Exceptional but not an Exception: Understanding How African American Women Make Their Way

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EXCEPTIONAL BUT NOT AN EXCEPTION:
UNDERSTANDING HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN
MAKE THEIR WAY

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by
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2017

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EXCEPTIONAL BUT NOT AN EXCEPTION:

UNDERSTANDING HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN
MAKE THEIR WAY

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Success in the US has been defined in White American terms (Katz 1985; Mangino, 2014), which may not reflect the values of African American women. The goal of this study was to provide practitioners (e.g., counselors, educators, researchers) with a perspective of African American women from their standpoint. African American women who were raised by female heads of households in under-resourced communities were given the opportunity to name, define, and describe their own successes. Using a phenomenological qualitative interview method of inquiry, a semi-structured interview was used to gain a more in-depth understanding of participants’ lived experiences and how they have been able to experience success in their lives. This qualitative phenomenological dissertation was framed using Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) (Harding, 2006; Hill Collins, 1997) and Blackness Theory (Cross & Strauss, 1998). A total of 13 participants were interviewed for this study. Findings suggested that although some White American measures of success (e.g., educational attainment) resonated with participants, success was largely framed in the context of relationships. Participants not only identified maintaining healthy relationships as leading to success but also attributed their successes to their relationships. Furthermore, context (i.e., shared group experience, impact of oppression) should be addressed to clearly understand that success
for African American women also involves overcoming unique obstacles (e.g., social stereotypes, trauma, poverty). The following questions guided this study: 1) How do African American women who were raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of households describe successes in their own lives? 2) To what do African American women raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of households attribute their success? Implications for parents, community members, counselors, counselor educators, and researchers are provided.
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I have been supremely blessed with an amazing village. There are far too many people to name. However, my mom has been everything to me. Mommy, against all odds you ensured that everything I wanted was attainable. You have ALWAYS had my back and continue to push me and support me in ways that only you can. You have been my sun, my moon, my water, and my air. You showed me how to stand up for myself and fight for what I believed. I will always be your baby girl, and I will always work to make you proud. You did good mom and I adore you.

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“And now unto Him who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.” Jude 1: 24-25.
Dedication

For my great grandmother Elease who didn’t take no mess. For my nieces Christina and Elizabeth, may you always follow your dreams. For my godchildren who deserve a world that values them. For Black women everywhere who are reclaiming their time and their identity. I did this for you and because of you. #blackgirlmagic

#blackgirlsmagic
#blackgirlsrock
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Exceptional But Not an Exception: Understanding How African American Women Make Their Way

Chapter 1: Introduction

A large body of research exists that examines the general condition of African Americans as a whole and in subgroups. However, the overwhelming majority of this research approaches this population from a deficit-based perspective (Baldridge, 2014; Jones, Zalot, Foster, & Sterrett, 2007; McCloud, 2016). Although the body of literature that views African Americans from a strengths-based lens is slowly growing, it remains sparse, particularly regarding the adult, female African American population. Additionally, the literature examining the strengths of African American women is often presented in a White American context which may not reflect the values of the population. For example, research exists that focuses on African American women working in high status careers (Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Morris, 2011) however, this measurement of success may not be meaningful to African American women. Thus, the goal of this study was to provide space for African American women who were raised by female heads of households in under-resourced communities to define and describe their own successes in a way that is defined by their values. Their perspectives help inform the models counselors use when counseling and researching this population.

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the problem and define the terminology that was used for the study. Additionally, rationale for the study and the problem statement will be given. Finally, the questions that guide this study are included.
Overview of Problem

As noted above, African Americans are often viewed in the literature from a deficit or “at-risk” perspective which may serve to detract from their strengths and remove the focus from systemic issues which create and maintain deficiencies (Baldridge, 2014; Jones et al., 2007; McCloud, 2016). In recent years, educators in the United States have begun to refer to an opportunity gap that privileges certain groups of people and disadvantages others (Gay, 2014). Just as there are circumstances that privilege certain groups, there are also constructed conditions that oppress others. If there is a hierarchy of privilege, the cumulative identity of Black women situates them at the very bottom (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; bell hooks, 2000; Epstein, 1973; Hurston, 1937; Robinson, Blockson, & Robinson, 2007), living in a state of multiple oppressions, while those in the dominant culture live in a constant state of opportunity. However, even in the face of oppression, African American women have been able to “propel themselves to press forward in the face of insurmountable challenge” (Jeffries, 2015, p. 81).

For decades, researchers have referenced an achievement gap, commonly referred to as the Black-White achievement gap (Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Rouse, Brooks-Gunn & McLanahan, 2005). This gap refers to disparate educational outcomes between Black and White students on achievement tests. Studies have focused on how to narrow this gap, and multiple approaches, such as the establishment of charter schools, have been implemented to address this problem. However, the term achievement gap seems to put the onus of responsibility on the individual rather than on the existing structures that limit
the opportunity to achieve, such as an inequitable distribution of resources. By doing this, examples of those who “beat the odds” are held up which perpetuates the myth of meritocracy, discounts social injustice, and maintains the status quo (Kivel, 2000). Additionally, a White American view of success (e.g., wealth, power, and individual accomplishment) has been adopted by US society, with members of the society at large either striving to live up to this standard or being judged against it (Katz, 1985; Mangino, 2014). Researchers have made an effort to view African Americans from a strengths-based perspective using terms such as grit (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014; Laursen, 2015; Strayhorn, 2014) and resilience (Behar-Horenstein, West-Olatunji, Moore, Houchen, & Roberts, 2012; Brodsky, 1999; Jeffries, 2015; O’Connor, 2002) when describing the strengths of African Americans; however, it is important to consider an alternate perspective. Considering and including the perspective of the very population being studied, African American women, allows for them to be heard, understood, conceptualized, presented, and treated in more appropriate ways by clinicians, researchers, and educators. Furthermore, labeling a population from an outsider viewpoint has often resulted to relegating populations to a single story (Adichie, 2009) and misconstruing cultural norms and behaviors (Hill Collins, 2000).

Success has frequently been defined in the literature as academic achievement (Hanson, 2007; Jackson, 2013; Kim & Hargrove, 2013), career achievement (Chambers, 2003; Epstein, 1973; Smith, 2001), relationship satisfaction (Running & Roth, 2013) or some combination of the three. However, in the book Having It All? journalist and essayist Veronica Chambers (2003) presented a critical account of issues for successful
African American women. Chambers (2003) associated Black women’s success with achieving affluence, which she strongly tied to educational attainment and she explicitly noted that success equals change related to education and income. All of the aforementioned descriptors of success are reflections of White American standards (Katz, 1985; Mangino, 2014). Although these definitions of success have been widely accepted in our society, the definitions themselves may tend to best reflect the cultural standards of the dominant group (Katz, 1985; Mangino, 2014) and may fail to acknowledge the realities of other portions of the population like African American women who are the target of this study. For this reason, it is important to use a model that reflects the cultural values of the population, in this case African American women, and that is recognizable to the population themselves. The problems created by both the opportunity gap and the use of the White American definition of success for African American women are that the gains and strengths of African American women are likely misunderstood and under recognized, which can negatively impact African American women’s self-esteem and self-concept. Furthermore, misrepresentations of African American women could result in counselors missing significant nuances of the culture and thereby impacting rapport and quality of service delivery.

What follows will be an overview of the problem based on a critical review of the literature that exists studying successful African American women who were raised by female heads of households in under-resourced communities. Using a Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST; Harding, 2006) lens, to be described below, extant literature on African American women who achieved various types of success was summarized and
critiqued. Related literature that informed this study also was critiqued using an FST-based analysis. Although definitions of positive outcomes as they relate to White American success will be provided later in this chapter, this study was not seeking to understand women who met these definitions. On the contrary, women who have been able to move beyond societal expectations and achieve fulfilled lives, by their own definition(s), were the target population of interest. A description of the study will be provided along with the research questions that guide the study. Feminist Standpoint Theory (Harding, 2006) and Blackness Theory (Cross & Strausss, 1998; see Chapter 2 for a more detailed description) was used to frame the study in an effort to conduct culturally sound research understanding ways in which African American women continue working toward fulfilled lives within a context of systemic oppression. Finally, the methods of data collection and analysis will be described.

Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) highlights internalized oppression providing a warning to oppressed people to avoid accepting the views of the dominant group (Harding, 2006; Payne & Suddler, 2014). This theory is an epistemology that provides a framework for conducting research. FST encourages researchers to conduct research from the perspective of the oppressed group as an insider, so that nuances of the culture are understood (Harding, 2006). FST takes into account the history and lived experiences of the group while confronting issues of power (Harding, 2006; Hill Collins, 1997). FST provides a vital lens through which individuals can view existing literature about African American women raised in under-resourced communities and can assess that literature
while recognizing that research is not exempt from oppressive practices such as racism, sexism, and classism.

In the literature review in Chapter 2, it will be evident that success for African American women has been measured by White American standards, yet the use of these very standards exemplifies one way that oppression exists in research. FST (Harding, 2006) is relevant due to the multiple marginalized statuses African American women hold. Oppressive systems present barriers that impede the progress of this population and ignore their successes by not acknowledging their strengths as they relate to their cultural values. Using FST, we can better understand the lived experiences of African American women raised by female heads of households in under-resourced communities and how they have been able to achieve success from their perspectives. Having an understanding of African American women’s experiences allows counselors both to better conceptualize their mental, emotional, and behavioral concerns, and to use counseling models that are culturally appropriate. These experiences not only show a commitment to social justice, but can also be a step toward minimizing their cultural mistrust. Cultural mistrust refers to the apprehension people of color feel toward White professionals due to historical and persistent oppression (Terrell & Terrell, 1989), between the African American community and helping professionals. Hopefully, this will aid in decreasing the drop-out rate of African Americans from therapy, and encourage more members of this group to seek counseling (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007;2008).
African American Women and Girls

Reported findings indicated that Black girls fared better than Black boys educationally, which led researchers to direct their attention to Black boys, the group for whom the greatest detriment lies (Kafele, 2012). Although data suggest that Black girls outperformed Black boys, they still lagged behind their White and Asian counterparts (Kafele, 2012) academically. This fact speaks to the opportunity gap and the failure of systems to promote educational success within this population. Furthermore, in adulthood, Black girls’ academic success has not led to economically successful African American women in the workforce. For example, African American women in the workforce are employed at similar rates as African American men, but paid at the lowest rate out of all groups (Chambers, 2003; Jeffries, 2015; Kafele, 2012; Matthews-Armstead, 2002; Robinson & Werblow, 2012). Furthermore, Black women persistently experienced “less success in the areas of political representation, economic/family stability, professional/business development, health and educational achievement than Black males, White females and White males collectively” and they remain “the most unemployed group of all women of color” (Jeffries, 2015, p. 81).

