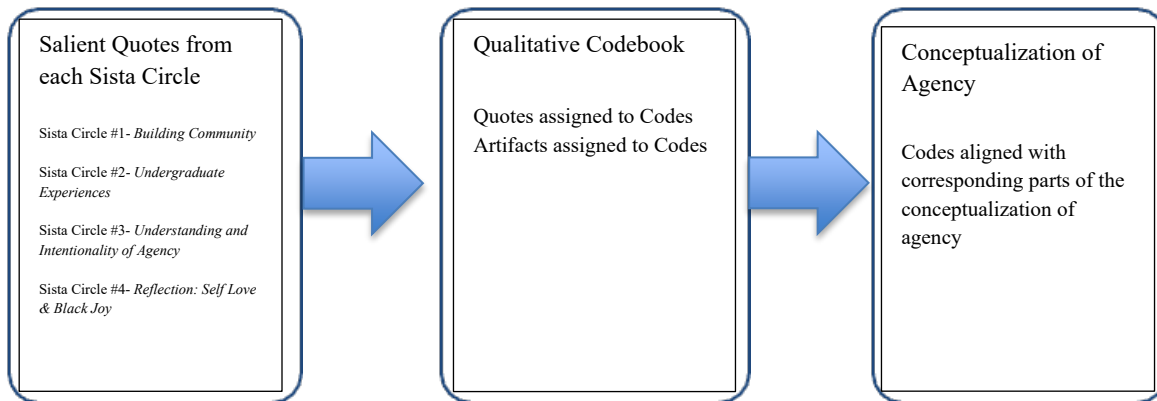
signed consent to my university email address. After receipt of each consent form, I emailed each participant with detailed instructions for completion of the college journey profile. I asked each participant to send me their completed college journey profile by our second scheduled sista circle meeting. Also, I asked each participant to send me their schedule so we could choose date and time for weekly sista circle meetings. After receiving responses from each participant, I emailed each participant with the day and time of our sista circle meetings. I also created ZOOM meeting calendar invitations sent to each participant's email with day time and virtual ZOOM link for our meetings. We met every Monday for the month of October 2022. After our first meeting, I created a group text so that I could communicate meeting reminders with the group each week. The final sista circle meeting concluded on October 24, 2022. Finally, all data was recorded and transcribed by ZOOM recording and Otter.ai. Data analysis for all data, sista circle conversations, college journey profile, and electronic post-sista circle reflection was completed between October 31st- November 11th, 2022.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, I reviewed the transcripts from our four sista circle conversations. I also reviewed each artifact of the college journey profiles. Each salient quote from the sista circle conversations along with the artifacts were each given a code based on themes identified throughout the sista circle conversations, such as relationships, culture, identity, microagressions and mental health; these codes were then placed into a qualitative codebook. Using the qualitative codebook, codes were aligned and assigned to components of the conceptualization of agency. The codes were assigned to the topics discussed during each circle but also used as participants spoke about their college journey profiles. The spoken words as participants

discussed their college journey profiles during the sista circle is how the artifacts from this study were analyzed.

Figure 3.2 Data Analysis Process

Salient Quotes from each Sista Circle	Qualitative Codebook	Conceptualization of Agency
Sista Circle #1- *Building Community*	Quotes assigned to Codes	Codes aligned with corresponding parts of the conceptualization of agency
Sista Circle #2- *Undergraduate Experiences*	Artifacts assigned to Codes	
Sista Circle #3- *Understanding and Intentionality of Agency*		
Sista Circle #4- *Reflection: Self Love & Black Joy*		

Credibility and Meaningful Coherence

Good qualitative research is dependable or credible. Credibility means trustworthiness or verisimilitude. According to Tracy (2010), credibility has four criteria, thick description, triangulation, multivocality, and member reflections. Our sista circle conversations were full of thick descriptions regarding the experiences of each participant. Triangulation was reached as the information gathered during the study continued to reiterate similar experiences among participants. Multivocality was achieved through the various voices represented and the relationship between researcher and participants. Finally, credibility was achieved through member reflections throughout the sista circle conversations and in depth, during the last sista circle through the use of the electronic post-sista circle reflection. The final component of qualitative quality exhibited by this study is its contribution to meaningful coherence. This study connected research design, data collection and analysis with BFT and conceptualization of agency to achieve the study's intended purpose.

Summary

The purpose of this research study was to explore the agency of Black collegian women at a predominately white institution. The research questions using the frame of Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and application of the conceptualization of agency identified Black college women experiences with agency and the characteristics that embody agency for Black college women. Sista Circle was the most salient methodology to understand how agency is operationalized by Black college women across disciplines at a predominately white institution (PWI). Sista Circle methodology is an ethnographic method that is gender specific and culturally relevant for Black women (Johnson, 2016b). The research design for this method was focused on the individual and shared lived experiences of Black college women. Our Sista circles functioned as a support group encouraging trust and dialogue between participants. These circles allowed the participants to share their lived experiences in ways that are congruent to their cultural norms. This methodology has three distinguishing features that sets it apart from other qualitative methodologies, (1) *communication dynamics,* creating conversations among a community of Black women who share unique and common experiences; (2) *centrality of empowerment*, Black women are able to create community with one another through sharing their experiences and their wisdom (Johnson, 2015); and (3) *researcher as participant,* the researcher shares her own personal experiences as necessary to encourage empowerment and to offer support (Collins, 2009). Following IRB approval in August 2022, various forms of recruitment took place, followed by participant screening interviews, four sista circle conversations in October 2022, artifact college journey profile collected from participants, and electronic sista circle reflection received by each participant. The participants in this research study included 3 alumni and 3 currently enrolled undergraduate students attending a four - year

public university in the Southern United States. The youngest participant was 18 years old and the oldest participant was 28. Of the three currently enrolled students, two identified as freshman or first -year students and one as a senior. Of the three alumni, all graduated within the last five years, 2017, 2020, and 2021. Each sista circle focused on a topic or theme. The first sista circle focused on the group getting to know each other and describing their why, while the second sista circle focused on the undergraduate experiences of each participant as they shared their college journey profile. The third and final sista circles focused on agency and reflection. Sista circle conversations for this study broke with the tradition of in-person meetings and each conversation took place virtually on the ZOOM platform. Data analysis used a qualitative codebook to align codes with components of the agency framework. Finally, the study was credible and exhibited meaningful coherence. The findings for this study address the research questions and are explained in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

In this research study I examined how the undergraduate experiences of Black collegian women at a predominantly white institution (PWI) to understand their conceptualization and demonstrations of agency. There were seven participants in this study, three Black undergraduate college women alumna, three currently enrolled Black undergraduate college women and me the research participant. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and the institution. The institution is referred to as SB University (SBU). I collected and analyzed qualitative data from four Sister Circle Conversations (90-minute virtual meetings), as well as an college journey profile, and post -Sista Circle written reflection collected from each of the Sista Circle participants.

I began analyzing data generated by reviewing and selecting salient quotes from sista circle conversations. Quotes from the participants were added to a qualitative codebook and each quote was assigned a code based on themes that emerged during each sista circle. Themes that emerged during sista circle conversations were relationships, identity, culture, mental health, and microaggressions, Next, I organized codes and associated quotes into the categories of the conceptualization of agency presented in chapter two. This allowed me to understand how the experiences and narratives of Black women collegians reflected their agency, and further refine the conceptualization of agency I derived from reviewing literature. Codes were also assigned to the College Journey profile artifacts created and the quotes from participants as they presented their profiles in our sista circles as well as to the post -sista circle reflections.

The conceptualization of agency distilled from the literature has two parts (see Figure 4.1): participants relationship to agency, and how participants are intentionally agentic. Participants relationship with agency is defined by their experiences with emotional labor,
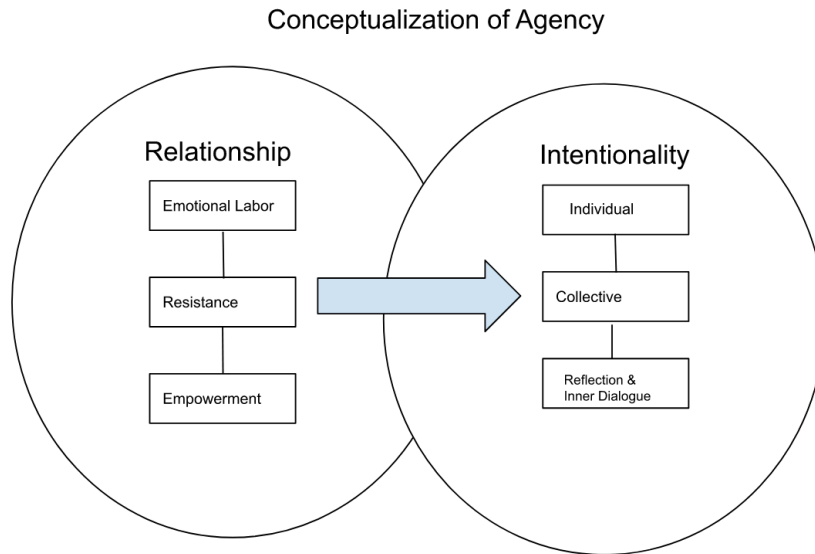
resistance, and empowerment. The relationship with agency informs how each participant is intentionally agentic as an individual, as part of a collective group or community, and through inner dialogue and self-reflection. I used this framing to organize and interpret the codes and associated quotes from the first round of analysis. First, each code and associated quotes were aligned with the one of two main grouping in the framing: relationship to agency and intentionality of agency. Then each code and associated quotes were aligned with the specific characteristics of each grouping. The code and quotes assigned to the relationship to agency grouping, were eventually aligned with emotional labor, resistance, or empowerment. The code and quotes assigned to the intentionality of agency grouping, were eventually aligned with individual agency, collective agency, or self-reflection and inner dialogue.

The findings for this study described the relationship between Black women collegian experiences and agency, as well as how Black women collegians are intentionally agentic. In this chapter I will illustrate the findings from this study organized by each of the sub-questions:

1. How do Black collegian women demonstrate agency throughout their undergraduate experiences at PWIs?

    a. What is Black collegian women's relationship with agency?

    b. How are Black collegian women intentionally agentic?

I divided this chapter into two sections, where I presented the findings that align with research sub question a) What is Black collegian women's relationship with agency?, and sub question B: How are Black collegian women intentionally agentic?.

Figure 4.1

Conceptualization of Agency

What is Black collegian women's relationship with agency?

Black collegian women's relationship with agency is framed by the literature as emotional labor, resistance, and empowerment. The findings provide evidence of (1) engagement with emotional and physical performativity, (2) development of coping mechanisms to cope with the erasure of Black college women's intersectional identities, (3) erasure of identity and opportunities to build community perpetuated by intracultural differences, (4) assimilation as a means of survival, and (5) empowerment through vulnerability. Black college women's relationship with agency is nuanced and centered on finding their authentic self.

Emotional Labor

My findings reflected how Black college women's experience with emotional labor within the collegial context is connected to their agency. Based on my analysis and interpretation

of the data, I found emotional labor for these women manifested in three ways, *erasure,*

performance, and coping mechanisms. Erasure for these Black college women showed up as

isolation, hypervisibility, and intracultural differences. The emotional labor was evidenced in

their coping with the erasure of their culture and humanity. Performance manifested in their

engagement and disengagement with the campus community. Lastly coping mechanisms were

the skills or tools these women employed for survival in their predominately white collegial

environment.

Erasure. Crenshaw (1989) made the case that the intersections of gender and race for

women of color can lead to double discrimination, arguing that these intersections are ignored,

erasing the identity of the black woman. The study participants first described erasure through

their experiences of isolation and hypervisibility. Jackie and Haley commented:

Jackie: "I just felt sort of like I was stuck. I stuck out anywhere. Like all eyes were on me, you

know. When you go into a class you feel like I'm the only black person in this class" (SC 1

transcript, p. 14).

 Haley: "Like every room I walk into, the first thing I think about even before being a woman is

being black, because now it's like, really in my face. So, for the most part I've always been

comfortable, and now it's like, it's just completely different, which is insane to me in a way. But

um, I'm also thankful for it, too, because, being in architecture [architecture major] , is

predominantly white "(SC 1 transcript, p. 28).

Jackie expressed her feelings of being the only one. Jackie experienced hypervisibility in

the classroom. Inside the classroom Jackie was made aware that she was different. Jackie's

hypervisibility contributed to her awareness of her own identity and her sense of belonging on

campus. Haley also described experiencing hypervisibility on campus but focused more on her

feelings of isolation. Haley described isolation in terms of her major. The isolation that Haley felt caused her some discomfort, but she could also see the value in her isolation. She explained that she was not used to being the only one, but grateful to be in an environment with predominantly white persons, as she knew that her field of architecture is also predominantly white. Haley and Jackie both experienced isolation and hypervisibility related to race on their predominately white campus. Black college women often feel that they are alone or the only one (Porter & Dean, 2015). The lack of peers, faculty and staff that look like them contributes to feelings of isolation on predominantly white campuses. Black college women can also experience hostile campus environments regarding feelings of belonging in their major, especially in male dominated fields such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) or fields with one specific demographic like teacher education (Commodore et al., 2018). Haley and Jackie experienced hypervisibility in classroom spaces and isolation in campus community spaces. Isolation and hypervisibility contribute to the marginalization of Black college women (Newton, 2022). The marginalization of these Black college women erased their identity and their humanity. Hypervisibility contributed to stereotype threat, therefore the participants were not able to be their true authentic selves, erasing their true identities.

Participants felt isolated in predominately white spaces on campus but also felt isolation amongst their Black peers. Haley and Sara described intracultural differences, highlighted by their isolation from their Black collegian women peers.

Haley: "I've grown up really, only around black people like, since I was little, and both of my parents, we constantly have race talks growing up. And then, like all my best friends, you know, they're black, and they go to HBCU's. And then a lot of the black people that I do meet, they have only been socialized like white people. I still get along with everybody, but at the same time

it's not like, I completely click with people in a way, because it's like , there's certain things,

culturally, that I grew up in that, like certain things happen, and my reaction to it is completely

different to like white people per se, or even like a lot of black people I've met who grew up

around white people. I'm not happy, but I appreciate the fact that Um, it's like reality almost"

[Reality of how the world is] (SC1 transcript, p. 26-28).

Sara: "HBCU was everything. We had all different colors, I always joke and say, like, there's

something in the water at [SBU], because it's just like , even like for the women at [SBU]. It's

like I haven't made a new black friend at [SBU] since my freshman year, and like I don't

understand, like I don't understand. These girls maybe they like, they're different than me like

they're black, but like they're like , not the type of black people I grew up with" (SC1 transcript,

p. 45-47).

Haley and Sara spoke of their experiences growing up in Black spaces. Haley described

how all her life experiences have been within the Black community. Haley's first experience in

an predominately white space was when she came to SBU. Haley described how she was not

able to relate or connect to her Black peers within a white community. Sara drew from her

experiences attending an HBCU institution before attending SBU. Both young women described

that even the Black people within the white environment were different, describing their fellow

Black peers as "socialized like white people." Haley and Sara experienced a culture shift as they

came to a predominately white environment from a predominately Black one. Therefore,

isolation for these Black women was not only about being the 'only one' but also feelings of

isolation from their Black peers, who they perceived to be part of the 'white culture' and not part

of Black culture. This data revealed that there is a more nuanced understanding of differences

within the Black community. There are different comfort levels within different contexts,

highlighted here as time spent in a predominately white community versus a predominately Black community.

For some in our sista circle, they grew up in 'white spaces' and were able to navigate the PWI environment. However, these women also struggled with isolation from their Black women peers on campus. These women described their experience with racial microaggressions from their Black women peers:

Jackie: " I've also struggled with the way I talk, I've always gotten that I talk white. Being teased about talking white and being good at and having an interest in English… I gravitated towards white people" (SC1 transcript, p. 11).

Jackie described her experience of growing up in predominately white communities and attendance at predominately white educational institutions. Jackie's interactions with her Black woman peers in these environments resulted in attacks on her self-expression through language and on her educational interests that were perceived to be 'white'. Given the microagressive behavior towards Jackie by her Black peers, Jackie became disengaged from building relationships with Black women and instead built relationships and community with white peers. Ally described a similar experience:

Ally: "Like probably Junior High, when I first started recognizing that apparently, I don't fit the mold of a black person. You know, black people listen to rap music, and they dress a certain way, and they talk a certain way, supposedly. But you know I was listening to pop music, and I was wearing colored, skinny jeans and I was literally called like a double stuffed Oreo. Then when I got to college, you know it was a whole, another just you know, pool and group of students that are, you know, the real black people. I guess you can say [I was] trying to figure out how to fit in with them. And then, you know, you have this whole added layer and complexity

70

of sororities. And you know, if you're not trying to be in a sorority, or if you don't get in one like

for me personally, that just meant, I wasn't, I guess, black enough" (SC1 transcript, p. 16-17).

Ally described how her sense of belonging and acceptance of her own identity were

affected by the intracultural differences of Black women who were different than her. Our sista

circle conversations revealed three distinct intracultural differences between Black college

women. The first is Black women who were socialized within predominately white

environments, second Black women who were socialized within predominately Black

environments, and Black women socialized in either environment, but were socialized by their

participation in an historically Black National Panhellenic Council (NPHC) sorority

organization. Ally experienced isolation from Black women peers who were socialized in

predominately Black environments and Black women who participated in NPHC sorority

organizations. Participant Z also expressed how she was microaggressed by her Black women

peers, she stated:

Z: "I was told I was raised pretty much as a white person. I've been told I act white, even though

I don't understand why" (SC1 transcript, p. 31).

These young Black women experienced racial microaggressions from their own Black

peers. These young women were judged on aspects of their identity and were denied their claim

to 'Blackness.' Black persons in predominately white spaces on or off-campus questioned the

Black identity of these young ladies. Therefore, although these Black women learned to navigate

predominately white spaces and communities, they still struggled with understanding who they

were and struggled to demonstrate their agency in white and Black spaces. Erasure for these

young Black women showed up as isolation within the white and Black community. Although

the young Black women in our circle were socialized in different environments, predominately

Black, or predominately white, still none of the ladies in the circle felt that they could relate to, build relationships with, or find community with their Black women peers on campus. These women experienced erasure through isolation and hypervisibility of being the 'only one', and intracultural differences based on previous cultural and societal experiences, specifically, alienation from ownership of Blackness and Black culture.

Performance. Societal images and contexts portray Black women as other, pinning the responsibility of 'failed' gender performances on Black women (Kelly et al., 2021, Wilkins, 2012, Collins 1990). For college students' performance manifests as identity performance influenced by their peers and the collegiate environment. The findings highlighted performance as academic performance, campus engagement or disengagement and performativity.

Campus Engagement. Ally explained her high level of involvement and illustrated how engagement defined her college experience in her College Journey Profile (See Figure 4.2). Ally explained *"My why was being successful which meant making a lot of other people happy. When I hopped into college like I said, I'm still trying to perform successfully, because I feel like that's the only thing I can control. But you know, like, I said, ultimately recognize that I was doing everything to please other people, including what connotation I was giving off as a person in general.., especially as a black person"* (SC1 transcript, p. 16-18).

Ally described her involvement on campus, or her engagement in various campus activities and leadership roles as 'performing'.

"You know, trying to play the act and be the actor. So, for me, you know, being in all these roles over my college experience was, I didn't realize that, but it really was to find my purpose to, you know to learn to navigate. Okay, kind of like I mentioned during the last call, like I was very driven by success because I just felt like That's what my family expected of me. That's what was

right. So, like I said being involved was, my way of trying to figure things out? Okay, like, you know, is this something that's gonna help move me into the person that I am today? Um, but also, I learned a lot about myself" (SC2 transcript, p. 47-48).

Ally believed that success at college meant that she needed to be engaged inside and outside of the classroom. Therefore, she focused on her grades and focused on joining student organizations and obtaining leadership roles within those organizations. Her motivation to engage was driven by her desire to please others, such as her parents, her peers, and university staff. Ally's engagement was a performance, she was playing the role of successful business major and successful student leader. Ally's performance became the gateway to her pursuit of a sense of belonging. Therefore, Ally created her identity around performance, specifically based on the expectations of others. Ally struggled with knowing who she really was during her college journey, because she was consumed with who she thought she needed to be. Ally's performance informed her relationship with agency. In sister circle #2, Ally defined agency as the *"overall effect that I had as a student at [SBU] including academically, socially and culturally."* Ally only saw her agency as how her actions affected her peers, her campus environment, and her grades. During her college journey, performance was emotional labor, a burden that she had to bear; All her actions were not for her own agency but for the agency of others. For her college journey profile, Ally chose to complete a collage of her collegial experiences. Ally's artifact (Figure 4.2) highlighted the many student organizations she was a part of, her leadership roles, academic accomplishments like the President's award, and membership in honor societies. The artifact also showcased her internships and job opportunities as well as how societal events like COVID 19, election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States and taking classes on Zoom impacted her collegial experiences. During our second sista circle meeting, Ally

shared her college journey profile artifact with the group. While sharing, Ally described her performativity as a mask that she wore to hide her insecurities, to live up to expectations of what she believed a successful college student looked like, and to connect and find community. However, Ally found that her performativity became a heavy burden. Ally shared that she began having suicidal thoughts from all the stress to perform. On her collage, Ally included the Counseling and Psychological Services office and described that getting the help she needed was one of the best things she did for herself. Ally's action of seeking professional help was her first step in advocating for her own agency. Ally was able to acknowledge and confront her performativity and began to know her true self. Ally went on to describe that her performance extended into her internship and career choice. On the collage is the ALDI symbol, Ally described that she took an internship with ALDI and when she graduated, she took a management position with the company. Ally explained that she accepted the positions because she believed her career path in Management was what she was supposed to do. After working as a manager for one year, Ally realized that she did not have a passion for the work she was doing. At the time of this study Ally was working as an Academic Advisor at SBU, helping business majors find their sense of belonging, a position that is aligned with Ally's true character.

Figure 4.2 Ally's College Journey Profile

Note: Profile was edited to remove identifiable information of the participant or other associated persons.

Jackie had a different perspective on her engagement on campus. Jackie said : *"One of the things that really grounded me and found my sense of purpose and home and community was AKPsi, Business co-ed Frat" (SC 1 transcript, p. 15).* Jackie found purpose and friendships through her campus involvement which allowed her to begin to shape her identity. For Jackie, engagement provided a sense of belonging and community and was not a performative behavior as with Ally. Although Jackie did explain the friendships from her involvement were with mostly white friends. Jackie's white friends became her allies (SC 2). She described that she was able to

have meaningful conversations and friendships in white spaces that allowed her to explore her own identity. Jackie said of her closest white male friend, *" We were able to have those open, honest conversations late at night in his car. It was just, It was really cool, but he was just one of the most open, able to meet everybody. And honestly, he was a reason like I was able to branch out and have my own black friends without him, and, you know, do my own thing. So it was really cool, and he's my best friend to this day"* (SC 2 Transcript, p. 17).

In contrast to Ally and Jackie, Carrie described how her engagement became disengagement because she felt she could not find her community. She explained *"I feel like I was always searching on SBU's campus a lot of the time like trying to like, you know, just search for that true sense of community. But it was always just so hard for me to find. You kind of get to a point where you don't want to keep looking for, you know, because you just ultimately feel like you're just always searching for something that you're never gonna get. And um. So ultimately that was kind of like my tap out"* (SC transcript, p. 7-8).

Carrie did all the right things, she joined several organizations, including a university leadership program and the Black student union, she attended university sponsored events, yet, she was never able to find a community of Black women. She did find one Black woman peer that she became close with. However, she never made the connections she needed to form a support system of women who looked like her. Carrie became detached from collegial engagement. She ended her memberships in student organizations, and she stopped trying to find her community. Instead, she formed her own support system with her one Black woman friend, her Black partner, who became the father of her child, and her biological Black sister, who attended an HBCU institution nearby. Carrie's performativity was disengagement, which led to behaviors that aligned with expectations.

Performativity. For Carrie and also Z, performativity was working towards meeting expectations of family members.

Z: *"Because I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up. So I've always been told you're going to be an engineer, a lot of playing with Legos and stuff and putting stuff together. You're going to be an engineer. You're doing engineering. She [my grandmother] wanted me to be something up there like doctor, lawyer, engineer, something high paying"* (SC1 transcript, p. 31-32). Participant Z spoke about the expectation from her grandmother to not only go to college, but also to earn a degree that would lead to a career that would create generational wealth. Z entered SBU and declared mechanical engineering as her major and at the time of our sista circle conversations she was still pursuing an engineering degree. Z chose her degree program and her career path expressly to meet familial expectations. Z further described that her family viewed their expectations as support but for Z it was pressure instead. She explained, "I *know they mean well, they're trying to be supportive, but it's just so much. It turns into a negative. They don't understand what this is like, and they still see it as support"* (SC 3 transcript, p. 29). Familial expectations were the foundation for Z's performativity in college. She was engaged in a specific major based on the expectations of others, therefore she demonstrated agency for others and not for herself. Carrie also shared her familial expectations:

Carrie: *"My parents gonna kick my ass if I don't graduate like I got to finish school, so I that's next on my plate "* (SC1 transcript, p. 20) Carrie acknowledged the expectations from her family to graduate. Carrie shared in a sista circle that getting pregnant in her junior year was an obstacle she had to face, but that she knew that graduation was still an expectation from her family. Therefore, performativity for Carrie was based on achieving the goal of graduation, not just for herself but for others, her family.

Z and Carrie experienced emotional labor with the pressure from their families to perform, to ultimately be successful. Both ladies experienced pressure from their family to meet an expectation of doing well and graduating from college. Although familial support is usually a positive aspect of collegial life, for these ladies' familial expectations and concerns was not support but emotional labor instead.

The final aspect of performance discussed in our sista circle conversation was the idea of code- switching. The idea of behaving differently in specific contexts or environments has been referred to as living 'double lives' or 'shifting', enacting behaviors to protect one's true identity (Spates et al., 2020, Brown et al., 2017). This phenomenon can also be referred to as code switching (Kendall, 2020, Myers 2020). The participants described their various experiences with code switching:

Sara: **"***You know, every day the way I talk. I can't, you know, talk like that in every situation with anybody. You know grammar has to be changed. Can't say any type of words and stuff like that. So I definitely code switch when it comes to school. Um just discussing with certain people like my professors. My day job at [the university] like I definitely code switch there, too. Code switching becomes emotional labor when you go overboard. Overboard, like you're changing your whole idea of yourself, which isn't good. You know you should always be yourself. You can, of course, talk a little bit different, but just for like completely like changing yourself, just to look and present yourself in a different manner in front of people. [At the HBCU] " It was easier just to like talk normally, and not the pressure of like having to change your voice and your grammar. It's okay to have like slang"* [at the HBCU] (SC3 transcript, p. 21-22).

Sara engaged with performativity in her description of how she used language on SU's campus. Sara acknowledged that she did not have to adjust her language or behavior in her

experiences at the HBCU institution. It was interesting that Sara did not see her adjustment of language, her codeswitching as performativity and rejected the fact that this action was emotional labor unless you changed who you are. However, the action of codeswitching is 'performing', adjusting to a situation or population, and not showing up as your authentic self. It was interesting that codeswitching came so natural and easy within predominately white spaces for these Black college women. Codeswitching is a performance that is stifling the authenticity of the identity of Black college women. Jackie shared her experience with codeswitching and how it started in her family home:

Jackie: "And then also just growing up, as you know, seeing my mom, she's from Louisiana, you know. Um, that's just a whole nother story. But as soon as she picks up the phone to talk to, you know a doctor's office or something complete code switch, or like her voice mail, or you know that's just how it was. So that's just how I thought it had to be when you had to be professional when you're talking to someone older than you. I never thought of it as emotional labor. Now that I'm in the workforce, I'm working with people. It is like having a fake laugh, or ,you know, just doing all that kind of stuff. It does get tiring, you know" (SC 3 transcript p. 25).