Even though Black girls achieve at higher rates than their male counterparts, their academic successes and vulnerabilities are largely ignored and could lead to detrimental outcomes (Kafele, 2012). This trend of ignoring successful African American girls and women is not unique to schools, but can be seen in the limited research available on this population, as well as in academia, in the media, and in various other fields (Cheung, 2015; Gay, 2014; Goff, 2014; Kafele, 2012; Williams & Bryan, 2012). Williams and
Bryan (2012) found that high-achieving low income students often go unnoticed in schools unless there is an issue, and thus are less likely to complete school or attend colleges than their high-achieving, higher income counterparts. This is an example of one of the detrimental outcomes that can result from ignoring the successes and vulnerabilities of this population. The limited attention of teachers, counselors, and researchers to the success of Black girls may contribute to their invisibility in the literature which, in turn, may extend to the successes of Black women. Hence, those with the power to amplify this issue, such as researchers, may be focused elsewhere, which perpetuates the invisibility of this population.

**Exceptional Exceptions**

Although a vast amount of research has been conducted on African Americans in low-income communities (e.g., Basch, 2011; Byck, Bolland, Dick, Ashbeck, & Mustanski, 2013; Westbrook, Harden, Holmes, Meisch, & Whittaker, 2013), strengths-based literature is scant. In instances where strengths are highlighted, they are often framed in a way that may suggest exceptionalism. Consequently, African Americans who achieve in any area may be painted as exceptions to expectations for African Americans. In particular, those from under-resourced backgrounds may be viewed as having achieved the impossible, thereby suggesting that examples of success are rarely prevalent within this community. Even newer studies that focus on resilience or grit refer to a requirement for “tough-mindedness” or “strong-will” to overcome oppression in a way that only the strong survive, and these attitudes imply that a selective few achieve, that failure is the norm, and that the individual is responsible for his/her fate rather than
considering the role played by systemic oppression (Laursen, 2015; O’Connor, 2002; Strayhorn, 2014; Williams, Greenleaf, Albert, & Barnes, 2014).

**Social Class**

Existing research on African American achievement has largely focused on school-aged youth and predicted outcomes for this population. The general consensus seems to be that poverty, among other variables such as being raised by a single mother, yield dismal results (Robinson & Werblow, 2012; Williams & Bryan, 2012). From an FST perspective, it is important to examine the power relations at play that create social conditions to maintain the status quo and ignore the perspectives of oppressed populations. Outcomes in the literature for African Americans raised in under-resourced communities include an increased risk for developing behavioral problems (Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang, & Glassman, 2000), a greater chance for early termination of school (Hill, Morris, Castells, & Walker 2011; McGee, 2013), an increased chance of incarceration (Wildeman & White American, 2010), and a higher risk for teenage pregnancy (Basch, 2011). The confluence of these outcomes combined with the oppression faced because of the dual identities of being both Black and female not only make it difficult to achieve the White American standard of success but leave little room for their own definitions of success. While negative outcomes certainly exist for some, a disservice to the community occurs if information about successes that have occurred is withheld or presented from the dominant perspective instead of the perspective of the group (Harding, 2006).
The Opportunity Gap

Ethnic disparities in education have been highlighted since 1966; however, as time has progressed the opportunity gap has continued to result in an even greater disparity in outcomes (Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Rouse, Brooks-Gunn & McLanahan, 2005). This stark academic opportunity gap between African American students and White students is evident as early as entrance into kindergarten (Fryer & Levitt, 2004). Hill Collins (1997) noted the importance of questioning systems’ participation in hierarchical power relations. For example, scholars and consumers must question whether systems essentially perpetuate injustice. Clearly, school policy and practice must be questioned.

The Role of Parenting

In addition to poverty, being raised by a single mother has also been identified as a risk factor for negative outcomes (Robinson & Werblow, 2012). Outcomes included increased risk for developing psychological, adjustment, and behavioral problems (Barrett & Turner, 2005; Simons, Chen, Simons, Brody & Cutrona, 2006). Such negative findings suggest that just being raised by a female head of household decreases the likelihood of achieving positive outcomes. However, a growing body of research suggests that the parental relationship can be a protective factor for African American youth living in poverty (Roberts, Lewis, & Carmack, 2011; Robinson & Werblow, 2012; Sterrett, Jones, & Kincaid, 2009; West-Olatunji, Sanders, Mehta, & Behar-Horenstein, 2010). Additionally, using FST, it is important to understand this experience from the perspective of group members within the community.
The Context of Oppression

While differences in the quality of educational institutions have been largely identified as the culprit, other confounding factors have been identified as contributing to negative outcomes for African American women raised in under-resourced communities in female-led households (Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Williams & Bryan, 2012). For example, systemic forces such as institutionalized racism have been found to impact the achievement of African Americans in low-income communities (Ani, 2013). The quality of educational institutions directly reflects the impact of oppressive conditions such as racism and classism, as evidenced by data suggesting that schools with predominantly White student bodies spend twice as much per child compared to schools with predominantly Black student bodies (Ani, 2013).

Matthews-Armstead (2002) noted the interplay of racism, classism, and sexism as it relates to Black women who are poor, and to their families. Thus, Black women in under-resourced communities likely face triple oppression (race, gender, class), which impacts their interactions in both the personal and systemic (school, work) levels. However, despite the opportunity gap and confounding factors that have been linked to psychological, economic, and professional deficits, African Americans raised in under-resourced communities have been able to continue achieving goals albeit at times defined in a White American context (Matthews-Armstead, 2002; West-Olatunji et al., 2010; Williams & Bryan, 2012). Jenkins (2005) echoed Alice Walker (1982) in her statement, “even people whose lives have been filled with violence and despair are able to transform themselves in positive and creative ways” (p. 28). The studies referenced above defined
success using a White American standard, however, research conducted from the perspective of African Americans using their cultural frame is largely absent from the literature, particularly within the counseling discipline. Additionally, the language used to describe this population has been constructed by outsiders and I am choosing to deviate from this terminology. Terms used in this study, including common terms used in the literature are defined below.

Definition of Terms

Language describing marginalized populations and issues impacting them can often be seen as pathologizing and stigmatizing. Therefore, I tried to deviate from this practice by using strengths-based terminology that is defined below. However, studies in the literature review often used terms framed in the dominant lens. These terms were presented as such and are also defined below.

Female Heads of Households

Female heads of households refer to unpartnered women who are the primary caregivers for their children. In the literature, these women are often referred to as single mothers. Although the term single mother is commonly used in the literature to describe households where the mother is non-partnered or is the sole provider and nurturer, this term holds a negative connotation and is misleading as it does not take into account extended family support networks and fictive kin on whom many African American mothers rely for support, and who actively participate in and influence the child’s development (Jones et al., 2007). Therefore, unless the research being reviewed specifically uses an alternative term such as “single mother,” female head of household or
mother-led household will be used. Single-parent led household is not being used because this term could include fathers and grandparents, and the focus of this study is on research in which the identified population was raised by their mothers.

**Under-Resourced**

Under-resourced refers to communities and households that are plagued by poverty, dilapidated educational institutions, and violence. Under-resourced is a term used instead of low-income to highlight the responsibility of systems that have ensured the maintenance of economic and social oppression of certain populations (Harding, 2006; Hill Collins, 1997; Kivel, 2000). Although “at-risk” is commonly used to describe groups living in communities characterized by violence and poverty, this term is excluded from this study because it simultaneously pathologizes the populations and disregards their assets (Baldridge, 2014).

**African American**

African American refers to persons of African descent born in America who likely are unable to trace their countries of origin due to the damaging impact of slavery. This study is particularly interested in the experiences of American born Black women of African descent and the term African American is being used instead of Black to describe them. Black is a term that includes other populations such as Caribbean born persons, however, these groups are not the focus of this study. Various studies in Chapter 2 use both Black and African American to describe their participants, and I will use these terms when specifically referring to these studies.
**White American Standards**

White American culture refers to the values of the dominant group in the U.S., which includes White, male, middle-class, heterosexual, and Christian persons. The values of this group were depicted as including preferences for individualism, status, competition, and a family structure that includes a husband as the breadwinner along with a wife, and children (Katz, 1985). These values have often been referred to in the literature as “western” however, several groups, including African American women, live in a western context, so using this term would be dismissive of their experiences. Furthermore, if western translates to White American, it means this group remains invisible and the goal of this study is to amplify their voices rather than marginalize them. I will use White American to capture the values and expectations that are widely accepted and inappropriately thrust upon African Americans as the standard to meet (Katz, 1985).

**Positive Outcomes**

Positive outcomes refer to specific successes as defined in White American culture, such as educational attainment, accumulation of wealth, high status occupations or positions of power (Katz, 1985). It also includes living up to the societal standard in professional and personal life (e.g., heterosexual marriage, children, and home-owner) (Chambers, 2003; Katz, 1985). This is the definition used to frame the literature review however, one primary purpose of this study was to see if this definition fits for participants in this study.
Negative Outcomes

Negative outcomes refer to situations or behaviors that may disrupt and limit opportunities to achieve a fulfilled life. Examples include incarceration, premature pregnancy, emotional or psychological problems, and early termination of education (Barrett & Turner, 2005; Robinson & Werblow, 2012; Simons et al., 2006). Continued poverty is another outcome that would be included in this category.

Fulfillment

Fulfillment is defined as being “satisfied or happy because of fully developing one’s abilities or character” (Oxford University Press, 2016). For this study, I am viewing success differently than the White American standard of success and am seeking participants who are not only seen as successful by their peers and community members but also feel successful themselves. I understand that participants may use a different word to describe fulfillment, but this is how I am choosing to identify it. I recognize this may only be one aspect of success, therefore, I am also seeking terminology and definitions from participants.

Opportunity Gap

One of the most researched issues affecting African Americans is the Black-White achievement gap, hereafter referred to as the opportunity gap. The opportunity gap refers to the inequitable distribution of resources that contributes to disparate achievement outcomes between students of color in under-resourced communities and White students in middle class communities. The term achievement gap can suggest that the failure lies within the students themselves rather than the conditions that create a gap.
The quality of schools in urban communities may be compromised and resources are distributed inequitably which influences the learning that can occur (Ani, 2013; Travis & Leech, 2014).