For Jackie, code-switching was a learned behavior from her home environment and became a social norm as she transitioned to collegial life. In her working life, Jackie acknowledged how codeswitching became emotional labor.

      Coping Mechanisms. The final aspect of emotional labor identified in this study were coping mechanisms. Black college women used self-reflection to evaluate facts, beliefs, and emotions to construct a conclusion about their mental health. The coping behaviors used by Black women outside of seeking professional help are informal support in the community, religious

coping, self-help, positive attitude, denial or avoidance (Ward et. al, 2009). The participants in this study identified two specific coping mechanisms, Drugs (prescribed and illegal), and Self -care.

Drugs. Participants discussed use of prescribed medication for anxiety and depression as well as use of alcohol and recreational marijuana. Participants described their experiences:

Jackie: "I deal with a lot of depression and anxiety, and that's one of the reasons also why I kind of sheltered myself , and needed to find my circles. The only way I could go out is if I drank, or you know. So it [anxiety] just started to build up and to the point where my sophomore year, anxiety just came over me. So I started seeing a therapist. Hard to find a Black therapist so its been harder to connect. While here I started medication, and had a horrible doctor. He had me on like ten different medications, a horrible experience "(SC 2 transcript, p. 20).
" I was introduced to weed here, and it got me through a lot. Me and my friend,we kind of became potheads. If you want to say around campus. If you needed it, we had it. It [marijuana]was a saving grace" (SC 2 transcript, p. 22).
Carrie: "After multiple breakdowns like and crying like being in that moment of just like I feel shitty. But what am I going to do about it, you know, like? But what am I going to do to take myself up because all I need is to like; Sometimes all you need is to just sit there like, okay, I realize I'm not my best right now, like I am in the dirt right now. But what am I going to do to like… I can relate to Jackie, The plant [marijuana] is nothing but a plant, and it was my saving grace for my breakdown in two thousand and eighteen like I will just be real with you" (SC 2 transcript, p. 44).

Jackie and Carrie described using drugs in a variety of forms to cope with anxiety, depression, and just the basic challenges faced as a Black college woman. For these young women, drugs were how they were coping at the lowest points of their collegiate experience.

Instead of finding support from family, friends or a community, these women looked for alternatives to cope in their environment. Using drugs as an alternative is one example of how these young women created their own support systems and strategies to confront challenges they faced.

   Self care. The next most salient coping mechanism identified was self- care. Participants used different methods to exhibit self-care. For some self -care meant guarding their mental health and for others self-care was finding ways to work through challenges. The women shared their experiences with self-care:

Ally: "I went to the counseling services for a while, because I mean, I started having these like really crazy thoughts like you know, things would be a lot easier like if I just wasn't here like, you know. I was like hold up like, let me, just take a step back real quick, and you know, actually, if I can't talk to my parents then we talk to somebody. So you know I utilized that [counseling services] during my collegiate experience, which you know, I just have to recognize that was normal. You know there was nothing really wrong with me. It was just you know this was kind of like you mentioned Carrie, just like a face of adversity that I had to go through, and i'm glad I've reached out to those resources on campus" (SC 2 transcript, p. 49)

   Ally shared with the group that her self-care began with protecting her mental health. She needed help and she reached out for help with counseling services. She mentioned in our circle that she was not afraid to ask for help because the stigma surrounding mental health has changed. Ally was able to care for herself and get the help that she needed. Ally also shares how she uses alone time as self-care: *Ally: "Like Carrie was saying, like alone time. Um, actually, as I've gotten older, I've become more and more introverted. So I personally just enjoy,you know,thinking of doing things by myself. Uh, but once again just kind of circling back to what I*

was saying in the first. What is my Why, like really, literally, all my life I've been driven by what

I think other people would want me to do, or constantly feeling like I have to do something so

just really stopping and just reflecting like.Why,I'm Unhappy.How I got to that point, and then,

usually taking that alone time to do something that I want to do, whether it's sitting there and

doing nothing, or getting my nails done, or going and reading a book" (SC 1 transcript, p. 37).

Ally's performativity, through engagement in several student organizations and events and doing

everything for others was making her unhappy. In addition to protecting her mental health, Ally

needed to find a way to care for herself and restore her joy. So, another piece of her self-care was

to use her agency to do something for herself and not for others. She began to take time to be

alone or do something that was only for her. Carrie also reflected on self-care as alone time.

Carrie: " For me, alone time. It really makes me so good, which you can imagine. It's kind of

hard being like a mom and everything. I try to do as much as I can to get that alone time. I just

recently like, got a book, because I remembered way back when , when I knew myself, one of

those things used to be reading for me like just getting lost in a different reality if it was reading

or watching shows, or a movie or something like that" (SC 1 transcript, p. 35).

Carrie faced the challenge of being a mother while pursuing her education. Motherhood

does not leave much room for self -care. Although, it was challenging for Carrie to find the time,

she realized the importance of spending time with herself. Carrie needed her alone time and used

it as a restorative practice. In contrast, Haley focused her self-care on cultivating relationships:

Haley: "For me, I would say, talking to my mom really helps me out a lot. Yeah, talking to my

mom, and then sometimes my mom's not available, or when I try to be a bit more independent.

Um, I try to like journal out how I feel" (SC 1 transcript, p. 37).

Self-care for Haley was about making a connection with her mom and with herself. For Haley the relationship with her mom was restorative and when her mom was unavailable, she connected with self-reflection and inner dialogue through journaling. Haley was the only participant in our circle who mentioned a connection with familial support. Additionally, Sara described her connection with self-care as cultivated a relationship with herself and friends.

Sara: "Um, I would say for myself. Um, pampering myself would definitely be something that makes me feel better like any time I get my hair done; feel totally different, no matter what it is. Um, also like cooking, And then, of course, like just having a good time with friends is going out trying forget about it, you know" (SC 1 transcript, p. 37).

Sara described different ways to spend time with herself. But also, Sara was the first participant to mention relationships with friends as a mechanism for support and self-care. Unlike her peers Sara was able to cultivate meaningful friendships during her time at the HBCU institution and although limited, also able to develop meaningful relationships at SU. Sara and Haley reinforced that there was an importance in cultivating relationships with others as a support and reinforcement of self-care. Z presented a different way of caring for herself.

Z: "Whenever I'm upset I go and get a snack or something" (SC 1 transcript, p. 37)

In our sista circles Z discussed how familial support was a burden for her, so it makes sense that she would not find cultivating relationships as a form of self-care. Instead, Z used food as her comfort and her relationship with food is how she created a way to cope.

All these women engaged with self-care in a variety of ways, but what they all shared was each of them used self-care strategies to cope. Ultimately, these young Black women were creating their own individualized system of support to navigate their collegial journey.

Participants' relationship to agency through emotional labor was exhibited in three ways: erasure, performance, and coping mechanisms. These young Black women experienced erasure through isolation, often being the only one in white spaces. They also experienced erasure through the denial of their 'Blackness' by their Black college women peers. Performance for these young women manifested in engagement or disengagement with campus activities and campus life. Engagement was a means to connect and form relationships and community. Disengagement further perpetuated isolation but also fostered independence. Additionally, these young women 'performed' based upon expectations of others and also participated in code-switching to assimilate inside the white space. These women described their coping mechanisms when facing challenges, drugs whether prescribed medication, recreational marijuana, or alcohol. The final coping mechanism, self care, took the form of seeking counseling and therapy or participating in a self-care activity, time with family or friends, journaling, or pampering.

Resistance

The next component in their relationship to agency is how these Black college women engaged with resistance. Resistance means disrupting normative ways of knowing and forms of oppression by using disruptive ways to challenge the status quo. This means challenging the perceived norm of who should be in a space, what they should look like, and what they should wear (Pennant, 2021). I asked participants what they first thought when I said the word 'resistance.' The responses included "Something I am not willing to do", "The will to push forward", "Fighting back", and "Choosing not to push forward." I was intrigued by the last response, choosing not to push forward and I asked for clarification.

SM(Researcher): "What do you mean by not pushing forward Sara?"

Sara: " I guess just letting things be the way they are."

This response made me evaluate the definition of resistance. Instead of looking at resistance as fighting back, Sara presented the idea of not fighting back at all, just keeping with the status quo. If these young Black women do not fight back, instead they just stick with the status quo, was it complacency or taking a break from daily emotional labor? Is complacency really a form of resistance? The conversation went forward as I posed a question to the group:

SM(Researcher): *"In this space, in the [SBU] space on campus, whether you're in a classroom or you're in an office, Do you feel like just your presence, your existence in that space is resistance?*

Sara: "I think so in a way like maybe [our existence, as young Black women] is resistance to some people's idea of what campus should look like. Their idea of how the culture should be on campus" (SC 3).

Sara described being in classes on ZOOM during the COVID shut down which was her first semester at SBU. She described that she was often the only Black and woman in those spaces and that the culture of SBU was very evident when seeing inside student homes, specifically bedrooms. Therefore, just her existence as a Black woman in a virtual space with offensive paraphernalia in the background was her form of resistance. *" Seeing some of these people's rooms, and stuff was like, Oh, this is crazy. I cannot believe this is where I go to school now. So, I was like, yeah, like the flags everywhere like it was like every single um class I had."* (SC 3 transcript, p. 37). Our sista circle explored the idea that resistance can be showing up in spaces as your authentic self.

Generally, the young women had never really thought about their mere existence in these spaces as a form of resistance. I continued the conversation by offering my thoughts:

SM (Researcher): "*I believe that you all just being in these spaces, is a form of resistance. Because if you weren't there, no one would have to think about you right. No one would have to think about difference, right? They would never have to think outside the box or be outside of their own comfort zone right, because we're always outside of our comfort zone. Ninety- nine percent of the time we're outside of our comfort zone. But are other people outside of their comfort zone? Probably, not until you walk into the room. So, I hope that you will think of it [your existence] about this in a way of it [your existence] being empowering to you. It's easy for us to look around and be like Oh, it's just me again. I'm the only one again. I'm the only woman, or I'm the only black or both. I'm the only woman, and the only black in this whole room. Its very easy to feel down about that, and feel lonely and feel not supported. And it does suck. I'm not negating that at all. But I also hope that you can see it on the flip side and see it as your form of resistance. See it as your stand. Yes, a black woman can be an engineer. Yes, a black woman can be here and be different, and look different, and speak different, and An engineer can look like this right because everyone has in their mind; Oh, this is what an engineer looks like, or this is what a teacher looks like, or this is what an Xyz looks like. And, Sara, you're saying, Well, no, actually an engineer can look like me. So I hope that when you ladies are going through this emotional labor and you are in these spaces, and it is hard and is challenging, and you are the only one, that you see i'm paving the way, and i'm making others around me see difference and be out of their own comfort zones. I know for me my faith is part of my resistance, right When things are challenging, Things are going down on me like there's so much emotional labor going on. So if you can find mentors, or you can find those social groups, or you can lean on your faith, or you can find that community in any way that you can. All of those are your forms of resistance, right? All of that helps you to continue to move forward, to beat down these*

challenges, and to have your agency to take action, to make sure that your voice is heard" (SC 3

transcript p. 39-43). I watched each young woman in the group as I spoke, they all were quiet

and pensive and seemed to really be accepting my words. After I finished speaking, we sat in

silence for a moment or two before moving on to our discussion on empowerment. In that

moment, I hoped that I had offered some comfort.

Empowerment

Empowerment begins with embracing and celebrating identity. Embracing identity is a

means for survival for Black college women (Pennant, 2021). I asked each participant to give

their individual definition of empowerment. As a group we listed everyone's definition in the

chat feature of our virtual Zoom room. As a group we looked at each individual definition and

crafted a group definition. We collectively defined empowerment as "Being the best version of

yourself" (SC 3 transcript, p. 45). After the creation of our group definition, each participant

shared personal stories of what makes each of them feel empowered.

Raising your voice. Sara described how she felt empowered to use her voice in one of

her classrooms. Sara stated that her professor made a comment that seemed to imply that

colonialism was acceptable. Sara stated: "*The people that were taken over would still respect*

them [their colonizers], regardless of being conquered. And you [the professor] try to compare

that to Abraham Lincoln trying to end slavery? I was like he did not just say that.. And I said,

how would you compare that? I said. First of all, let's be real. The end of slavery is about money

like that's where you went wrong. They didn't really care about the people. I just went all the

way in. He was like maybe we could talk about this in my office one day, You got it, though I just

had to let you know you should not use that analogy ever again" (SC3 transcript p. 45). As a

group we rallied around Sara and let her know we were all proud of her for using her voice when

she felt that she really needed to. Sara used her agency in this moment to use her voice and be an advocate for her own thoughts and ideas.

Community of Blackness. Our discussion on empowerment continued and we discussed the significance of feeling empowered in Black culture and feeling empowered when confronting and accepting vulnerability. Sara and Jackie described how surrounding themselves with Black culture helped them to feel empowered:

Sara: "My second job is at a bar. It's like a Black bar, so it's like It's kind of a decompressing. I can be myself. Don't have to worry about how I talk. That's like a decompress like just being around a whole lot of Black folks" (SC 3 transcript, p. 28)

Sara who was raised in a predominately Black community and who attended an HBCU institution, was comfortable around a community of Black persons. Sara found a space, her second job, which was minutes from SU's campus to be connected to Black culture. Sara was able to be authentically herself in this space. Jackie also described how she was empowered to be authentically herself:

Jackie: "I would like always listen to rap music, it helped me to get my mind right. Especially, when I pull up to work, listening to rap before I went in always helped me" (SC 3 transcript, p. 28).