**Rationale for the Study**

According to recent statistics, African American youth in the United States have the highest overall rates of poverty (35%) and have the highest percentage of single parent-led families (72%; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2011; KidsCount.org, 2013). Given these statistics, African American families are likely the group most vulnerable to experiencing a multitude of negative outcomes associated with poverty and membership in marginalized groups (e.g., African American, women, low-income) such as developing psychological and behavioral problems and early termination of education (Hill et al., 2011; Jackson et al., 2000). To negate the idea of exceptionalism, the experiences of African American women who were raised by female heads of household in under-resourced communities and who were able to propel themselves forward must be understood. A within-group definition of success will likely result in more examples of successful African American women, thereby negating the stereotype that successful African American women are rarities. In this study, I aimed to understand the experiences of participants, and develop new constructs around how success is named, defined, and achieved in this community.

**Problem Statement**

Due to the combination of deficit-based research about African Americans who both live in under-resourced communities and were raised by female heads of household
within social conditions that create oppressive circumstances, a dismal picture has been painted of this population. Although these outcomes have been studied and may be accurate for some, they likely do not convey the full story of the lived experiences of African Americans. A vast amount of the research on this community has been conducted by researchers who are not members of this community, thus their research may be impacted by internalized negative messages they received about this population. Although researchers are encouraged to conduct unbiased research and may have received training in multicultural issues, Sue et al., (2007) suggested that mere membership in the dominant group makes them susceptible to harboring internalized racist and sexist beliefs. Furthermore, outsiders may not be privy to the kind of sharing that occurs with insiders. For this reason, FST suggests that research on oppressed groups be completed by members of that group or researchers who have immersed themselves within the group enough to understand the nuances of that group’s experience (Harding, 2006). As I will describe below in my researcher’s stance, my status as an African American woman raised by a female head of household positions me well to use FST to study my community. Therefore, in line with FST, the hegemonic discourse of privileging the work of the outsider needs to be examined and disrupted, particularly because so many negative outcomes are reported and repeated about this population that researchers’ motives may come into question. Furthermore, questioning the motives of those in positions of power is an important function of FST.

Continuing to view African American families from a pathology-focused perspective will prevent much needed identification and understanding of their lived
experiences. Counselors working with African American women can be misinformed about their clients and will benefit from reading strengths-based representations of this population, particularly from African American women’s own perspective. Due to both cultural mistrust and the stigma around mental health that remains in the African American community (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007), African American women need to feel recognized fully for counseling to be effective. The purpose of this study was to provide practitioners with a new perspective for understanding African American women from under-resourced communities that will better help them conceptualize and treat their clients. Another goal was to allow space for African American women who were raised by female heads of household in under-resourced communities to name their own successes in ways that are natural and meaningful for them. Additionally, as the title of this dissertation suggests, the idea of exceptionalism regarding this population was challenged, as “success” defined by this community likely differs from that of the dominant society and is not as limited as mainstream constructions suggest.

Significance of the Study

One of the hallmarks of the counseling profession is the goal of achieving a holistic understanding of the population being served (Day-Vines, Patton, & Baytops, 2003). Therefore, acknowledging the impact of systemic forces, such as racism, sexism, and classism, while also understanding the lived experiences of those with whom we work is integral. For example, the sociopolitical climate during this study was intense with the increased visibility of Black persons being murdered by police officers and a highly controversial election circulating through mainstream media. This climate shaped
interactions with participants, their ideas of success, my analysis, and this study as a whole. Therefore, using a culturally appropriate model to obtain information about the experiences of this population from an insider perspective was not only necessary but provided different information about these women that may have been missed by outsiders. As an insider, my experiences have equipped me to conduct this research in different ways than an outsider who may not be prepared to understand the systemic forces and lived experiences affecting African American women. Gay (2014) noted of her own experience in academia that she has found “there are no reflections of your experience” (p. 59). Her comments suggest both the isolation that Black women in academia experience and the paucity of Black women’s voices in the literature. I believe that the shortage of strengths-based research on African American women may have a similar isolating and limiting impact. My identities as a Black woman, a counselor, a social justice advocate, and a researcher all motivate me to ensure that African American women recognize themselves reflected in the literature, as this experience contributes to self-esteem, can provide a sense of universality, and prepares counselors to work with them in culturally appropriate ways.

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do African American women who were raised in low-income communities by female heads of households describe successes in their own lives?

2. To what do African American women raised in low-income communities by female heads of households attribute their ability to move forward/make their way?
Conclusion

Although there is an emerging body of strengths-based research that focuses on African Americans as a whole (Laursen, 2015; O’Connor, 2002; Strayhorn, 2014; Williams et al., 2014), few articles address success and paths to success for African American women, specifically those raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of households. Furthermore, although well-intentioned, research that has focused on strengths has been framed by White American standards which does not leave room for constructions of success that deviate from this standard (Laursen, 2015; O’Connor, 2002; Strayhorn, 2014; Williams et al., 2014). Therefore, the successes of African American women may go unacknowledged or are portrayed as exceptional, against the norm for this population. The following chapter will provide a review of relevant literature that focuses on success in African Americans. Because there was a limited amount of research on African American women from under-resourced communities who were raised by female heads of household, literature that focused on African Americans and success was included.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review includes a detailed description of the theories used to frame the study. Additionally, due to the scarcity of literature on African American women raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of household, three bodies of literature were reviewed: (1) African American children and adolescents raised by single mothers in low-income communities (2) African American women raised in low-income communities; and (3) studies examining the professional success of both African American women and men. The goal was to determine how the literature about African Americans, particularly African American women, defined success, and to what success was attributed.

Theoretical Frameworks

There are two theories that provided the framework for this literature review and the study overall. These theories were chosen because of their attention to both the race and gender of African American women, and attention to the oppression this population faces due to their racial and gender statuses. Furthermore, these theories helped to provide both a foundation for the study and a lens for understanding how African American women who were raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of households were able to achieve successes by their definitions.

**Feminist Standpoint Theory.** Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) is an epistemology that provides a clear guide on the way in which research should be conducted with particular applicability for oppressed populations (Harding, 2006). Basic tenets of FST include: a) conducting research from the oppressed groups’
perspective, b) placing emphasis on the shared group experience with respect to power or the lack thereof, c) addressing and challenging social conditions that construct oppressed and privileged groups, and d) highlighting the values of the oppressed group within hierarchical power relations (Harding, 2006; Hill Collins, 1997). Harding (2004) suggested that research on an oppressed group be conducted by someone who lives as a member of an oppressed group or at minimum does the necessary work to develop an emic understanding, which is the first tenet of FST. I am fulfilling this requirement by being a member of the very population from which I am seeking information as I am an African American woman who was raised by an unpartnered mother in an under-resourced community. Therefore, I have firsthand knowledge of the impact of multiple oppressions on everyday life and I share the lived experience.

The second tenet is to understand that groups share a history and lived experience, as such “group realities transcend individual experiences” (Hill Collins, 1997, p. 375). With respect to my population of interest, African American women raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of households have shared lived experiences with race, sex, and class discrimination that continues to persist and will likely continue in our society. The third tenet for use of FST is addressed in this study by challenging and opposing commonly accepted White American standards of success and by increasing awareness of how the hierarchy of power creates and maintains social inequality (Harding, 2006; Hill Collins, 1997). Finally, because the last main tenet of FST acknowledges the absolute importance of privileging the values of the oppressed group, this study was designed to enable participants to name and apply meaning to their
own experiences based on their own values. The tenets espoused by FST theory were well suited to my study and, therefore was the lens through which I conducted my study.

**Blackness Theory.** Blackness Theory was applied to this study to help me understand how participants negotiate their blackness in ways that may help them lead fulfilling lives and be recognized by their community in ways they recognize themselves. Blackness theory was developed out of the Nigrescence identity model to explain the functions of Black identity in everyday life (Cross & Strauss, 1998). Blackness Theory addresses thoughts, emotions, and behaviors by accounting for the “ideas a person holds about racism, Black people, Black culture, and the Black experience… the emotions linked to such ideas and… the action choices that logically flow from the fusion of ideas and emotions, as stimulated by various context variables” (Cross & Strauss, 1998, Chapter 12, Section 2, para. 1). Cross and Strauss (1998) discussed five functions of Black identity: bonding, bridging, buffering, code switching, and individualism.

Bonding refers to the way in which Black people connect with group members, Black culture, and the Black experience (Cross & Strauss, 1998; Payne & Suddler, 2014). Bridging refers to the social capabilities of Black people to intimately interact with non-Blacks in a way that both parties’ cultures and backgrounds are respected and appreciated (Cross & Strauss, 1998; Payne & Suddler, 2014). Psychological protection is provided by the function of buffering (Cross & Strauss, 1998). Buffering involves being able to assess situations that threaten identity and respond accordingly based on prior experience and beliefs (Cross & Strauss, 1998).
Code Switching involves the ability to express or shed behaviors associated with Black culture and identity to meet the demands of the environmental context (Cross & Strauss, 1998). For example, although I may use the term “ain’t” among other Black peers, I consciously avoid using this term in the classroom setting as the professor or the student, where it is expected that I exhibit certain competencies deemed appropriate for the environment (Cross & Strauss, 1998). Finally, individualism refers to thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that may not be connected to Black culture but are considered unique to the personality of the individual (Cross & Strauss, 1998). Those who focus on individualism tend to have a decreased identification with Black culture and have more of an assimilated worldview (Cross & Strauss, 1998).

Blackness theory is relevant to this population because of the participants’ racial status and their social context that potentially always presents a threat. Furthermore, Blackness Theory provides practical strategies that may explain how Black people negotiate their identities and environments. Understanding the way in which participants negotiate their lives may provide insight into their ability to achieve fulfilled lives outside of societal expectations.

As described in Chapter 1, the successes achieved by African American women, particularly those raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of household, have received little attention within the literature. Rather than focusing on success, scholars have focused on resilience in African Americans as a group. West-Olatunji et al. (2010) defined resiliency as the ability to succeed in spite of the presence of risk factors such as poverty. In contrast, success has often been defined in White American terms.
(e.g., money, power, education), which is based on the values of White, middle-class men, and therefore may be limiting, given the cultural values of this population (Harding, 2006; Katz, 1985; Mangino, 2014). To underscore the dangers of taking a resiliency perspective, I critiqued and ultimately rejected the discourse around resilience due to the implication (based on the White American model) that those who achieve successes in spite of barriers may often be framed as exceptions to low expectations. Instead, this study focused on gaining an understanding of the group’s perspective on successes based on their cultural values.