Jackie connected to Black culture by listening to rap music before work. This small amount of time to connect to something meaningful to her, empowered her to be ready to face her workday. The reflections from Sara and Jackie continued to highlight the significance of community for sense of belonging and well-being for these Black women. When surrounded by Black persons, or Black culture, these women feel empowered and supported.

Vulnerability. Carrie shared how acknowledging her vulnerability helped her to feel empowered:

" *Nobody knew that I had depression. I told my mom like I had to tell her, and it was a big moment. But at the end of the day, like there is power in weakness, in recognizing and acknowledging your weakness. Getting through the turmoil is what is keeping you rising. Power within that keeps you going. Knowing you must keep going, you must survive" (SC 2 transcript, p.44).* Carrie's statement during our second sista circle was so powerful and continued to resonate through our future group conversations. Vulnerability, specifically the acceptance of failure empowered these Black collegial women to be fearlessly authentic and aided in their survival at a predominately white institution.

The relationship between agency and these young Black women was examined using the foundation for the conceptualization of agency, through emotional labor, resistance, and empowerment. These women shared their college experiences present and past to express their relationship with agency. These women experienced emotional labor through erasure, performance, and use of coping mechanisms. These women felt isolation as they were often the 'only one'. They also felt isolation among their Black women peers who microagressed them and put their 'Blackness' into question. These women managed erasure and worked through daily challenges through performance and coping mechanisms. Participants expressed their levels of engagement and disengagement with campus life as well as their need to live up to the expectations of others. Finally, code-switching was a daily practice to navigate at their PWI, whether in a white space or a black space on campus. Participants described the use of drugs, prescribed and recreational, along with participation in activities they enjoyed along with counseling or therapy to help them cope, navigate and survive. Participants defined resistance as

fighting back, using what they could to keep going. However, sometimes basic survival meant not fighting back, instead sticking with the status quo, trying to assimilate and just fit in. We also explored existence and how existence can be a form of resistance, just being authentically present in spaces on campus. This concept seemed to be a new idea for participants, but one that they seemed to appreciate and grab on to. The final component of Black college women's relationship with agency was empowerment. Collectively defined by these Black women, empowerment was 'Being the best version of yourself', discovered through acknowledgement and acceptance of vulnerability and the comfort of Black culture.

Section Two: Intentional Agency

How are Black College Women Intentionally Agentic?

Here I applied the conceptualization of agency to explore how these young Black college women were intentionally agentic. The intentionality of agency for these women was examined through their college experience of individual agency, collective agency, and their interactions with self-reflection and inner dialogue. The sista circle conversations allowed all of us to examine what it meant to act and be seen as an actor. Ultimately, the findings provided evidence that Black college women are intentionally agentic by (1) Discovering who they are, (2) Showing up as their authentic self and (3) cultivating meaningful relationships.

Individual Agency

As we explored individual agency in our sista circle conversations we focused on self-expression, self-efficacy, and self-advocacy. We began our discussion examining self-expression. Generally, the young women had not put much thought into how their own self-expression could be a means to be intentional with their agency. Many of the participants expressed that they simply assimilated to the SU culture, especially concerning the dress code.

Others stated that they just did their own thing regardless of the SU culture. A few shared their thoughts:

Jackie: " I always straightened my hair in high school and relaxed it and stuff. But after freshman year I was like with the humidity I was like there's no way I can do that. So, I just went natural. Um, I didn't really care what people thought. And then one of my home girls. she was uh she was really into hair and started doing hair. So, then I started wearing wigs, So that was really cool. I really didn't care what others thought. When I came here and saw people dressing, with like Nike Shorts and T-shirts all the time, I never saw that before, I was like, bet, I was like I don't have to try. I assimilated to the clothing, that is probably why Black men didn't approach me a lot "(SC 3 transcript, p. 48-52).

Jackie created her own style and expressed herself with her hair and clothing in ways that made her comfortable. She was willing to assimilate to the dress code of SU because she liked the style and felt it would be comfortable for her. It was evident that even with her self-expression, Jackie felt alienated and detached from her Black peers. She made the comment that because she wore the same clothing as her white counterparts that, she may have not been attractive to Black males. Jackie was a young Black woman embracing her self-expression and doing what works best for her and still she felt marginalized by what was perceived to be normative for Black culture.

Ally: "If I was intentionally expressing anything, it was that I really cared about making an A in that class, because I was just always asking questions. So, I mean other than that yeah, I would wear the Nike shorts and the T-shirts, and I don't really care like you said when I got to campus. You know, all through high school, they tell you that you're gonna have to wear certain things,

and the dress code is preparing you for college. But nobody cares what you wear in college" (SC

3 transcript, p. 48-52).

Ally also expressed that with dress code, she wore what made her comfortable. Ally was

not concerned with self-expression; she was more concerned about her grades. However, the way

that she described dress at SU, it seemed that she felt some relief and freedom in not having to

think about how to 'perform' with her self-expression. In contrast, Sara described a comparison

between her self-expression at the HBCU she attended versus her experience at SU.

Sara: "So I guess like coming from HBCU first, like we used to dress all the way up.-all the time

especially on Fridays. Coming here felt awkward wearing real clothes. I used to care, don't

anymore. I would never want to like, do nothing crazy to my hair or anything like that. But now

I don't even care, So my hair colors, all different types of hair…. At first I was nervous to switch

it, But now I don't care, like I'll switch it every few weeks, and I really like it. It is what it is, you

know" (SC 3 transcript, p. 48-52).

Sara's experience at the HBCU she attended clearly set some expectations for self-

expression within the cultural norms of a predominately Black environment. Sara acknowledged

that coming to SU was a transition and she was not sure whether she should stick with the hair

and dress that she was accustomed to. Although Sara described that eventually she took

ownership of her self-expression and did what made her comfortable. In contrast, Z described

how she struggled with her self-expression at SU.

Z: "I had a hard time, you know. I wore the same type of uniform since probably elementary

school, and that's what I wore you know when I got here, and it's been hard to wear anything

other than that. I'm trying to change a little bit, because now, before, what was the requirement

is no longer there, so I'm trying to look at myself more differently than what I see and find out my true style" (SC 3 transcript, p. 48-52).

Z's self-expression was directly linked to her exploration of her identity. As Z explored her first year at SBU, she experimented with what her self-expression would be and how she would fit into the culture of SBU. Z found herself in an educational environment which was different than the ones she grew up in and developed in, therefore Z had to rediscover who she was and how she chose to share who she was at SBU.

There was a clear connection between self-expression, sense of belonging, and identity. Although, these young women did not realize it, their style or assimilation to the style culture around them impacts how they navigate the campus environment. For example, Ally quipped that the only style she was concerned with was her success, which further enhanced her focus on engagement as a student leader and as an academically successful student. In contrast, Sara struggled to adjust to the cultural norms of self-expression at the PWI versus her experiences at the HBCU. However, her adjustment became encouragement and confidence to find and embrace her own self-expression.

Our conversation continued with self-efficacy and self-advocacy. We discussed how a belief in self, motivation to move forward, and making your voice heard manifests in each of their college journeys. Here are some thoughts that were shared:

Jackie: *"l learned more about resiliency, and you know, being able to get through work, while things are going wrong . Even to this day, I think, what I went through has prepared me, I can go through anything now because of what I went through at college, so that resiliency. That was one of the words that really resonated with me. Um, I think that's something I really learned in college. I think uh college is more about life more than anything" (SC 2 transcript, p. 35).*

College taught Jackie about her self-efficacy. She gained confidence in her ability to meet challenges and continue to rise. Jackie was able to use what she learned in times of adversity and apply skills of resiliency and agency to her life after college.

Carrie: "*I don't give myself grace at all, you know, take on, you know, not giving yourself grace, and you know, just not thinking like you're capable of like really pushing through. But, like all at the same time. You don't realize, you're doing it like you could be freaking out Da da da! But at the end of the day you're still doing it, and for me, like with my college experience, that whole pressure of like, you have to be strong twenty-four, seven, and all of that stuff like I found my strength at the end of the day. Going against the grain of like continuing to push when so many people are kind of like trying to hold you back, because I feel like Mrs. M (Mrs. Morawo), was the only person in my corner when I was pregnant, and I told her like, no, I want to finish this (degree). All my teachers, they're like I think that's too much for you. I think you should sit out. I think you should do this, so it was hard and literally only Mrs. M was like after I told her like, No, like I have to finish this, I am gonna do it. She was like, Okay, you're gonna do it, and she stuck by me and I finished it (bachelors degree at SBU) (SC 2 transcript, p. 42).*

Carrie was able to recognize her self-efficacy through her challenge of working to finish school while pregnant and becoming a mother. She was able to use the belief that she had in herself to stay motivated to finish her degree. She also exhibited self-advocacy, as she used all of her resources, academic advising, tutoring, and time-management to accomplish her goal.

Jackie and Carrie expressed their development of self-efficacy by staying strong in the face of adversity. When things were going wrong and were tough is when these women learned the most about themselves and their own capabilities. Jackie spoke about resiliency and for her, college was about learning life lessons. Carrie described her specific challenge of navigating

pregnancy and becoming a parent between her sophomore and junior years. As individuals, these young Black women demonstrated agency by facing their challenges and mistakes, learning from them and continuing to move forward. Our sista circles continued to reveal that these women knew they would face challenges and failures. Each young woman acknowledged their challenges and failures and were never afraid of failure. Through every challenge, through every setback, these young Black women were always fearless. As we continued to get deeper into conversation, Sara and Jackie shared what self -advocacy looked like for them:

Jackie: " And uh, even with significant others, you know I get very emotional. I don't want to upset people, so that's kind of like a trigger for me. Again, something that I am working on. But yeah, I think I advocate more for others than myself" (SC 3 transcript, p. 33).

Jackie described self-advocacy as a burden, something that she described as triggering and so she focused more on others than herself. Sara's experience was a little different. She said:

Sara: "I used to just like to sit back and just let anything happen. It's like, Well, it is what it is gonna roll with the punches. But now I'm kinda more like no, that's wrong. I'm not listening to that, or something that I always had an issue with, you know. I would just let it go, sweep it under the rug. Now, I'm more able to speak up on how I feel about things " (SC 3 transcript, p. 34).

Sara described that she used to not advocate for herself but that she is now more comfortable with using her voice to advocate for herself. Overall, these women demonstrated their individual agency through assimilation, learning from their challenges and mistakes and working towards making their voices heard.

Our sista circle conversations revealed that these Black women were intentionally agentic more so collectively than as individuals. In our discussion we talked about creating safe spaces

and establishing social networks through participation, relationships, and mentorship. These three items come together to describe collective agency.

Collective Agency

The findings represent collective agency through participation and relationships. Participants described their level of campus engagement and the impact of meaningful relationships and how both factor into their intention of agency.

Participation. The levels of participation in campus activities and campus life varied among the young women in our circle. Some were very actively engaged in campus activities, namely Ally and Jackie, some were somewhat engaged, Sara, and others were disengaged for various reasons, Carrie, Haley, and Z. For Ally and Jackie as shared earlier in this chapter, engagement in various student organizations and activities had varied meanings for these two women. For Ally, she felt she was expected to participate, to 'perform' in campus life. She expressed that she was engaged more because of others rather than for herself. For Jackie, student engagement gave her a purpose and were the spaces where she found community with cultural allies. She was able to establish connections and relationships through her engagement. Sara came to SBU from an HBCU and chose to be involved in only student activities for her major, specifically a mentorship program for engineering majors. Carrie, Haley, and Z were disengaged with campus activities. Here they stated their experiences with disengagement:

Z: "So you weren't allowed to participate in sports clubs like that. She wanted us to focus on academics. My mother was like that. Also, she wanted us to mostly focus on academics. So, if we wanted to do sports if we weren't already good at it or had an interest in it, we basically got no support or were told no. So, any class, any club, that was the only thing I could participate in outside of the classroom. It had to deal with engineering or something that I can use in college,

and I always found it hard to, I guess, join in with anybody else and doing anything because I'd be lost pretty much from the start and I don't understand what they do. I started off at a predominantly white um private school, and up until third grade, and I wasn't around black people a lot, even my own family. I wasn't around them a lot, and then fourth and fifth grade, where I was, I guess, introduced to a majority Black School, and since then I've stayed in Black Schools, but just then I never really fit in. And I've always found it hard to be in either group [Black or white], so I'll just be on my own, on my own a lot, and it's been pretty easy, I guess now, because, as I'm here [SBU], I'm mostly alone" (SC 1 transcript, p. 30-33).

Haley: *"Since I was like little, and I did have to like be around white people. Um, I've always tried to keep an open mind to, or like um my perspective pretty wide, to like people from different backgrounds. So, I think that helps me out alot of meeting people and just trying to understand their viewpoint on a lot of things. Um. So, joining this [Sista Circle], I think My biggest reasoning was to meet other uh black women, and I'm glad that, like most of you are quite older. So, you've already been in the PWI environment, because I'm still trying to adjust. And it's not bad so far" (SC 1 transcript, p. 27).*

Carrie: *"I would have changed some things about my [SU] experience, especially when it came down to getting out, and all of those sorts of things, and just knowing how to maneuver out there, It'll definitely make a huge difference. I don't know where it happens along the line, but it really is like a huge disconnect with like resources and everything. Because if I knew that we had some of those resources, I definitely would have taken advantage of way more" (SC 1 transcript, p. 40/52).*

These women each expressed different reasons why they were not active on campus. Z described that she has never been very active in non-academic activities in her educational career

due to familial influences and needs to discover what it means to be involved. Z and Haley discussed their discomfort with the PWI space and learning to navigate a new environment stifled their engagement. Carrie discussed that she was not always sure on how to be engaged on campus or even aware of what was available to her. Therefore, the level of participation varied greatly among these young women. Participation is an important part of how these Black women demonstrated their agency. The differences in their engagement with activities and groups on campus had an impact on their experiences at the PWI. However, overall, the women in our sista circle seemed more concerned about relationships rather than participation.