To better understand this phenomenon, I used Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) to explain the dynamics enacted within the literature and the field. FST warns researchers to avoid accepting the views of the dominant group and advocates for disruption of the dominant discourse by challenging social conditions that create oppression. Research is another arena impacted by oppressive dogma and the studies in this review are no exception, given that the premise of many of these studies seems to largely be to identify ways individuals can navigate a flawed system with little attention to criticizing and disrupting the systems designed to maintain their oppression (Harding, 2006). Therefore, not only does it become the sole responsibility of the individual to succeed, but the research is presented in a way that continues to promote the perspective of the privileged (Harding, 2006). This study aimed to open up a new space for African American women raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of households to develop new constructs (e.g., language) that recognize their successes, as well as challenge dominant constructs as is urged by Feminist Standpoint Theory. Additionally, this perspective,
which is largely missing from the literature, can inform the work of counselors and practitioners working with African American women.

Because success has been defined as academic and career achievement, in this chapter, I reviewed the literature on African American children and youth related to academic achievement, African Americans raised in under-resourced communities, and African American women and career achievement. Additionally, social stereotypes and their impact on the success of African American women emerged as significant in this study, therefore literature regarding the impact of stereotypes on the success of African American women is also included. As the literature review below will illustrate, positive outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, involvement in extracurricular activities) based on White American standards have been identified in the extant literature on children and youth. However, limited research exists identifying or defining positive outcomes for adult African American adult women. Additionally, because research is another arena encapsulated in racism, sexism, and classism, these women are presented through others’ observations and not their own perspectives of their lived experiences and what is meaningful to them (Harding, 2006). Even when using White American standards, the literature that noted positive outcomes for African American women was limited. Because success is subjective and commonly used descriptors are limiting, this study was more interested in African American women who have been able to achieve fulfillment despite societal expectations for them and societal standards of success.

Initially, only research that met several criteria was used in this literature review. Studies chosen included those that focused-on individuals who: (a) identified as African
American women; (b) lived in under-resourced communities; (c) were raised by female heads of household; and (d) achieved any variation of success (i.e., career, educational, family). However, studies that met these criteria in a search of PsycINFO only yielded eight relevant articles; therefore, other bodies of literature were reviewed. Studies that focused on achievement and success in African American adolescents were included, as well as studies that focused on African American women in general and professional and academic success in adult African American populations regardless of whether they were raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of households. A total of 44 articles were initially included in this literature review. Because social stereotypes emerged as significant for participants, literature focusing on the impact of social stereotypes in African American women’s lives was also included. This literature included articles, dissertations, and other important literary works for a total of 56 writings.

**Review of the Literature**

Because success has been defined by White American standards, the goal of this literature review was to synthesize relevant findings about how African American women raised by female heads of household in under-resourced communities defined and experienced success. Information is presented by population: (1) African American children and adolescents raised by single mothers in low-income communities (2) African American women raised in low-income communities; and (3) studies examining the professional success of both African American women and men. While the latter body of literature does not fulfill all the requirements in regards to class, gender, and
makeup of household, it was relevant to this research due to the race of the population presented, the strengths-based focus, and the focus on success.

**Children and Adolescents**

Multiple studies examined achievement outcomes for African American children and youth. These studies focused on student academic success among pre-school and elementary school students, middle school students, and high-school youth and adolescents. This section of the literature review will address the following areas: mentors and role models, positive relationship with mother, extended family support, self-perception, involvement in activities, church identity, and cultural capital. These themes were chosen because they were explicitly stated in the literature. Although the population of study in this literature did not consist of adult women, the majority of the articles meet all of the other criteria mentioned: raised in an under-resourced community, by a female head of household, and achieved success, which generally equates to academic success. Information from this body of literature is relevant to this population due to the specific attention to their upbringing and influences on their successes. I expected participants to reflect on their childhood experiences, therefore, information on children and adolescents is helpful.

**Mentors/models.** A growing body of research suggests that when positive models are present, chances of positive outcomes for African American youth are increased (Robinson & Werblow, 2012; Tucker, Dixon & Griddine, 2010). The same positive relationship between role models and youth has been found in the research on African American women who have achieved fulfillment in their lives (Fries-Britt &
However, studies have also suggested that while role models can serve as a protective factor, they are often lacking in the African American community (Epstein, 1973; Kafele, 2012). In understanding the experiences of successful African American youth, the presence and significance of positive role models seems vital, as is explained later (Robinson & Werblow, 2012; Tucker et al, 2010).

Robinson and Werblow (2012) conducted a multiple case study design with five academically successful males and their mothers to understand the parenting practices of these unmarried mothers and the impact on their sons’ academic success. During the focus group with the mothers, a theme indicating mothers’ propensity to identify positive role models and mentors for their sons emerged (Robinson & Werblow, 2012). Although they lived in under-resourced communities, mothers encouraged their sons to be successful, which they felt would be more realistic if successful models were accessible in their community (Robinson & Werblow, 2012). Therefore, the mothers were intentional in connecting their sons with role models within their community. Prior studies have indicated that individuals who reside in the same community tend to share the same goals (Roberts et al., 2011). In an effort to avoid their children succumbing to negative outcomes common in their communities (e.g., gang involvement, incarceration, and school dropout), parents may attempt to partner their children with positive role models. Sadly, models that represent a variety of occupations are often limited in low-income communities. Therefore, as a result of this deficit, children and youth may have a limited knowledge of the world of work, and in turn may feel they have limited possibilities.
Research on the influence of female heads of household on their sons’ success indicated that the presence of positive role models contributed to the academic success of African American youth in low-income communities (Robinson & Werblow, 2012). Developing positive relationships within community is a form of Bonding, as explained by Blackness Theory. This Bonding also helps to foster a positive Black identity (Payne & Suddler, 2014). Thus, more positive role models in these target communities may aid in expanding possible outcomes for African American youth. Furthermore, these models could assist in keeping youth engaged in their education by showing how education directly influences vocation.

**Maternal relationship.** One of the most common factors that participants in studies reviewed here reported as essential to their success in school was having a positive relationship with their mothers (Halgunseth et al., 2005; Hanson, 2007; Hubbard, 1999; Matthews-Armstead, 2002; Roberts et al., 2011; Robinson & Werblow, 2012; Sterrett, Jones & Kincaid, 2009; Tucker, Dixon & Griddine, 2010; West-Olatunji et al., 2010; Williams & Bryan, 2012). Matthews-Armstead (2002) conducted a comparative case study of five high school girls who had completed or were completing high school and found that participants reported feeling their relationships with their mothers helped to cultivate their self-perception of their identity as well as their emotional independence. The participants noted that although their mothers may not have been openly affectionate, love was shown through support and provision (Matthews-Armstead, 2002). For example, participants reported understanding the sacrifices their mothers made to simply provide food, and they interpreted this as an act of love.
Williams and Bryan (2012) completed a qualitative study in which they interviewed eight African American students from under-resourced communities who were being raised by female heads of households. Their participants reported having a positive relationship defined as “warm, supportive, responsive, and close (p. 294),” and expressed a sense of indebtedness to them for their impact on their lives (Williams & Bryan, 2012). Participants reported positive parenting practices of their mothers such as providing praise for earning good grades in school and setting realistic but high expectations for academic achievement. These participants viewed their mothers in a positive way and felt their success was a way of “giving back.”

It was also common for parents to share their stories of hardship, which served to motivate their children (Hubbard, 1999; Williams & Bryan, 2012). Hubbard (1999) used a qualitative study to interview 30 African American high school students in an under-resourced community. Results indicated that the mothers’ stories of hardships were especially motivating to the females in the study to try to avoid similar hardship. Williams and Bryan (2012) noted that these stories of hardship encouraged their participants to succeed academically.

Four articles explicitly examined the impact of mothers on the success of their children (Halgunseth, 2005; Roberts et al., 2011; Robinson & Werblow, 2012; West-Olatunji et al., 2010). Each of these studies focused on communication between mothers and their children. Findings in a study that surveyed 462 African American youth suggested that more verbal communication occurred in female led households than two parent homes (Roberts et al., 2011). Mothers seemed to use increased verbal
communication as a technique to gain an understanding of their children’s world and also to gain knowledge about their interests, likes, dislikes, and goals (Roberts et al., 2011; Robinson & Werblow, 2012). Information gained from children was important because mothers would then seek out opportunities for their children to engage in positive activities (e.g., sports, church, band) surrounding their interests (Robinson & Werblow, 2012). The amount of verbal communication in female led households was found to serve as a buffer to help prevent children and youth from engaging in maladaptive behavior, such as affiliation with violent groups (Roberts et al., 2011).

West-Olatunji et al. (2010) highlighted the ability of mothers to foster resilience in their children in their qualitative study of 18 participants. They found that their participants used an authoritative parenting style, defined as “discipline coupled with demonstrative caring” (p.141), which is common in African American households (West-Olatunji et al., 2010). Although this parenting style has been criticized by White American standards as overly aggressive, it was perceived as a way to express caring and encouragement (West-Olatunji et al., 2010). West-Olatunji et al. (2010) asserted that the authoritarian parenting style used by African American mothers in this study not only fostered resilience in their children, but it also was related to above average academic achievement and performance. Therefore, although previous research has cited being raised by a female head of household as a risk factor (Barrett & Turner, 2005; Robinson & Werblow, 2012; Simons, Chen, Simons, Brody & Cutrona, 2006), in this study, the parenting style of African American mothers was related to positive outcomes in regards to academic achievement.
Despite the negative outcomes (psychological, adjustment, and behavioral problems) associated with being raised by a female head of household (Barrett & Turner, 2005; Simons, Chen, Simons, Brody & Cutrona, 2006), Robinson and Werblow (2012) found that mothers in their study seemed to put the needs of their children before their own needs in an effort to foster self-esteem. Therefore, it is not surprising that a survey study indicated that African American adolescents from single parent homes have educational aspirations that are equivalent to adolescents in two parent homes (Roberts et al., 2011). Furthermore, parents fostered these desires by encouraging their children to become successful, stressing the importance of an education, and presenting college as an expectation and not a choice (Tucker et al., 2010). Tucker et al. (2010) noted in their qualitative study with 9 African American male students, that some of their participants would lose privileges if their educational performance was lacking. Therefore, regardless of the educational background of the parents in these studies, education for the children was still seen as important and necessary for success.

The findings above suggest three things: 1) the importance of education is highlighted in African American families, 2) educational aspirations of Black and White youth are similar, and 3) an achievement gap continues to persist. From the perspective of FST, scholars must question systems or social conditions that create a huge opportunity gap in the absence of an intellectual or aspirational gap. Historically, it has been argued that Blacks were innately a lesser species, and in some forms, this idea persists today (Parham et al., 2011). Thus, quantifying success in White American terms and presenting information such as an “achievement gap” further perpetuates this idea of
innate inferiority. Yet, this gap does not consider the existing barriers that create a gap, such as an economic gap, that impacts the quality of education students receive. Using FST to analyze this gap, I chose to examine the social conditions that created the gap and I acknowledged the role of power in this dynamic. To better understand the system, we must question who benefits from this stratification and who is marginalized by it (Hill Collins, 1997). Furthermore, we must look at the groups being disadvantaged and indict a system that actively fails to support and acknowledge the desired success of these groups.

**Extended family support.** The mainstream definition of family (i.e., two parents, biological children) may be insufficient for the African American community because the definitions were never designed for them (Boyd-Franklin, 2006; Jones et al., 2007). Therefore, using a model designed for the dominant culture to measure other cultures against is unjust because outcomes will always reflect a pejorative view (Boyd-Franklin, 2006). It is important to note that many African American households are led by a female, and thus this type of family may only be problematic from an outsider point of view (Brodsky, 1999; Roberts et al., 2011). Female heads of households are common within the African American community, and “adolescents may have adapted to this structure as the norm” (Roberts et al., 2011, p. 317). Thus, despite the obstacles that may exist in female-led households and the additional stress that may accompany it, this family makeup may not be seen as insufficient by group members. Furthermore, in a broader context, the American family is not static, given divorce and the changing
Another protective factor commonly reported in the literature that seems to contribute to the success of African American youth in low-income communities is the role of extended family support (Roberts et al., 2011; Sterrett et al., 2009; West-Olatunji et al., 2010; Williams & Bryan, 2012). The term single mother can be very misleading, as other adults often assist in childcare in African American families (Jones et al., 2007; Roberts et al., 2011). As previously mentioned, Boyd-Franklin (2006) and Jones et al. (2007) posited that the narrow definition of family that has been used is insufficient for African American families as it does not take into consideration the role of extended family and fictive kin. Fictive kin refers to individuals viewed as family that adopt caretaker roles who are often not related by blood or marriage. Although mothers may not be married, other important figures (e.g., children’s fathers, grandmothers, other family members or family friends) may be active in children’s lives. Sterrett et al. (2009) refer to this as co-parenting. Because the mother is the primary caregiver and breadwinner in matriarch led households, she may not be as available to the child due to high work demands or other factors. However, African American mothers were found to be resourceful in ensuring that despite various obstacles, the needs of their families were met (Brodsky, 1999; Dill, 1998).

West-Olatunji et al. (2010) also discussed the role of extended family support, and acknowledged that this also encompassed support beyond biological family members. Although the success of African American adolescents in low-income communities is not
solely attributable to extended family support, positive parenting from mothers plus positive relationships with co-parents or extended family support yielded higher levels of adjustment for these youth (Sterrett et al., 2009). Therefore, the effects of positive maternal parenting were enhanced when the youth had a positive relationship with the co-parent (Sterrett et al., 2009). Furthermore, although the literature paid limited attention to the perceptions of absent father figures, they may have a psychological presence in their children’s lives even if they are not physically present (Thomas et al., 2008). Cartwright and Henriksen (2012) interviewed five African American males and found that although their fathers were not physically present they still maintained respect for their fathers. Some participants even confronted the researchers in this study because they were worried their stories could be seen as disrespectful to their fathers and they did not want it portrayed in that way (Cartwright & Henriksen, 2012).

**Extracurricular involvement.** Participation in activities has been shown to positively impact academic achievement and protect against dropping out of high school (Irvin, Farmer, Leung, Thompson, & Hutchins, 2010; Williams and Bryan; 2012). In a quantitative study with 208 participants, students scored higher on standardized tests and obtained higher grades when they participated in activities (Irvin et al., 2010). Low-income African American youth who were at risk educationally improved their academic achievement when they participated in activities (Irvin et al., 2010). Irvin et al. (2010) noted that these positive outcomes are similar whether the participation is in a school activity, community activity, or both. Williams and Bryan (2012) also found that participants attributed their success to participation in extracurricular activities such as
school sports and outside of school activities, such as involvement in community activities.

Robinson and Werblow (2012) noted that the mothers in their study placed emphasis on putting their children first. This included linking them to activities or sports in school as a way to minimize unstructured and unsupervised time and to decrease the opportunity for engaging in seemingly destructive behaviors or becoming victim to violent acts (Robinson & Werblow, 2012). Irvin et al. (2010) also acknowledged how participation in activities can provide additional safety. Therefore, ensuring that structure and monitoring is in place as much as possible, parents were able to maintain the safety of their children (Roberts et al., 2011).

Participation in school activities served as a protective factor against risks and provided youth in low-income communities with another source of support (Irvin et al., 2010). Also, for students who struggled academically, participation in activities aided in keeping them interested and engaged in school and, for some youth, may have protected against school dropout (Irvin et al., 2010). Irvin et al. (2010) found that even when a high degree of risk was present, adolescents who persistently participated in activities were more likely to finish high school and seek postsecondary education.

**Church identity.** It is common knowledge that church is an integral component in many African American communities and families (Irvin et al., 2010; Robinson & Werblow, 2012). Church seemed to play a positive role in the achievement of the African American adolescents. Irvin et al. (2010), in their quantitative study of 280 students, found that African American adolescents living in poverty achieved higher
grades when participating in religious activities (Irvin et al., 2010). However, in this self-report survey study, participation in church was shown to reduce debilitating psychological symptoms and minimize the chances of turning to substances as a coping mechanism (Irvin et al., 2010). Church participation helped to provide positive coping skills for economic and social stressors, and helped to foster a positive family relationships (Robinson & Werblow, 2012). This is another example of Bonding, as explained in Blackness Theory.

West-Olatunji et al. (2002) also acknowledged the role that religion and spirituality played in their participants’ lives. These mothers referenced attending church weekly, with many referring to themselves as women of faith. While they acknowledged their own skills and hard work, they felt like God, Jesus, or a Higher Power played an even larger role in their success. One mother referenced her child experiencing difficulties in life such as poverty, but stated that he was able to be successful because of God.

**Self-perception.** One theme that emerged when looking at success in African American youth in low-income communities was the impact of self-perception (Matthews-Armstead, 2002). Matthews-Armstead (2002) interviewed three high school women who were college bound and found that they viewed themselves as self-reliant, self-directed, competent, and empowered. Despite systemic factors, the participants noted their accomplishments were due to their own abilities and they could overcome oppression. While they acknowledged experiences with racism, classism, and sexism, they did not see this oppression as barriers to achieving their academic goals.
Individualism, as explained by Blackness Theory, is evident in these findings as participants were highlighting traits they felt were not attributable or exclusive to their racial group membership. Even though the educational facilities were inadequate, participants continued to view education as a way to escape poverty (Mathews-Armstead, 2002).

A few studies discussed the negative views faculty in schools seemed to have about African American students from low-income communities (Ani, 2013; Kafele, 2012; Matthews-Armstead, 2002, Robinson & Werblow, 2012; West-Olatunji et al., 2010). Teachers reportedly held different expectations for African American youth, solely based on their race, based on feedback from students, their parents, and some teachers (Ani, 2013; Matthews-Armstead, 2002; Robinson & Werblow, 2012). While Ani (2013) noted that some African American youth disengaged because they perceived the system did not care about them, some students continued to achieve academic success in spite of this discrimination. Applying Blackness Theory, this is an example of using Buffering as a function of Black identity. Participants were prepared for the threat in their academic environments and responded logically based on their past experiences and values (Cross & Strauss, 1998).

In a qualitative study with six participants, Ani (2013) noted that participants did not individualize their experiences as African Americans, yet saw them as part of the larger Black community (p. 415). This finding supports the use of FST in addressing group qualities created by social conditions rather than the individual experience (Hill Collins, 1997). Holding a group perspective may explain their perseverance to continue
in school, as Ani (2013) cited research that showed having a healthy racial/ethnic identity and viewing it as central resulted in fewer psychological and behavioral issues, and better adjustment (pp. 408-409). Bonding through socializing with group members has been found to promote a healthy Black identity and result in fewer psychological problems (Payne & Suddler, 2014). In addition, although parents and children are aware of discrimination in the educational system, both mothers and adolescents felt that education would be their way of escaping poverty (Ani, 2013; Robinson & Werblow, 2012; West-Olatunji et al., 2010). Also, participants seemed to feel a strong sense of connection (bonding) and obligation to their communities and used obstacles such as poverty as motivation to succeed. Although Ani’s study did not pursue what this success meant in detail, this is one of my main points of inquiry for this study.

**Cultural capital.** White (2014) defined cultural capital as “nonmonetary assets, knowledge, and/or relationships that can promote mobility and offer access to opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable or inaccessible” (p. 10). As previously stated, educational facilities in low-income communities are often inadequate and the teachers may tend to view African American students in a negative light (Ford & Moore, 2013; Henfield et al., 2008; Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010; West-Olatunji et al., 2010). Because this was common knowledge within the community, mothers’ actions to seek opportunities for their children can be interpreted as efforts to increase their cultural capital. Cultural capital refers to the ability to use social status to access resources that are not equally accessible to the masses. For example, some of the mothers chose to learn more about the educational system so they would be able to effectively advocate for
their sons (Robinson & Werblow, 2012). Many of the mothers were also highly involved in their children’s education (Hanson, 2007; Halgunseth et al., 2005; Robinson & Werblow, 2012; West-Olatunji et al., 2010; Williams & Bryan, 2012). They would introduce themselves to teachers and encourage them to call if there were issues and would meet with teachers regularly (West-Olatunji et al., 2010). They felt this initial and continuous contact would aid in forming an alliance with the teachers in which there was trust and cooperation (West-Olatunji et al., 2010).