Relationships. It was evident during our sista circle conversations that these women were wanting relationships with other Black women. All participants expressed a need to find their community and to have close relationships within that community of peers. Each young woman also expressed the difficulty in finding Black women peers to build relationships with. Here were some of the salient comments from our conversations:

Sara: *"It was I'm just like what is going on, even like the black women that we meet. They were. What's the word? Um I wouldn't say friendly, but the Black women that we meet, I kept getting stares like looking up and down at me. If I told them like about myself and stuff like that, it was always Oh, or I don't know it was a very weird interaction when I first came here, but then I found a firm group. I did um, but it took me a whole year to find them"* (SC 1 transcript, p. 29-30).

Sara had to adjust to the culture of SBU coming from an HBCU campus. Sara found it difficult to find Black women peers that she could build community with at SBU. Sara described the Black women on SBU's campus as not friendly and judgmental. She felt alienated from her Black women peers and it took her awhile before she found her friend group.

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Carrie: I really hung out with guys, before I hung out with girls; as women we will always have to deal with clicks.... especially as black women (SC 1 transcript, p. 24).

Carrie described her struggle to connect with Black women, referencing clicks. Carrie brought forth the idea that Black women in particular, form specific relationships with each other that often excludes others. During our sista circles Carrie discussed how there were different groups, the cheerleaders, the athletes, the sorority girls, the girlfriends of the athletes to name a few. Carrie described that everyone fit into a specific group and that if you did not fit, then you were an outsider, making it very hard to build relationships and find community with Black women peers. Carrie also mentioned that because of these specialized women groups or clicks that it was often just easier to be friends with men. Haley, described a different experience with Black men friends.

Haley: "Like some of you mentioned like, uh clicking with guys [instead of girls]. Even my grandma, like I was talking to my grandma and um She's like, you know, sometimes. Maybe you just need to have guy friends, but my experience so far is most black guys; They just don't want to be friends like I haven't had really friendly experiences per say with black guys, and also like when it comes to race. I don't think they um don't view it the same way that like black women, do like not all of them, of course, but most black guys in general that I meet they're just like they're Black, whatever like. There's not really something to think about, but me like every room I walk into the first thing I think about even before being woman is being Black" (SC 1 transcript, p. 27). "I've only been here two months, [Freshman student] but, like I came in with all like I'd already met a group of black girls, and they were cool. But because of architecture, my major, like you're required so much, and they're like in education, and like business, they have more free time. So they got closer, and I remember when one girl, she started talking to some football

player. She found out that he was interested in me first, and because they were all friends, I kind

of just got dropped from the group. So now I'm in like a weird place where it's like now I have to

like actively search for like Black people again, but I don't really have much time to go meet

people. And when I was telling my friends [black girl friends from my hometown] how a girl got

mad at me over a guy, and I didn't even want the guy, my friends and I were like that's so weird"

(SC 1 transcript, p. 47).

Haley described that in her experiences, Black men peers did not want to be friends and

Haley interpreted that Black men peers do not have the same struggle with 'being Black' as

Black women do. Therefore, Haley found it hard to relate and build friendships with Black men.

Haley also described the competitive nature that drove away her first attempt at friendships with

Black women peers at SBU.

Sara, Carrie, and Haley all expressed their difficulty with finding and maintaining

relationships with Black women peers. As we discussed further it was evident that relationships

with Black women peers were difficult due to a competitive- isolated culture created by these

women. The pressure of being the 'only one' translated into a culture and mindset of Darwinism,

survival of the fittest. Black women at the predominately white institution were competing for

resources and support given to their white counterparts and not to them. There was even

competition for the knowledge of resources, as expressed by Carrie. Therefore, so much energy

and effort must be generated just to survive in the environment, that there is no consideration for

camaraderie. The drive for success and survival stifles the opportunity and space for Black

women peer relationships.

In contrast, to no relationship at all, Jackie built her relationships with students from the

majority culture. Jackie described her experience with relationships and building community

with men and women who were white, who she referred to as allies. When Jackie could not find a community of Black women, she built her community with white students. Jackie described how these relationships were very important to her while describing her college journey profile (see Figure 4.3). Jackie began in sista circle conversation #1 with a statement about not feeling like she would fit in with the Black sorority community. Then in sista circle conversation #2, she shared her college journey profile with the group:

Jackie: "So um I had a I remember hitting up uh some of the black girls that did come down here, and you know, Hey, let's hang out, or whatever, and they were um gonna be um pledging. And you know I knew that wasn't gonna be something that I was gonna be into, and we just never really linked up. so, I knew like, Okay, that's just not going to be my path, and its just not something that's comfortable" (SC 1 transcript, p. 13).

In sista circle conversation #2, Jackie shared her college journey profile with the group:

Jackie's College Journey Profile.

"I said I'm twenty-eight and I graduated in two thousand and seventeen, so It's kind of changed quite a bit since I've been here. So basically [for the college journey profile}, I thought about all the places that really made me who I am. Why I came to SU, and the things that really were important. A wake up call when I got here, and one of the things that really grounded me and found my sense of purpose, home, and community, was AKPSI a business co-ed fraternity. Um, I'm not one of those people that was kinda that got too involved, I realized very quickly. Um, Even though I went to a very big school, I grew up with the same people from kindergarten all the way to high school. Um, I graduated with six hundred people, six hundred plus people, but I was always in my comfort zone, and this brought me even more out of my comfort zone, because everywhere I went, nine times out of ten I'm the like only black person, and it just made me very

uncomfortable . It was really hard. But, And what if it wasn't for my freshman year here [living on-campus] I wouldn't have met My friend had friends um, especially in this guy right here. Nolan. And what's really funny is, we would have these very deep conversations about how grew up as as far as like culture. We were able to have those open, honest conversations late at night in his car. It was just. It was really cool, but he was just one of the most open able to meet everybody. And honestly, he was a reason like I was able to branch out and have my own Black friends without him,and,you know,do my own thing. uh, all Black crews with my whole family and stuff like It's really cool. And I went to his house, you know, and you know we have those debates of like Why, why people have mashed potatoes at, you know. Um Thanksgiving. You know just those types of conversations. But you know he lived in the hill his freshman year, and I would make the trek over to the hill, and you would just see these different types of people and different ways of life and I just really enjoyed that. This was a great, great, great friend. Uh, you know you always talk about like some white people as allies. Um, he is someone I consider an ally and he is still one of my best friends" (SC 2 transcript, p. 14-20).

Figure 4.3 Jackie's College Journey Profile
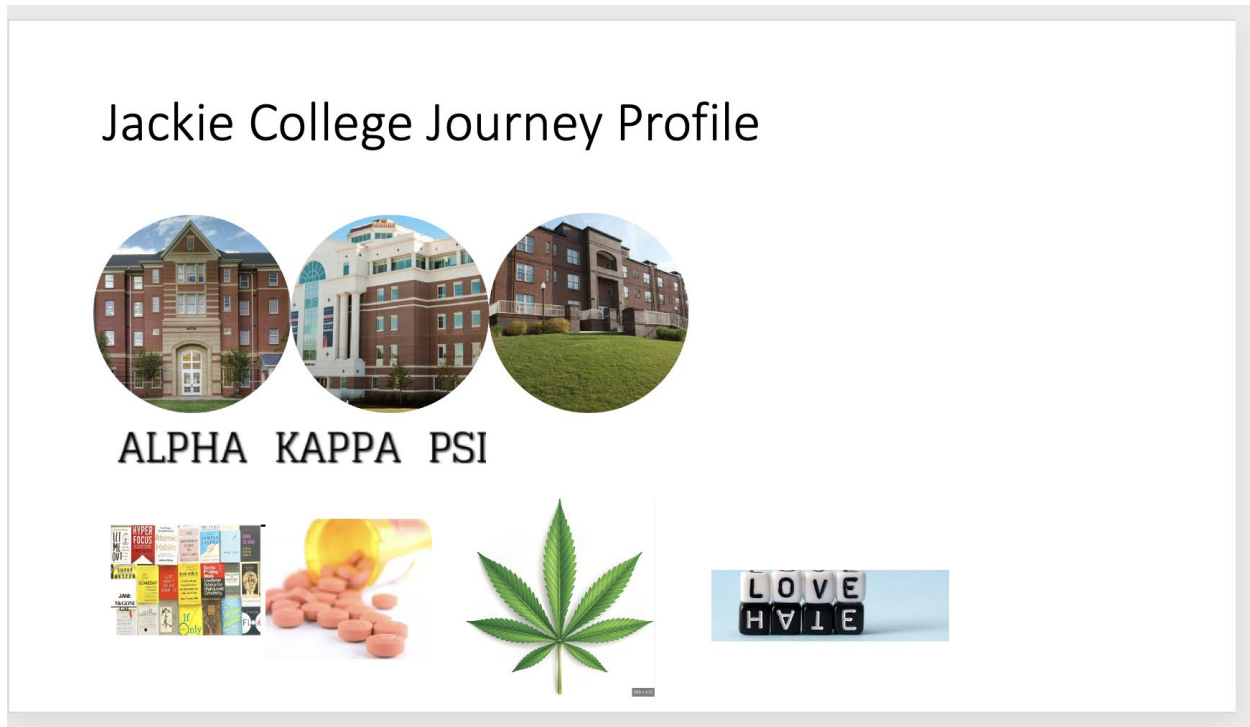
Note: Profile was edited to remove identifiable information of the participant or other associated persons.

Jackie shared with us how her relationships outside of Black women had an impact on her college experience. Jackie felt that she could not relate to the Black women who wanted to be apart of the NPHC sororities. The NPHC sororities are a wonderful space for Black college women to build community and support each other. However, all the women in our sista circle were not interested in participation in the historically Black sorority space, therefore, they were ostracized and isolated for that decision. So, these women had to look elsewhere for community. Jackie was able to find persons who served as allies for her, which encouraged her future relationships with her Black women peers.

Another young lady in our group Carrie expressed how her relationships impacted her college journey. Carrie's college journey profile was a one-on-one interview with me, the researcher about her college experiences and their relationship to agency. From our one- on- one interview I created an artifact to illustrate Carrie's experiences with relationships with Black women in college. The artifact is called a Black Out Poem. This artifact is a part of the transcript from our interview, and I used Black out to remove some words and the words that remain are a poem in her own voice.

Figure 4.4 Carrie College Journey Profile: Black Out Poem

I don't know how to put this ████ ███████████████, but like the mean girl of the click, ██████████, I never liked her lets just be real, ██████ she gave off like the same energy as like the black girls in high school, █████████, I don't know why black girls do it ██████, if they see somebody that █████ intimidates them or is on their level ██████ ████ its automatically like competition like we can't be friends. █████████ it's always ████ I want to beat you down █████ I have to be better than you. ████████████████████████████ ██ ██ ██ ██, she was the black girl who had money, █████████████, she was bragging about, █████████, she knew this football player she was just talking about this football player so you know as freshmen like she had like other girls like going googoo gaga over like every single word she said mean while im just like, is this what we're striving for? ████████████████████████████████████ ██ ██ ████████████████████████████████████. Basically, because I always felt that that it was like a weird competition. So it was like I had friends but like I wasn't really sure ████ how to go about it ██████████████████ I wasn't fully comfortable. ████████████ ██ ████████████████████████ I just kind of went with the flow of things but also, you know, I tried to venture out to find different friends █████████ I don't have to be stuck here. So, basically, me and this girl Taylor, we ended up being friends ████████████ ██

████████████ So I ended up kind of bringing her into the friend group. And she's actually Chance's(Participants Son) godmother now. So it's been like a huge evolution with her but we ended up getting really close so now I'm starting to feel comfortable like I'm starting to feel like okay, I have somebody who I know I can definitely talk to and it wasn't like a something had to happen to show me that I could trust her. It was just a natural thing, which is huge for me. And ████████, just for it to be another black woman I was like okay like still wary. But this is really great if I could really have this in my life. So, as freshman year, we just went, wherever, like we were just always together, █████████████████████████████

Carrie described her initial negative interactions and experience with her Black women peers, but also described how eventually she did find one Black woman peer who she could trust and build a strong relationship with. For Carrie, relationships with her family, her partner, her Black woman friend, and her son were very important for how she exercised her collective agency. To illustrate the full capacity of Carrie's strength found in her relationships, I created a second artifact in my own words. A simple poem that summarizes Carrie's college journey, highlighting the importance of her relationships.

Figure 4.5 Poem: STRONG

STRONG

I am young, I am Black, I am woman.
I am daughter, sister, friend
I am lover and mother
Surrounded by a village like no other.

A Louisiana girl through and through
Searching for my purpose and my place
Learning how to create my own space,
Working at my own pace.

Looking in the mirror and what do I see,
Flaws instead of beauty.
Feelings of heartache and pain,
Learning to cope with the strain.
But I AM STRONG

Fights with my sister and my mother
How can I go any further?
Instead, my girls and my man are my encouragers
Together we are a village of foragers
And WE ARE STRONG

Our love is BOMB
Our love is BOLD
Our love is BRAVE
Just me and you, all the days long
WE ARE STRONG

Acquiring my education, always feeling below my station.
But I have got to keep going, I have got to get this done.
Got to do this for me and for my son.
There are no breaks when you are a mom.
But I AM STRONG

I AM STRONG.

The above artifacts (Figures 4.3, 4.4 & 4.5), illustrate the significance of relationships for how these Black college women were intentionally agentic. Both Jackie and Carrie found ways to build community and create a support system. The final component of collective agency is mentorship. During our conversations only one participant had any experience or even opportunity for mentorship. Mentorship is a way for Black college women to build a support system. The benefits of these mentoring relationships are self-esteem, motivation, and self - confidence (Patton, 2009). Although participants expressed wanting mentoring relationships, only Sarah had some experience with mentors, however her experiences were limited. Sarah stated:

Sarah: "*So I used to have a mentor um to like this thing called one hundred and one women strong in the Engineering department here. But the thing about it is like they give specific people, and I requested like a few black ladies. But then they didn't think I needed the Black lady and gave me someone else. I think this will be a better fit for you'. I'm like, okay. I'll go with the punches, you know it's fine. So I got this lady ,you know we talk every like once a month, or something like that. And it was okay. But then, right after the year long Mentorship, I never heard from her after that. So it was kind of like I don't know…. But um, I do have a professor [from HBCU] as someone that I will always keep in touch with, and really like. She helped me a lot. She's the one who was like, Yeah, you, can do this like this is something that you can do. Don't ever let nobody steer your mind from this.*" (SC 3 transcript, p. 31)*

Sara's experience reiterates the importance for Black women to be in community with their peers and with mentors who look like them. If these Black college women are given the opportunity to be supported by their peers and mentors, their sense of belonging and their individual and collective agency will increase. Black women celebrate their identity through the discovery of sense of self (Davidson, 2017). This discovery is manifested through relationships with other Black women, whether it be Black women peers or Black women mentors. Representation matters. Representation is a key factor in the development of self and support for Black college women.

Self -Reflection & Inner Dialogue

The final way that Black college women are intentionally agentic is through reflection and inner dialogue. Reflection and inner dialogue can manifest from ideals of self- authorship and transition to self-definition. Okello describes self -definition as knowledge validation and cultivation of the sense of self (Okello, 2018). Reflection and inner dialogue provided an

opportunity for these women to experience self -love and Black Joy. Our final sista circle conversation focused on self-love and Black Joy. The women expressed their own definitions of self-love and Black Joy:

Jackie: Self-Love: "putting yourself first. Giving yourself that day of relaxation and rest to recharge. I think that's very important, that love that it comes within, finding stuff that you like about yourself. Black Joy: We uniquely have a culture that people cannot necessarily relate to, because we do not have somewhere that we can say, distinctly, that we come from. Because we were taken from our own place, and you can see that people of other, races and ethnicities want to use our culture, or be a part of our culture, whether it be rap, our hair or clothes. They want to be a part of that. So, for me, being black. Joy is just being happy about who I am. Uh being, you know, happy, especially about my hair. Uh, I think that is something that I'm very proud of. So, seeing others like us is very important. Also rooting for others when they succeed" (SC 3, transcript, p. 2-7)

Jackie described the importance of Black culture and how because Black persons were brought to this country (USA), it is even more important to develop and celebrate Blackness. She described that her Black joy comes through the celebration of her self-expression.

Sara: Self-Love is about priorities and keeping your mental state straight. Black Joy: Is that good feeling when [Black people] gather together. There is a " HOME feeling"(SC 3, transcript, p. 2-7)

Sara described the importance of self-care and mental health in her description for self-love. Black Joy for Sara was being in community with Black persons. Sara previously described the opportunity she had to surrounded by Black culture at her second job at an bar. Sara is intentionally agentic in her pursuit of community with those who look like her.

Z: Self-love is to be happy with yourself, and to just accept yourself for who you are. Black joy: This you don't need to know anyone to have a sense of familiarity with one another, family feeling (SC 3, transcript, p. 2-7)

Z described self -love as acceptance of self. As Z described looking to find and know her identity, it makes sense that her agency is linked to knowing and accepting who she is. Z agreed with others that Black Joy means community, means being surrounded by Black culture.

Haley: Black joy: Joy is like just that understood community. Being comfortable in your blackness(SC 3, transcript, p. 2-7)

Haley described Black joy as both community and being accepting of your own Blackness. For Haley agency is embracing her Black culture and also embracing how she fits inside of the culture.

During our last sista circle together we discussed how reflection and inner dialogue are connected to feeling self-love and Black joy. The experience of feeling self - love and Black joy provides a sense of hope for Black college women. "Hope is needed to survive the academy. It keeps us resilient, and allows us to maintain our sense of power and agency in the face of adversity (Nganga & Beck, 2017, p. 563). As we wrapped up our final circle and summarized all we had discussed in our four conversations, the group collectively defined what agency means to them. The group defined agency as:

Agency Group Definition: "You can either conform to the environment, or you can dictate how you fill in the spaces you inhabit. Agency is acknowledging both of those things, and then trying to reflect on and rework your agency so you can do what you need to do for yourself" (SC 4).

Finally, I share the college journey profile made by Sara. Sara created a painting and provided a description with her art. This artifact was shared with the group and had such a profound impact on each of us in our sista circle. As a group we all agreed that her art and

description is the creative and physical representation of what agency is for Black college women:

Figure 4.6 Sara's College Journey Profile

"The cherry blossom represents a time of renewal and regeneration. My time here at [SU] I had to face difficulty of feeling lost and alone causing me to have to pick up the pieces and restart several times. But, when the cherry blossom tree has it's great reveal and rebirth it is always an amazing sight to see" (SC 3).

Chapter 5: Discussion

Summary

Upon completion of this study, I return to a quote from Porter and Boyd (2021), "Black women are uniquely affected by the historical legacy and dimensions of oppression that not only influence their development and success in college but also positions them as invisible and hypervisible at the same time" (p. 806). The purpose of this study was to examine the agency of Black collegian women at a predominately white institution. The findings for this study were shaped using Black feminist thought, specifically the elements that spoke to Black women's agency. My review of literature related to Black women collegians and Black feminist thought, pointed to two key elements of agency. The first part highlights the relationship between agency and Black college women's experiences, as reflected in emotional labor, resistance, and empowerment. The second part speaks to how Black college women are intentionally agentic, more specifically their demonstrations of agency individually, collectively, and through reflection and inner dialogue. The findings from this study provided evidence supporting several ways Black college women demonstrate or are intentional with their agency, which helped to answer the research question at the center of this study: How do Black collegian women demonstrate agency throughout their undergraduate experiences at PWI's? Black college women demonstrated their agency in response to various challenges they faced and how they navigated them. Through this study I identified and highlighted Black collegiate women's challenges with isolation, expectations, finding community and mental health. Participants experienced isolation, often being the only Black woman in spaces on campus. The lack of representation with faculty, staff, and peers left these women navigating their academic environment alone. These Black women also discussed challenges with feeling pressure to succeed. The pressure came from

parents, faculty and staff, and even their peers. The pressure felt by these women led to their engagement or disengagement with campus life and with other Black women peers. As these college women navigated their campus environment, the pressures of academics, isolation, microaggressions from white and Black peers, and finding their own identity, these women had to find ways to protect their mental health. These challenges faced by the Black college women in this study confirm the negative significant relationship between microaggressions, sociostructural stressors and stereotype threat on Black college women mental health (Nadal et al., 2014, Patton & Croom 2017, Smith & Hung, 2008, Commodore et al., 2018). The Black college women in our circle made it clear that they did not have the support that they needed and so they found their own ways to support themselves. This concept of self-support accentuates the literature which highlights that Black college women are positioned in a way where they are strong, independent, and resilient, overshadowing their intersectional needs and the oppressions that they face (Shahid et al., 2018, Nelson et al., 2020). There is one concept that continued to resonate throughout each sista circle, the need to find and build community with Black women peers. Again, and again the young women expressed their challenges with finding a community of Black college women and the desperate need to have these specific relationships. Although Porter and Dean (2015) identified the importance of Black college women relationships, specifically with how it relates to identity development, the Black women in this study experienced significant barriers in relating and connecting to their Black college women peers. Therefore, these barriers raise questions about the conditions that are necessary to contend with Black college women finding their community.

Our sista circle conversations were guided by sista circle methodology. Sista circle methodology is an ethnographic method that is gender specific and culturally relevant for Black

women (Johnson, 2016b). Therefore, our circles functioned as a support group encouraging trust

and dialogue between participants and allowed the participants to share their lived experiences in

ways that are congruent to their cultural norms. In our final sista circle, participants completed an

electronic post-sista circle reflection. In their responses the women described what they learned

about themselves, their culture, and how they define and demonstrate their agency. The

reflections shared by participants in their post-sista circle reflection were connected to this

methodology allowing these Black college women the opportunity to be in community with

other Black college women. These women were able to connect and discover that they are not

alone and that there are other Black women on campus who share the same experiences. Sista

circle methodology also allowed the women in our group to show up in a safe space where they

could be their authentic selves. In this chapter I will discuss how the findings from this study

affirm and are unique to what has been previously known about the Black collegian woman

experience at a predominately white institution and how this new knowledge can be applied to

better support these young women.

Emerging Concepts

The relationship and intentionality of agency for these Black college women that are

unique to this study, are alternative coping mechanisms, divergent faith, and intercultural

differences.

Alternative Coping Mechanisms

According to the literature, coping behaviors for Black women are informed by the

Common Sense Model, where these women thrive on informal support (Musgrave et al., 2002).

Informal support includes reliance on a network within a community, a connection to faith or

spirituality, self-help, positive attitude, denial and avoidance (Ward et al., 2009). However, this

study found that Black college women do not rely on a network of community or even faith. First the Black college women in this study were not able to find or establish a community with their Black women peers. Secondly, these young women described familial relationships as a burden and not as a support. Black Feminist Thought (BFT) makes clear that knowledge is produced within a community and that knowledge comes from knowers who understand the lived experiences and ethical relationships of their peers (Collins, 2009) . However, these Black college women have not been able to build community with their peers. Therefore, these women cannot advance their knowledge and their agency because they are isolated from their needed community of knowers. The literature also speaks to the fear that Black women have with asking for help. Instead of informal support as a coping behavior or mechanism, the women in this study presented alternative coping mechanisms. The ladies in this study did not look to their community or familial support. Instead, they looked for help from professionals, therapists, counselors, or doctors. These ladies embraced their challenges and difficulties and created support for themselves using various methods of self-care. The young women welcomed the help and support of professionals and were not afraid to admit their vulnerability. Some participants suggested that because the stigma of mental health is disappearing, it gave them confidence to seek help. Finally, some of the young women used drugs, prescribed or recreational as a coping mechanism. Ultimately, these ladies used the resources they had access to and found ways to create their own support systems. The young Black women in this study are surviving their college journey at a PWI by living independently through the creation of their own silo of support. This finding is in direct conflict with previous ideas from the literature which suggest that Black women see mental illness as weakness, have a fear of asking for help, and the idea

that silence is better than disclosing feelings or emotions (Ward, 2009, Nelson et al., 2020, Commodore et al., 2018).

Divergent Faith

In addition to coping behaviors, the literature describes a reliance and connection to faith for Black women. The literature describes faith, whether it be spirituality or religiosity as a health protective factor for women of color (Spates & Slatton, 2017). Specifically, the Black church has played a significant role in Black culture and Black women find faith as a place of renewal and empowerment (Musgrave et al., 2002) However, the women in this study only mentioned faith once, as a response to a question on the demographic survey. Each participant was asked to complete the demographic survey to get background information for each woman. One of the questions asked the women to disclose their connection to faith. Two of the young women described themselves as spiritual and the remaining four young women described their faith as Christian. During our sista circle conversations, none of the young women mentioned faith. I often brought up faith, specifically when describing my own experiences, but still no one ever mentioned faith. Faith, whether it be spiritual or religiosity, it was not part of the college journey or a factor in how these women can be intentional with their agency. Community, faith, and familial support, the foundations for Black culture, were absent from agency for these Black college women.

Intracultural Differences

The findings from this study have been unique, learning how these Black college women are finding new ways to cope, and creating alternative ways to feel empowered and supported aside from community and faith. However, the most interesting finding from this study was the prevalence of intracultural differences. It was evident from this study that no two Black college

women are alike, they are each unique and one of a kind. However, there are often experiences and characteristics from Black culture and the lived experience of Black womanhood that are shared. In this study it was clear that there were intracultural differences between the Black college women based on societal environment, (growing up in predominately white or Black spaces), self-expression, and the nature of a competitive collegial experience. Also, there seemed to be a difference between how the young ladies in this study related to Black collegian women who were engaged within an NPHC sorority. The women in this study none of which were members of an NPHC sorority seemed to feel isolated from their NPHC peers. Despite the prevalence of intracultural differences, all the women in this study were desperate to find community and connection with their Black women peers. It became evident that intracultural differences were a barrier to the creation and maintenance of relationships between Black collegian women.

Advancing Scholarship

The findings connect to and advance the scholarship of Black college women through the framing of the conceptualization of agency through its two parts, relationship with and intentionality of agency.

Resistance Reimagined

The literature describes resistance as disrupting normative ways of knowing and forms of oppression, by challenging the status quo and the perceived norms of who should be in a space and what they should look like (Pennant, 2021). Although this is true and the mere existence of Black women in predominately white college spaces is resistance, the women in this study reimagined the meaning of resistance. Resistance for the Black women in our circle was survival through assimilation. This meant that the Black women in this study chose to assimilate in spaces

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on campus so that they could meet academic and institutional cultural expectations. Therefore, these women took the focus from fighting against the oppressions from the institution and their peers, and instead made resistance about fighting for themselves. This finding advance what we know about Black college women, as we now learn how these women self-support. These women use resources such as seeking professional help, self-reflection, and self-care to create their own support system. This contrasts with what is previously known regarding how Black college women seek support. Previous research described how schemas such as the Strong Black Woman, hinder Black women from asking for help (Nelson et al., 2020).