Although this body of research does not address African American women, the focus on identifying strengths in a group raised by a female head of household in an under-resourced community with an African American population has implications for African American women. It is important to understand the childhood and adolescent experiences of African American youth to gain insight into African American women, as some of the identified protective factors may inform ways in which African American women have achieved or continue to achieve fulfilling lives. For example, mentoring was a significant factor that influenced success in African American children and adolescents, and remains significant for the African American women discussed in the next section. Also, parenting practices in childhood impacted the developing child and influence their life trajectories. Furthermore, adolescence is the period of time in which identity formation occurs, and this developmental period has implications for identity in adulthood and racial identity. Finally, childhood and adolescence may be a significant period of time to intervene to assist in expanding developmental pathways and acknowledging desired success of even more African American adult women.
African American Women

Research in this section has a primary focus on African American women who were raised in under-resourced communities. The main themes related to factors impacting success that explicitly emerged from this research include relationships, prioritizing, and identity.

Relationships. African Americans are classified as a collectivistic culture, due to outcomes and choices being based on a group perspective (Parham, Ajamu, & White, 2011). Therefore, it is not surprising that relationships would be significant in emerging research on African American women. Blackness Theory suggests that Bonding is the way Black people uniquely connect in ways that foster a healthy Black identity, privilege their experiences, and provide a sense of belonging (Cross & Strauss, 1997; Payne & Suddler, 2014). Gardner (2010) conducted a quantitative study with 162 African American female participants, to find out the impact of multiple variables on both internal (self-perception) and external (other perception) career success. Using the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale (FACES), she found that reported family cohesion was a significant factor. Although family cohesion did not significantly predict intrinsic success, such as career satisfaction, it did significantly predict external measures of success, such as income and job status (Gardner, 2010).

Another significant finding was related to the presence of a father or father figure while growing up. Contrary to the literature which reports multiple negative outcomes in absentee father homes, there was no difference in self-reported success between the women who reported having their father or father figure growing up, and those who
reported having no father or father figure (Gardner, 2010). This seems to support the earlier argument that mainstream definitions of family are insufficient and the need for an acceptance of broader concepts. Despite being raised without biological fathers in the home, individuals are not fatherless and fictive kin continue to have meaningful roles in their lives. From an FST perspective, it is important for members of the oppressed group to name and make meaning of their own lives to avoid a pathologized perspective on Black families based on social stigma and stereotypes (Boyd-Franklin, 2006; Harding, 2006; Hill Collins, 1997).

Polite-Wilson (2014) conducted a qualitative study using a World Café method of research, in which she collected data through collaborative discussions. She used two groups of women, one group between the ages of 26-35, and the other group with a minimum age of 46, to answer the question, “What knowledge, skills, and attitudes do young women need in order to prepare themselves for career success?” (Polite-Wilson, 2014). Multiple responses were given with one of the main themes being mentors (Polite-Wilson, 2014). The African American women in the older group reported the impact of forming relationships on their lives and encouraged the younger women to seek out mentors so they would assist with helping them to gain entry (open doors) (Polite-Wilson, 2014).

Seales (1987) conducted a mixed methods study in which she interviewed 10 participants from her sample of mostly low-income undergraduate students. The participants consistently highlighted the importance of their mothers as it related to their
career decisions. They talked about viewing their mothers as role models who provided positive examples.

Participants highlighted the significance of relationships, one being familial and the other being professional. As stated above, this is congruent with the beliefs of many African Americans, and adheres to the African proverb Ubuntu, which means, *I am because we are, we are because I am*, implying success is not an individual effort. In Polite-Wilson’s (2014) study, the African American women in the older group reflected this sentiment, encouraging the younger women to individuate (be individuals) but not isolate. In this study, examples of all five functions of Blackness, as explained in Blackness Theory, were discussed. Participants spoke about needing to form relationships with gatekeepers regardless of race (Bridging) as a means of gaining entry into otherwise inaccessible places. Participants also reported the need to Code Switch, or exhibit behavior deemed appropriate by those in power and individuate in an effort to distance themselves from social stereotypes.

**Prioritizing.** Aside from identifying mentors, having a career-oriented attitude was identified as the most important quality African American women need to become successful in their respective careers (Polite-Wilson, 2014). While this was not clearly defined, the large majority of the successful African American women participants in these studies was never married and had no children (Gardner, 2010; Polite-Wilson, 2014). Thus, having a career-oriented attitude may refer to a requirement of prioritizing a career before other needs or wants.
Brodsky (1999) conducted a qualitative study of African American, single mothers raising children in high-risk (i.e., poverty, violence, crime) communities. She sought nominations from school officials for participation in her study. These mothers were identified as “successful” because they prioritized parenting and presented a positive public image. Furthermore, participants were able to meet their family’s needs despite systemic problems and social stigma. Brodsky (1999) postulated that participants may have been viewed by others in the community as successful because they belong to a culture that values mothering and is more accepting of single mothers.

Seale (1987) found that many of the skills participants identified as necessary for success were transferable such as goal-setting. She found that teaching students the importance of setting goals helped to foster success in their undergraduate programs. Participants noted that the ability to goal set helped them to maintain focus particularly while experiencing adversity.

**Racial identity.** Racial identity refers to individuals thoughts and feelings about their racial group, including thoughts about how others perceive their racial group (Cross, 1978; Helms, 1995). Wyche-Hall (2011) conducted a mixed-methods, nested relationship dissertation that focused on racial identity and academic achievement in 125 African American undergraduate students at a southwestern university. Using the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI), she studied the relationship between stage of racial identity development and GPA (grade point average). She then conducted interviews with 15 participants from her original participant pool to obtain more information about her results. Wyche-Hall (2011) found that the lower the
centrality (how central race is to the person’s identity) scores were the higher the GPA earned, indicating that individuals who did not view race as central to their identity performed better academically. Also, the lower the nationalist identity scores the higher the GPA. This was an interesting finding given that these students attended a predominantly White and Hispanic serving institution. This finding also suggests that racial differences might be more apparent for Black students. Qualitative findings revealed that participants felt the need to leave their racial identity at the door (“sell out,” code switch, act White) to succeed at the university (Wyche-Hall, 2011).

From a Blackness Theory standpoint, this is an illustration of the function of Code Switching, shedding characteristics attributed to Black people and culture. Initially, students were willing to make the necessary adjustments to earn their undergraduate degree not realizing the psychological impact of dismissing their racial identity (Wyche-Hall, 2011). Furthermore, although racial identity was not explicitly measured in the other studies noted in this section, participants did express that their racial and gender identities impacted their educational and career experiences (Gardner, 2010; Polite-Wilson, 2014; Seale, 1987;)

**Summary of Outcomes for African American Women**

African American women from under-resourced backgrounds are my target population, and the information presented in this section informs my research interests. Because I am interested in how African American women raised by female heads of household in under-resourced communities achieve stability, fulfillment, and “wholeness” in their lives, it is important to include research about African American
women who have some semblance of this. Research on career and college achievement and African American women seemed relevant to this topic. Thus, the following body of literature reflects research on African American women.

**African American Women, Education, and Career**

Few peer-reviewed studies, regardless of how success has been defined, have been conducted with successful African American women from under-resourced communities, who were raised by female heads of households. A search through several research databases including PsycINFO, using the terms *African American, Black, women, successful or positive outcomes*, yielded 2,028 results. Eliminating results that focused on animals, medical concerns (i.e., cancer, diabetes, HIV), and addiction, yielded 754 results. Further elimination occurred due to population and relevance to the topic. The overwhelming majority of results addressing this population were from Dissertations. Some dissertations were too specific (i.e., success as a teacher), and did not speak to what is success for this population. Other literature discussed in this review were found by looking through the references of other articles and in discussions with my chair and another committee member. I also reviewed a novel for this review, which was relevant to the topic of this study.

Due to the scarceness of literature on successful African Americans raised by female heads of household in under-resourced communities, the results from the following articles focused on the intersection of race and gender. Therefore, the focus is on successful African American women, regardless of class status and household makeup as a child. Also, articles were included that studied African American male success as
they were relevant to this population. Although, these articles do not meet the full criteria, they are relevant due to their focus on race (African American or Black) and gender (female) of their participants. Furthermore, participants in these studies were from various economic backgrounds, including low-income.

**Mentoring.** As noted in the two prior sections, mentoring was identified as a significant factor that contributed to the success of African American women. Loder (2005) conducted a qualitative study with 20 African American female principals to assess the impact of the Civil Rights Movement on their lived experiences in their professional fields. While different themes emerged from the two groups, for those who were working prior to the Civil Rights Movement and for those who began working after, one constant theme was mentoring. Several of the participants in Loder’s study discussed gaining access to their position of principal due to the recommendation of another female administrator who held the position previously. According to Blackness Theory, this can be viewed as both Bonding and Bridging, as these mentoring relationships were at times between participants and non-Blacks who were able to provide access to spaces that had been previously inaccessible to these women.

Smith (2009) conducted a qualitative study in which 19 Black women were nominated from an Entrepreneurial Assistance Program. She conducted interviews and a focus group with her participants. The Black women in her study highlighted the importance of networking and forming relationships as a way to increase financial capital or accumulate wealth. Fries-Britt and Kelly (2005) in an autoethnographic case study described the importance and necessity of their mentoring relationship. They talked
about the lack of African American professionals in academia, and the impact of connecting as African American women. This mentoring relationship seemed to buffer them against some of the obstacles encountered and is an explicit example of Buffering as explained by Blackness Theory, in which women used their blackness as a shield against systemic and psychological trauma.

Behar-Horenstein, West-Olatunji, Moore, Houchen, and Roberts (2012) conducted a critical ethnography using a case study format that also revealed mentoring as significant. Participants reported that their professional achievement was largely due to mentoring and connecting with colleagues of different cultural backgrounds. Although they noted mentoring as important, they also reported that mentoring opportunities were lacking due to race-based or race/sex based judgments. Behar-Horenstein et al. (2012) findings provide another example of the functions described in Blackness Theory.

O’Connor (2002), in her qualitative study of 19 African Americans from low-income backgrounds, also found that participants highlighted the importance of connecting. Participants in this study were first generation college students who recognized that their parents did not have the necessary knowledge to understand their college needs. They relied on other resources to help them navigate their undergraduate education. This study was particularly interesting because participants were divided into three cohorts by years of college attendance in relation to the civil rights movement.