Empowerment

Empowerment begins with the celebration of identity and the creation of new knowledge. The celebration of identity begins with the sense of self and learning how to make meaning of experiences, relationships, and the definition of the Black woman's own unique reality (Porter & Dean, 2015, Collins, 2002). Empowerment for participants in this study manifested through surrounding themselves with Black culture and the ambition to be the best version of themselves. During our sista circle conversations, participants described the pride they felt when in spaces with other Black persons. Additionally, participants described how being the best versions of themselves meant accepting and confronting vulnerability. The ability and courage to be vulnerable, was in direct conflict with the literature. The literature states that Black women often take on the Strong Black Woman (SBW) role. The SBW role includes resistance to vulnerability and emotion (Nelson et al., 2020). The participants in this study advance what was previously known about how these women respond to and their comfortability with their emotions and participation in self-reflection and self-care.

Individual Agency

The literature supports three key characteristics for individual agency, self-expression, self-efficacy, and self-advocacy (Pennant, 2021, McNeely Cobham & Patton, 2015, Kelly et al., 2021). Each young women believed in her own ability to exert control over their own behavior, motivation, and social environment (Kelly et al., 2021). The findings highlighted that each of the participants described a challenge or adversity they faced in college and how self-efficacy played a role in learning form and overcoming the challenge. In contrast self-advocacy was challenging for participants. Most of the participants avoided situations where they should and could advocate for themselves, supporting the idea that silence is better than disclosure of emotions (Ward, 2009 Nelson et al., 2020, Commodore et al., 2018). Although findings emphasize that Black college women were embracing the importance of mental health and seeking professional help, they were still struggling to advocate for themselves in classroom and social spaces on campus. This finding describes how these Black college women are still learning how to own their own agency, the capacity to manage conflicting relations of power, act in a different way to introduce new and unanticipated modes of behavior, and the capacity to engender change within the socio- cultural context (Davidson, 2017, Fernandez- Morales & Menendez- Menendez, 2016).

Collective Agency

The findings from this study make clear that Black college women are more connected to their own identity when they can build and maintain relationships. Black women celebrate their identity through the discovery of sense of self (Davidson, 2017). This discovery is nurtured through relationships with other Black women, Black women peers or Black women mentors (Patton, 2009, Porter & Dean, 2015) Black women are members of a cultural community who

share communal funds of knowledge (Collins, 2009). Black college women engage in collective agency through trust building in a community of Black college women. When Black college women are in community with their Black women peers, they can build an ethic of care that links their empathy, compassion, and knowledge to their values (Collins, 2000). Collective agency is linked to the creation of safe spaces and social networks. As previously mentioned, each woman in this study wanted to have meaningful relationships with their peers and a mentor if possible. However, findings uncovered that building relationships and community with Black women peers was very challenging. These findings give new insight into the specific barriers to building relationships and community between Black women collegians; The barriers are (1) Isolation in campus environments, in classrooms, within specific majors such as STEM, campus activities, student organizations, (2) Selective groups, NPHC Sororities, athletes, cheerleaders, etc., (3) Competitive culture, just trying to survive in the white space, (4) intracultural differences.

Self-Reflection and Inner Dialogue

Reflection and inner dialogue are connected to the ideals of self- authorship and self-definition. Self -definition is knowledge validation and cultivation of the sense of self (Okello, 2018). The identification of the sense of self, begins with dialogue. Dialogue is about the importance of language. The definitions of identity for Black college women are centered around language through the opportunity of dialogue, with self and with others (Dillard, 2000, Collins 2009, Evans-Winters, 2019). Participants were able to participate in self-reflection and inner dialogue through their college journey profile artifacts. This participation provided an opportunity for the Black college women in this study to experience self -love and Black Joy. Although participants had varied definitions of self-love and Black joy, they all agreed that self-love was about acceptance of your authentic self and that Black joy was being comfortable in

your 'Blackness'. In each sista circle conversation it was clear that these Black college women took the time to reflect on who they were, their place on campus and in the world at large. Each young Black women knew and understood the importance and elevation of education, especially as they inhabit a doubly oppressed body of Black and woman (Commodore et al., 2018). This finding advance what we know about the importance of identity development, sense of belonging, and impact of being part of a community of cultural knowers (Collins, 2009).

Conclusion

Recommendations for Practice

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and the conceptualization of agency applied in this study provided new insight into the experiences of Black collegian women. Specifically, this study explored the relationship and intentionality of agency for Black college women. The relationship between agency and Black college women is characterized by relationship with self, relationship with community, and autonomy. These characteristics help to build the foundation and inform how these women are intentionally agentic at a predominately white higher education institution. Black college women are intentionally agentic through authenticity, vulnerability, and maintaining a spirit that is not afraid. These Black college women show up as their authentic selves, they are prepared for the challenges they will face at a PWI, operating in isolation from white and Black peers, faculty, and staff and creating opportunities for themselves by making mistakes and learning from them. These women have an internalized characteristic, their agency that keeps them moving forward and will not allow themselves to quit. However, these young women should not just have to survive, they should be given the support they need to thrive. There are several recommendations for practice that can advance how higher education institutions, particularly PWI's support Black college women.

Representation Matters

Black college women need to be in spaces with cultural knowers where they can be in community with others who look like them and who share similar experiences. Therefore, higher education institutions, specifically PWI's must recruit Black women students, faculty, and staff, creating a presence and community of Black women on campus. Black college women will be forced to continue to function in isolation within their classrooms and public spaces on campus unless there is an increase in the presence of Black women on campus. The findings from this study highlight that Black college women experience Black joy when they are surrounded by 'Blackness'.

Building Relationships

Black college women need opportunities to form meaningful, personal one on one relationships with Black women peers and mentors. Institutions must create opportunities for one-on-one interactions. These opportunities can take several forms. These one-on one interactions can take the form of meet & greet events, mentoring programs, affinity groups, field trips, Black women as Faculty in residence.

Meet and Greet. Institutions can organize meet & greet events, where Black college women are able to meet other Black college women within their majors and class standings. These events should be tailored to Black college women. These events can include culturally specific food, music, and activities. These events can provide opportunities for these women to express themselves through art, fashion, expressions of talent.

Mentoring Programs. Second, institutions should create mentoring programs where there is matching and pairing of Black college women with Black women faculty and/or professional staff. Black college women should only be paired with Black women. Institutions

should also create opportunities for mentorship of Black college women with Black college women who are in advanced class standings. For example, pairing a first -year Black college woman with a second- or third-year Black college woman. Young Black college women can learn a lot from fellow Black college women who are more advanced in their own college journeys. There should also be opportunities for the older Black college women to have mentorship pairings with Black graduate students and/or Black college alumna.

Affinity Groups. Affinity groups are dedicated "spaces" within the residential communities, that allow students who share common identities and experiences to come together and build community. Affinity groups that represent the intersectional nature of what it means to be Black and woman would allow for a space for Black collegian women to show up at their authentic- self in a safe space that is made just for them.

Field Trips. PWI's should invest in field trips that are culturally specific and relevant for Black women. For example, the university can invest in taking Black women on campus to art exhibits, film screenings, museums, and social activities that help to foster Black joy.

Faculty in Residence. Faculty in residence programs are programs operated in Residential/Housing student affairs departments on campus. This program encourages campus faculty to live on campus in the residence halls with students. These faculty members provide programs and events that advance the academic needs and scholarship of students living on campus. Institutions must invest in recruiting Black women faculty who can serve in these roles.

High Impact Practices Reimagined

PWI's must also reimagine what high impact practices (HIPs) look like specifically for Black women. First- year seminars and learning communities should represent themes and curriculum that is culturally relevant. Learning communities can also be expanded to residential

living- learning communities that allow Black college women to live together on the same residential floors and in the same residential buildings, while also taking a specific set of culturally relevant courses as part of the residential living- learning community. The first year seminar courses and the learning communities including the residential living -learning communities can collaborate with Africana and diaspora studies and women's studies departments to create curriculum that will enhance the scholarship of Black women collegians. Other high impact practices such as collaborative projects, service learning, and global learning should be in partnership with Black communities and with historically Black universities (HBCUs). Collaboration with career services departments on campus can work with employers and community members to create internships, capstone courses, e-portfolios, and career opportunities which aim to strengthen and highlight the interests, work-ethic, and culture of Black college women.

Financial Support

Financial aid and scholarships should be established and given specifically to Black women. For example, as finances are often a factor in the academic success of Black women, access to living on campus through scholarships or grant -funding, as well as scholarships to cover tuition and the cost of books would alleviate some cost for these students.

All efforts of the university must be tailored to the culture, skills, and needs of this unique population. No one faces the same challenges and systemic oppressions that Black college women face. Therefore, support for these young women must be as unique and as special as they are. This qualitative research study has reaffirmed the importance of relationships and community for Black college women. This study has created new knowledge that agency for Black college women is defined by authenticity, vulnerability, and reclamation. Black college

women are intentionally agentic by showing up as their best selves, taking care of themselves, and building and maintaining meaningful relationships with their peers when given the opportunity. These women shine bright, but their light can be even brighter if given the support they need.

Future Research

For future research the conceptualization of agency and sista circle methodology can be applied with more groups of Black college women at various institutional types such as predominately white institutions (PWI's), HBCUs, Hispanic-serving institutions, community colleges, liberal arts institutions, religious institutions, and residential colleges and universities. It will be important to understand what agency looks like for Black college women at various institutional types so that we can better serve this population at many higher education institutions. Also, these specific institutional types are known to operate with an ethic of care and awareness of diversity, therefore findings from these institutional types may look different. Future research should also further examine how intracultural differences impacts the agency of Black college women and how their agency can be advanced within this barrier, specifically comparing Black women socialized in white, Black, or NPHC environments. Specifically, how are Black college women negotiating and understanding their relationship to Black women communities on campus.

Ultimately, this study reaffirms the uniqueness that is the Black college woman. Her uniqueness requires unique and specialized support. This question must be addressed, What are college campuses doing with the cultural and social capital that Black women are bringing to their campuses? Higher education must invest in its Black women students, faculty, and staff. When Black women rise, all rise.

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Appendix 1: IRB Approval Letter

From: IRB Administration <irbadmin@auburn.edu>
Subject: Morawo Approval, Exempt Protocol #22-349 EX 2208, "Still I Rise: Agency for Black College Women"
Date: August 17, 2022 at 12:04:09 PM PDT
To: Stephanie Morawo <snd0008@auburn.edu>
Cc: Leonard Taylor <ldt0016@auburn.edu>, James Satterfield <jws0089@auburn.edu>

Use IRB Submission Page for protocol related submissions and IRBadmin@auburn.edu for questions and information.

Dear Ms. Morawo,
Your protocol titled "Still I Rise: Agency for Black College Women" has been approved by the IRB as "Exempt" under federal regulation 45 CFR 46.101(b)(1,2). Attached is your approved protocol.

Official notice:
This e-mail serves as official notice that your protocol has been approved. By accepting this approval, you also accept your responsibilities associated with this approval. Details of your responsibilities are attached. Please print and retain.

Consent documents:
Attached is a copy of your consent form. You must provide a copy for each participant to keep.

Expiration:
Continuing review of this Exempt protocol is not required; however, all modification/revisions to the approved protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB.

When you have completed all research activities, have no plans to collect additional data and have destroyed all identifiable information as approved by the IRB, please notify this office via e-mail. A final report is no longer required for Exempt protocols.

PLEASE NOTE: If any unfunded, IRB-approved study should later receive funding, you must submit a MODIFICATION REQUEST for IRB review. In the request, identify the funding source/sponsor and AU OSP number. Also, revise IRB-stamped consent documents to include the Sponsor at the top of page 1 and the "Who will see study data?" section of consent documents." (see online template consent documents).

Best wishes for success with your research!

IRB Administration
Office of Research Compliance
540 Devall Drive
Auburn University
334-844-5966

Appendix 2: Recruitment Email

Dear Student Organization:

Hello, my name is Stephanie Morawo and I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education program here at Auburn University. I am conducting a research study that will explore the agency of Black college women. This research is designed to better understand the unique experiences and needs of Black college women. This research will be supported and supervised by my doctoral faculty advisor, Dr. Leonard Taylor, Associate Professor in the College of Education.

The purpose of this study is to explore the agency of Black collegian women at an predominately white institution. The research will identify Black college women experiences with agency but will also define agency and explore the characteristics that embody agency for Black college women. Participation will take approximately one month. There will be 4 weeks of 90-minute one day a week meetings for a total of 4 group meetings along with one week to complete a college profile task. If any members of your organization are interested, please have them contact me, Stephanie Morawo, Ph.D Candidate Auburn University College of Education at snd0008@auburn.edu or 678-357-9448.

Participants will be asked to share their experiences as a Black woman in college at a predominately white institution. Each participant is able to share only what they feel comfortable sharing, whether individually through the college journey profile activity or with the group during sista circle conversations. Choosing to share their own unique experiences is minimal risk. Participants will directly benefit from participation in this study because they will be given an opportunity to center their voices and tell their own story.

This is an opportunity for the participants to be in a safe space that is created just for them, to reflect and share their experiences with their peers. Participation in the study also allows for community and relationship building with a group of persons who share similar cultural norms and beliefs. The generalizable benefit for this study is to produce new knowledge to the higher education field about the unique experiences and needs of Black undergraduate women.
If you have any questions, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Morawo, Ph.D Candidate
Auburn University College of Education
Higher Education Program

AUBURN UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

Consent Form
Auburn University College of Education ● Auburn, AL

<u>**Title of Study**</u>: Still I Rise: Agency of Black College Women

Investigators:

Name: Stephanie N. Morawo, Ph.D Candidate   **Dept:** Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology; Higher Education Program

Name: Leonard Taylor, Ph.D   **Dept:** Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology; Higher Education Program

Introduction
- We are conducting a research study that will look at the Agency of Black college women. This research is designed to better understand the unique experiences and needs of Black college women
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program at Auburn University, you are between the ages of 18-25 and you identify as a Black woman.
- Read this form and ask any questions that you have before agreeing to be in this study.