The aforementioned studies identified mentoring as significant to the success of the participants. However, other studies talked about mentorship as a sign of success. For example, both Harris-LaMothe (2013) and Mainah (2016) conducted dissertation studies
in which they found that their participants identified serving as mentors as an indicator of success. Harris-LaMothe (2013) noted that participants valued the opportunity to provide mentorship although at times it inhibited professional advancement. Mainah (2016), in her study of Black women in academia, found that becoming mentors for Black students provided meaning for participants.

**Family influence.** Epstein (1973) introduced her research by describing the social location of her participants through an historical lens and the current impact of the structural forces that were developed and maintained. Although this study is over 30 years old, it is included due to its relevance to the topic and richness of findings. Epstein (1973) interviewed 31 successful Black women, the majority of whom came from two-parent families. She defined success as obtaining prestigious work positions and earning high incomes. FST helps me to acknowledge that both of these descriptors are based on White American standards of success (Katz, 1985; Mangino, 2014). It is even more important to understand participants in this study in relation to their historical location and how this influenced the definitions being used. One of the defining factors of success reported by her participants was family support. Although many of the participants reported being encouraged by teachers and guidance counselors to pursue teaching or social work based on their race and sex, the messages that influenced their educational and career decisions the most were those received from parents who encouraged them to choose their own paths (Epstein, 1973). Many of her participants also reported that their mothers worked in some capacity, and thus they had a positive image of women as doers. Reid and Robinson (1984) also found the family to be influential in the career decisions
of their participants. Though they conducted a quantitative study using 30 men and 34 women, they used a chi-square to differentiate their results by gender. All of their participants earned a doctoral degree in their respective fields.

Reid and Robinson (1984) found that parental education and encouragement to pursue goals had a significant impact on their participants’ career decisions. Participants in other dissertation studies noted the importance of familial relationships as well (Matthews, 2001; Seales, 1987; Wiggins, 2005). Wiggins (2005) found that her participants were motivated by the need to please their family members as they valued the emotional support they received from family. Because they valued the support they received from their family members, they were intentional in avoiding decisions that could jeopardize that support (Wiggins, 2005).

**Social stereotypes.** Black women in America are impacted at minimum by two oppressions, racism and sexism, which place them at the bottom of US societal structure (Epstein, 1973; Hill Collins, 2000; Hurston, 1937). FST refers to “historically shared, group-based experiences” that transcend individual experiences (Hill Collins, 1997). Therefore, although Epstein acknowledged this double oppression more than 30 years ago, social conditions have maintained power relations that keep these women oppressed.

Epstein (1973) stated “the costs of having several negatively evaluated statuses are very high and lead to social bankruptcy when people cannot muster the resources to pay them” (p. 912). However, she noted that success has not eluded this population despite the presence of two marginalized identities. In fact, this sentiment was echoed by other researchers such as Brodsky (1999) who stated “the successes of individuals at risk
are often the rule, not the exception” (p.148). Lewis (2007) found that participants were aware of both the social stereotypes and limitations attributed to them because of their race and gender, but did not allow this to interfere with their goals. Matthews (2001) found that self-concept was important to participants and although they were aware of their relegated positions they refused to allow this knowledge to impact their self-concept.

Harris-LaMothe (2013) reported that participants felt they had strong values instilled in them which allowed success to occur in spite of race and gender. These women felt they needed to portray images that were incongruent with the stereotypes associated with Black women in order to experience success. This is similar to one of the findings in Grey’s (2011) dissertation study, which was impression management. This referred to the ability to present an image that was acceptable in predominately White spaces in order to obtain acceptance and advancement opportunities (Grey, 2011). This concept is similar to Code Switching noted in Blackness Theory, in which Black people alter their presentation (e.g., speech, dress, mannerisms) to negotiate what, at times, may be experienced as threatening environments (Cross & Strauss, 1998).

Although some studies noted that participants did not allow oppression that occurred because of their race and gender to impact achievement of success, other studies found that participants felt they were limited because of their race and gender (Charleston, George, Jackson, Berhanu, & Amechi, 2014; Seales, 1987; Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013). Charleston et al. (2014) reported that participants felt that the oppression they experienced in college due to their identities as Black and female
influenced their ability or inability to complete school. Seales (1987) found that participants’ race and gender played a role in their career choices/options. Weatherspoon-Robinson (2013) specifically noted that stereotypical images of Black women impacted professional outcomes.

Epstein (1973) found that the double-minority status created a new status which in ways could serve as a buffer and in other ways be detrimental. Epstein noted that being a woman seemed to lessen the stigma of being Black, which resulted in White men viewing Black women as less of a threat than Black men. Thus, Black women may gain access to employment opportunities more easily than Black men due to this reduced threat. Additionally, Black women have always had more access to the White world due to jobs as wet nurses, nannies, and maids, at times even being told they were part of their White families (Epstein, 1973; Hill Collins, 1991). However, they could never really be part of the family due to their racial status (Hill Collins, 1991). Similarly, Lewis (2007) found that although participants were aware of and faced the stereotypes of mammies, maids, and martyrs, they felt the same environments that perpetuated oppression were ideal settings to engage in activism and resistance.

The participants in Epstein’s (1973) study reported using racism and sexism as a motivator, which also emerged in the current study. They expressed understanding the need to be better and work harder than others so that they would not be viewed as incompetent or lacking work ethic. This sentiment was echoed in other studies as well (Lewis, 2007; Matthews, 2001). Participants also stated they were motivated to continue so that they could be visible for other Black women as models (Epstein, 1973; Harris-
LaMothe, 2013; Mainah, 2016). Loder (2005) also found that racism impacted her participants in various ways. Even when her participants were provided opportunities after the Civil Rights Movement, they were reluctant to assume those positions of power. They expressed having an ever-present awareness of the “invisible hand” of “institutionalized racism and sexism in narrowing and blocking their professional opportunities and aspirations” (p. 260). Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, her participants reported that as teachers in Black community schools having White principals, they were often expected to maintain the school and fulfill principal duties without any of the benefits (Loder, 2005). Participants also talked about racism in academia and other professional environments and the importance of forming relationships with other African American women at that level (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Grey 2011).

O’Connor (2002) also reported racism and sexism in her study. Each cohort discussed racism but stated that it manifested in different ways depending on the decade during which they attended college. They reported feeling racially isolated on the campus, which was similar to the finding in the dissertation study by Wyche-Hall (2011). Additionally, participants discussed being discouraged from attending college by family members and teachers due to their race, gender, or both. Wiggins (2005) also noted this finding in her study. One participant in particular stated that her school provided her support to work as a maid but not to attend college (Wyche-Hall, 2011). Yet, they continued to persevere and earn their degrees even if it meant taking breaks and returning later.
Several studies explicitly named social stereotypes that influenced the success of African American women (Dickens, 2014; Grey, 2011; Lewis, 2007; Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013; Wiggins Young, 2005). Some of the stereotypes named were angry Black woman (Grey, 2011), crazy Black bitch (Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013), Jezebel (Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013), Mammy (Lewis, 2007; Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013), maid (Lewis, 2007), martyr (Lewis, 2007), Sapphire (Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013), strong Black woman (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; 2008) and Superwoman (Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013). Hill Collins (2000) refers to these stereotypes as controlling images because they provide the narrative by which Black women are measured. Because these images are limiting and have negative connotations attached to them, in order to experience success, Black women may feel like they have to represent a stark contrast to these images as found in Harris-LaMothe’s (2013) study or are relegated to fulfilling these roles in multiple environments as was evident in Lewis’ (2007) study. As an insider, I am aware that these stereotypes have existed for a long time and continue to persist. Hurston (1937) wrote about the Black woman as being the *mule of the world* 80 years ago, however, the impact of this image still emerged with participants in Lewis’ study as *martyr*. In the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston (1937), Nanny (a character) stated,

Honey, de White man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de Black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de White man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he
don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see." (p. 44)

This is a testament to one of the assertions in Epstein’s (1973) study, in which she stated that the cumulative identity of Black women places them at the bottom of the social hierarchy. More explicitly, the quote above asserts that in the hierarchy of oppression Black women are at the top.

**Spirituality.** This theme was consistent across the literature. Participants in each study cited God, faith, and religion as significant to their ability to overcome obstacles and achieve success (Grey, 2011; Loder, 2005; Mainah, 2016; Reid & Robinson, 1984; Swanson, 2006; Wiggins, 2005). The majority of the participants in Reid and Robinson’s (1984) study reported some consistent religious affiliation, although its impact was not discussed. However, Loder (2005) found that the principals in her study used spirituality as a way to make meaning out of their work. Participants in other studies used spirituality as a coping mechanism, a source of strength, and a source of hope (Grey, 2011; Swanson, 2006; Wiggins, 2005). Cross and Strauss (1998) identified a sense of spirituality as a requirement to engage in buffering, as it helps to maintain balance and hope in the face of racism.

**Cultural capital.** Smith (2000) discussed different forms of capital. First, she described human capital as an “accumulation of knowledge, skills and experiences that enhance productivity” (p. 3). Social capital was defined as the “breadth and depth of an individual’s support system” (p. 3). She postulated that the combination of human capital
and social capital helped to create financial capital. Blackness Theory would name these as Buffering, Bonding, and Individualism respectively.

**Love and marriage.** The women in Epstein’s (1973) study did not consider limiting marital options to be a deterrent to achievement. Yet, Reid and Robinson (1984) noted in their study of Black professionals who held doctoral degrees that more of the women in the study were never married and twice as many women had no children. These women defined themselves as less conventional, which is consistent with the beliefs of the women in Epstein’s earlier study. O’Connor (2002) also discussed the impact of sexism in her participants’ lives. The women in this study stated that some of the discouragement received surrounded their suitability to marry if they attended college. A participant in this study recalled her father’s disgust for choosing to attend college instead of marrying, thereby implying that education versus marriage was an “either-or” decision.