Purpose of Study
- The purpose of the study is understanding the experiences of Black college women at a predominately white higher education institution and explore how Black college women define and use their agency to navigate their college journey.
- The results of this research will be included as dissertation research to fulfill partial requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree.

Description of the Study Procedures

- Participants will be asked to complete a college journey profile. This profile will highlight each participants individual college journey thus far. Participants will be asked to be creative with their profile and are able to use any methods to capture their college experience. Participants will have one week to complete this task. The college journey profile will be shared with the principal investigator by email. Participants will have an option to share their profile with other participants within the study.
- Participants will meet for once weekly for a 90-minute meeting for 4 weeks. Participants will meet as a small group with the principal investigator. All meetings will occur virtually via the Zoom platform. Participants will receive calendar invitations with the applicable Zoom link.

<table>
<tr><td>The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this Document for use from
__08/02/2022__ to __--------------__
Protocol # ___22-349 EX 2208___</td><td>1</td></tr>
</table>

The meetings will be referred to as Sista Circle Conversations. Participants will have the opportunity to gather with their peers and share their individual and collective experiences in college at Auburn University. During these meetings participants will be able to center their voices in a supportive, safe, and empowering cultural community of their peers. During these conversations participants will define and explore what agency means for them.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

Participants will be asked to share their experiences as a Black woman in college at a predominately white institution. Each participant can share only what they feel comfortable sharing, whether individually through the college journey profile activity or with the group during Sista Circle Conversations. Your participation in this study is anticipated to be of no risk to you.

Benefits of Being in the Study

Participants will be given an opportunity to center their voices and tell their own story. This is an opportunity for the participants to be in a safe space that is created just for them, to reflect and share their experiences with their peers. Participation in the study also allows for community and relationship building with a group of persons who share similar cultural norms and beliefs. The generalizable benefit for this study is to produce new knowledge to the higher education field about the unique experiences and needs of Black undergraduate women. Participants will not directly benefit from this study.

Confidentiality

- We will be collecting and retaining information about your identity for data collection purposes only. Any identifying information will not be used when data is reported in the final dissertation manuscript. However, participants in the Sista Circle Conversations will be known to the Principal Investigator and to other participants, though their identifying information will only be recorded by the principal investigator. Participants are asked to agree to protect the privacy of participants in this study.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting your relationship with the investigators of this study or Auburn University. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any question, as well as to withdraw completely from participation in any study activities at any point during the process. Additionally, you have the right to request that the interviewer not use any documents that you produce such as the college journey profile.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by the Principal Investigator Stephanie Morawo or the supervising faculty, Dr. Leonard Taylor before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Stephanie N. Morawo at snd0008@auburn.edu or Dr. Taylor at ldt0016@auburn.edu. If you request, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant that
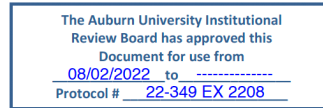
have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, contact the Auburn University IRB at irbadmin@auburn.edu or 334-844-5926.

Consent

- Your signature below is your consent to participate in this study. Please sign and date this form and return by email to Stephanie Morawo at snd0008@auburn.edu.
- You can keep a copy of this form, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

Signature: _____   _____
                      Name   Date

Still I Rise: Agency for Black College Women-Demographics

Demographic Information of Study Participants

* Required

1. Name *

   _____

2. Age *

   _____

3. Class Standing *

   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) Freshman

   ( ) Sophomore

   ( ) Junior

   ( ) Senior

   ( ) Recent Grad/Alumnus

4. Auburn University Major (Degree Program)

   _____

5. Graduation year or anticipated graduation year

Mark only one oval.

◯ 2016

◯ 2017

◯ 2018

◯ 2019

◯ 2020

◯ 2021

◯ 2022

◯ 2023

◯ 2024

◯ 2025

◯ 2026

◯ Later than 2026

6. In your own words, please describe your Identity (Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexual Orientation) *

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

7. Religion/Spiritual Affiliation

_____

8. Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Mark only one oval.

⬭ Working Class- Family Income: Less thn $50,000 annually

⬭ Middle Class- Family Income : $50,000- $150,000

⬭ Upper Class -Famiy Income: $150,000 plus

⬭ Other: _____

9. Current AU GPA

_____

10. Are you involved or were you involved in any student organizations on campus (Including Greek life)

_____

11. First Generation College Student (First in your family to attend college) *

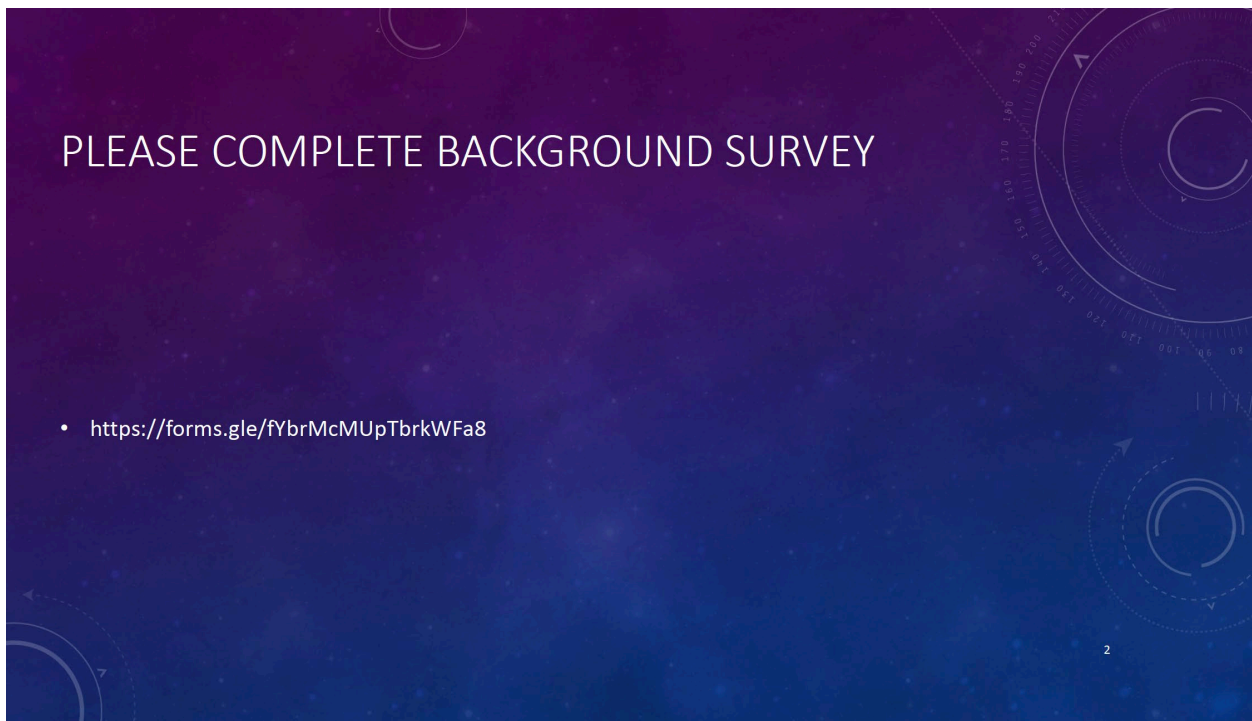*Mark only one oval.*

⬭ Yes

⬭ No

12. Please briefly describe what you hope to gain by being apart of this study.

_____

_____

SISTA CIRCLE CONVOS

OCTOBER 2022

1

PLEASE COMPLETE BACKGROUND SURVEY

- https://forms.gle/fYbrMcMUpTbrkWFa8

2

INTRODUCTIONS –SISTA CIRCLE 1

- Name
- Age
- Class Standing/Major at Auburn
- What is your Why?

3

GET TO KNOW YOU! - SISTA CIRCLE 1

- **What soothes your spirit when you are unhappy or in a bad mood?**
- **What are three things that you would change about your school environment that would make you a more successful student?**
- **What skills do you bring to your college life that are currently underutilized?**
- **What words would you most like to hear from your mentor or faculty or staff that would help you feel motivated and successful as a student?**
- **What are the most significant characteristics of the people who have been your best friends and support systems?**

4

DISCUSSION-SISTA CIRCLE 2

- Share from college journey profiles

5

DEFINING AGENCY-SISTA CIRCLE 2

- Agency: "Agency is the ability to act and to be recognized as an actor" (Davidson, 2017, p.18
- What is your definition?
- How do you feel about it?(Agency)
- Do you feel that you are intentionally agentic? Why or Why not?
- What are some things you do to inact your own agency?

6

AGENCY- SISTA CIRCLE 2

- "Agency is the ability to act and to be recognized as an actor" (Davidson,2017, p.18)

Your definition of agency:

- ♦Agency: Overall effect that I had as a student at AU, including academically, socially, and culturally
- ♦agency to me is simply taking control of what you want in your life and creating a narrative for yourself
- ♦Agency: being able to adapt to the different faces of adversity
- ♦Agency: Having the will to overcome when you want to give up.

7

EMOTIONAL LABOR-SSISTA CIRCLE 3

- Performance ex. Code Switching
- Coping Mechanisms
- Support Systems
- Advocacy for Others

8

RESISTANCE- SISTA CIRCLE 3

- Mentorship
- Social Groups
- Faith
- Finding Community

9

EMPOWERMENT- SISTA CIRCLE 3

- Celebration of identity and the creation of new knowledge
- How is your voice heard?

10

INDIVIDUAL AGENCY   -SISTA CIRCLE 3

- Self Expression
- Self-efficacy is the belief in your own ability to exert control over your own motivation, behavior, and social environment
- Self -advocacy is speaking up for yourself and what is important to you

11

GROUP AGENCY- SISTA CIRCLE 4

- creating safe spaces and social networks

12

REFLECTION & INNER DIALOGUE – SISTA CIRCLE 4

- Self Love
- Finding Black Joy

13

FINAL THOUGHTS- SISTA CIRCLE 4

14

Appendix 6: College Journey Profiles

MISS Black Student Union (BSU)

President's Award Recipient

Counseling & Psychological Services

Human Resource Management Minor

Freshman Focus Committee

Jackie College Journey Profile

I don't know how to put this ████ ██████████████, but like the mean girl of the click, █████████, I never liked her lets just be real, █████ she gave off like the same energy as like the black girls in high school, ██████████, I don't know why black girls do it █████, if they see somebody that █████ intimidates them or is on their level ██████ ████ its automatically like competition like we can't be friends. █████████ it's always ████ I want to beat you down █████ I have to be better than you. ████████████████████████████ ███ ███ ████████████████████████████, she was the black girl who had money, ████████████, she was bragging about, ██████████, she knew this football player she was just talking about this football player so you know as freshmen like she had like other girls like going googoo gaga over like every single word she said mean while im just like, is this what we're striving for? ██████████████████████████████████ ███ ███ ██████████████████████████. Basically, because I always felt that that it was like a weird competition. So it was like I had friends but like I wasn't really sure ████ how to go about it ██████████████████████ I wasn't fully comfortable. █████████████████ ███ █████████████████████ I just kind of went with the flow of things but also, you know, I tried to venture out to find different friends ██████████████ I don't have to be stuck here. So, basically, me and this girl Taylor, we ended up being friends ████████████████ ███

██ ██████████████ So I ended up kind of bringing her into the friend group. And she's actually Chance's(Participants Son) godmother now. So it's been like a huge evolution with her but we ended up getting really close so now I'm starting to feel comfortable like I'm starting to feel like okay, I have somebody who I know I can definitely talk to and it wasn't like a something had to happen to show me that I could trust her. It was just a natural thing, which is huge for me. And ████████, just for it to be another black woman I was like okay like still wary. But this is really great if I could really have this in my life. So, as freshman year, we just went, wherever, like we were just always together, ██

STRONG

I am young, I am Black, I am woman.
I am daughter, sister, friend
I am lover and mother
Surrounded by a village like no other.

A Louisiana girl through and through
Searching for my purpose and my place
Learning how to create my own space,
Working at my own pace.

Looking in the mirror and what do I see,
Flaws instead of beauty.
Feelings of heartache and pain,
Learning to cope with the strain.
But I AM STRONG

Fights with my sister and my mother
How can I go any further?
Instead, my girls and my man are my encouragers
Together we are a village of foragers
And WE ARE STRONG

Our love is BOMB
Our love is BOLD
Our love is BRAVE
Just me and you, all the days long
WE ARE STRONG

Acquiring my education, always feeling below my station.
But I have got to keep going, I have got to get this done.
Got to do this for me and for my son.
There are no breaks when you are a mom.
But I AM STRONG

I AM STRONG.

Sista Circle Reflection

Please take a moment to reflect on our Sista Circle Conversations.

smorawo@sdsu.edu (not shared) Switch account

What have you learned from our Sista Circle Conversations about yourself?

Your answer

What did you learn about our culture as Black Women?

Your answer

What was something that surprised you about our conversations?

Your answer

What have you gained from this experience?

Your answer

Is there something you wanted to discuss that we did not?

Your answer

Would you like to have an established space, *physical or virtual* where you could build community and have these conversations with your peers (Black women peers)?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Maybe

Explain how you felt about having these conversations in a ***virtual*** space.

Your answer

What challenges do you or did you face as a Black Woman in College at a Predominately white Institution? *(i.e. financial, finding friends/community, isolation, finding purpose)*

Your answer

Explain how you exercise **'Agency'** during your college journey. (Note: Think about our conversations about Agency).

Your answer

What support and resources do you or did you need from Auburn to reach your goals?

Your answer

Please share any additional comments you have.

Your answer

Thank you for your participation in this study. Please provide your email address, you will be sent an electronic gift card for your participation.

Your answer

Submit   Clear form