**Conclusion**

Although a vast body of research on African Americans exists, it largely views this population from a deficit perspective, only focusing on the stressors impacting this community and the subsequent negative outcomes (Jones et al., 2007). Although research around resilience (the ability to succeed despite barriers) (Behar-Horenstein, West-Olatunji, Moore, Houchen, & Roberts, 2012; Brodsky, 1999; Jeffries, 2015; O’Connor, 2002) and grit (innate toughness to withstand stressors) (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014; Laursen, 2015; Strayhorn, 2014) in adult African American populations is steadily growing, the majority of strengths-based articles regarding African
Americans focus solely on children and youth in regards to achievement outcomes. Peer-reviewed literature that focuses on successful African Americans remains sparse, and the research that has been conducted come largely from dissertations. Although I tried to focus on peer reviewed literature for this because it was limited, there were dissertations that may have spoken to this topic. Furthermore, strengths-based literature is often constrained by a racist, sexist, and classist context as it is presented from a dominant perspective.

The above literature review was constructed from multiple bodies of literature to provide a foundation for this study, as this is a newer area of research being pursued. In the next chapter, a detailed description of the study will be provided. Although, literature around African American women who have attained White American standards of success is emerging, it is important that we no longer continue to apply a model of success to a population for which it was not intended (Harding, 2006). Therefore, a study allowing participants to drop social constructions of “success” and develop their own could help to provide a more appropriate framework to understand their definitions of success.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The previous chapter presented literature about African American women who were raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of households who have been able to achieve success in the face of obstacles. However, this research provided minimal information about how these women have been able to make their way, particularly in relation to their beginnings (i.e., impact of poverty on their upbringing). As such, many women may not recognize themselves in current literature as success has been defined in a constricted manner which leaves no room to take into account the fluidity of success or how they define it for themselves.

Holes in the literature around the measurement of success for this population and ways in which it limits them were evident in the literature review. This is heightened when considering that recent research reported that Black women who meet White American standards of success have expressed that they still do not consider themselves “successful” (Edwards, Beverly, & Alexander-Snow, 2011), therefore it is important that this study leaves room for participants to name success for themselves and describe how they have been able to obtain it or continue to experience it. Although recent literature has mapped barriers African American women are up against, there is a gap that exists that could only be filled by gaining an understanding from these women. This qualitative study aimed to recognize these women, hear their stories, and learn how they have been able to continue to move forward in their lives, given where they came from.

Qualitative research requires that the researcher situate herself in the study. Therefore, my researcher stance is included in this chapter. Provided below is a detailed
description of the current study. In this chapter, the research design is outlined along with research questions and sampling procedures. Methods of adhering to the design of a qualitative study are provided including addressing bias in research. Additionally, the importance of this study and its contribution to practice is provided.

**Researcher Stance**

Qualitative research requires researchers to situate themselves in their studies (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Because researchers work from their own particular social location that shapes the process and presentation of results, this positionality should be explicated. Furthermore, because Feminist Standpoint Theory strongly encourages insider research, describing my connection to the group I am studying is important. My unique position as a doctoral candidate, who was raised in an under-resourced community by a female head of household, is an indicator of why this population and topic is of significance to me.

I am an African American female who was raised by my mother and other matriarchs in my family. In addition to my mother, my grandmother, who has a middle school education, and great-grandmother, who was illiterate and a homeowner with good credit, significantly impacted my perspective, especially in regards to racial and gendered expectations. I lived, and continue to live in an urban environment that is oftentimes plagued by violence. However, my experiences growing up within this context were full of love, support, laughter, togetherness, faith, and a sense of community. Although my biological father was absent and remains absent in my life, I had the benefit of exposure to positive adult male role models (e.g., cousins, pastor, music teacher). Because I was
raised in an under-resourced community, spending much of my childhood life in the
central housing projects, my experiences included both oppression and privilege. For
example, I was exposed to violence and drugs in my community however, my mother had
a lot of cultural capital which allowed me to travel and attend prestigious programs
around the country, which expanded my worldview. Additionally, a gentleman who
struggled with drug addiction, who may be seen as a negative statistic by many, was a
protector for my sister and me as we walked to and from school, ensuring we were safe
from the negative influences present for every step of our walk. I attended church several
times per week and was surrounded by elders who may not have had a lot of formal
education, but were wise and respected as well as nurturing.

Considering my beginnings and current status as a doctoral candidate, I have
oftentimes found it difficult to fully exist between worlds, particularly because my family
and cultural values differ from that of the dominant society. Additionally, not much
research existed or exists which addressed this contention of navigating historically
White spaces as a Black woman or traditionally Black spaces with multiple privileged
identities. Therefore, it is important that women like me see more reflections of
themselves in the literature to affirm our experiences. Although I have been able to move
into a sustainable career and acquire a high level of education, these are not the only
reflections of my success, nor do I feel they are the most important. For example, my
grandmother expresses pride regarding my educational achievements, but her chest sticks
out the most when she recalls the times I took her to appointments or cleaned her house.
My mother is happy that I am employed, but when she tells others about me, she talks
about the time I moved her into my home when she was diagnosed with breast cancer the second time and cared for her. Because these are the things of which they are most proud, I am most proud of these things as well. I expected to find similar stories in the women I interviewed, but was open to stories that did not reflect my own. I understand that my perspective influenced my research and was mindful of this throughout this study.

I am discouraged and offended by much of the current research, which I believe paints a hopeless picture for African American children and adolescents living in under-resourced communities and being raised by a female head of household and presents a dismal life for the women who were raised in this context. According to the outcomes from the literature for African American youth, these children and adolescents, who eventually become women, have little to which they can look forward. However, although the outcomes identified may be valid, they do not appear to capture the total lived experience of this population and thus may misrepresent them. Simply put, while this may be the dominant narrative, it is not the only version of future possibilities or current lived experience. Using a culturally appropriate framework, I was able to provide a more accurate reflection of African American women who were raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of household.

**Research Questions**

Using a strengths-based approach in researching African American women, the following questions guided this study:
1. How do African American women who were raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of households describe successes in their own lives?

2. To what do African American women raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of households attribute their success?

**Research Design**

Current research about successful African American women largely define success using White American standards such as attainment of wealth and affluence, marriage, and college education (Chambers, 2003; Epstein, 1973; Hanson, 2007; Jackson, 2013; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Smith, 2001). However, these barometers of success do not truly capture the lived experiences of this population or their views of success. Researchers’ understanding of their observations about African American women raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of households differs significantly from their views of themselves (Seideman, 2006). Feminist Standpoint Theory encourages researchers to conduct research about oppressed populations from their point of view (Harding, 2006). As such, it is important to inductively understand this phenomenon of success from the lived experience of the individuals themselves. Therefore, a qualitative phenomenological interview method of inquiry was used for this study.

Merriam (2009) stated that “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). A phenomenological study is used to describe, understand, and interpret a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Groenwald (2004)
noted that a phenomenological approach is used to “describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts” (p. 5). Therefore, research should be used to gain information instead of affirmation. Seidman (2006) noted that interviewing “is a basic mode of inquiry” and “stories are a way of knowing” (p. 8, 9). Using a phenomenological interview design allows for an understanding of the lived experiences of the population and the meaning they make of their experience (Seidman, 2006). Therefore, African American women raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of households were able to share their experiences and the meaning they made of their experiences, particularly as their experiences related to success.

Goals of this research included providing a detailed description about the population and gaining an understanding of how they have been able to make their way, including what they envisioned as possibilities and obstacles. This is important because current descriptions of these women are likely inaccurate or at best, incomplete. Furthermore, I was interested in finding out what or who they believed influenced their ability to move forward and how they defined this process, including people, experiences, religious beliefs or other influences that may not be discussed in current literature. Additionally, a phenomenological interviewing method requires that “issues of power, justice, and oppression” (p. 33) are addressed (Seidman, 2006). These issues are particularly relevant to the participants in this study as they received disparate opportunities given their gender, racial, and past class status. Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) and Blackness Theory were used to address the impact of oppression on
African American women especially considering their marginalized identities of being African American, women, and raised in under-resourced households. Lastly, I hoped to influence the practice of counselors, teachers, researchers and other practitioners who interact with and study this population.

Participants

Participants were African American women between the ages of 22 and 58, who were raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of households. Participation was solicited through snowball sampling, relying on gatekeepers to help facilitate access to certain participant pools. Snowball sampling is a method that asks participants to assist in identifying others who meet the criteria for participation (Merriam, 2009). Participation was primarily solicited in a northeast urban city through community leaders in churches and local agencies. This city was chosen because I was and continue to be an insider in this community and I am committed to having counselors better understand its’ strengths.

I visited churches and community meetings to solicit participants, and I made announcements at predominantly Black organizations to which I have access (fraternities, sororities, local NAACP, UMHA). The assistance of gatekeepers was solicited to gain access to these organizations and establish credibility among potential participants. Gatekeepers are individuals who control access to the participant pool (organizations, individuals, etc.) and facilitate easier entry into these spaces (Groenewald, 2004; Seidman, 2006). Various word of mouth strategies were utilized, such as making announcements in churches, and eliciting the assistance of friends and acquaintances to
inform potential candidates about the study. This proved to be the most valuable method of recruitment. Flyers were posted in supermarkets and stores (see Appendix B). Because snowball sampling was the method being used, participants also used email and Facebook to inform other potential participants about the study.

Two interviews on two separate occasions were conducted with each participant. The interviews lasted 60-90 minutes each. Saturation, the point where no new information was emerging (Groenewald, 2004), was reached with 13 participants and no additional interviews were needed. A heterogeneous sample with respect to age was intentionally sought to account for generational differences in perceptions of success. Although I initially had a particular interest in how age might impact African American women’s views about their journey to where they are and how they name it, my sample also reflected diversity in education level, level of income, and marital status.

When participants were recommended to the study or reached out in response to advertisements, I contacted them via telephone, email, or Facebook. During this contact, I introduced myself and explained the study. If I reached out through email, I attached the consent form in the email. If initial contact was through Facebook, phone, or in person, I asked for their email address and sent them consent forms for their review. After initial contact via telephone, Facebook, or in person, interviews were conducted in person at my office and in participants’ homes. Although the majority of the participants were from various cities in New Jersey, three participants whose geographical distance was a barrier (Texas, Pennsylvania, and New York) completed interviews via Skype. Interviews were recorded on an audio device. To establish and maintain an “I-Thou”
relationship (Seidman, 2006), the in-person setting was agreed upon beforehand and was in a location where the participant felt comfortable and there was limited distraction. An “I-Thou” relationship recognizes the interviewee as not just a subject to be studied but as an equal (Seidman, 2006). This type of relationship is close enough to create a partnership, but distant enough so that the participant’s responses and thoughts are autonomously fashioned (Seidman, 2006). Since the relationship between researcher and participant evolved, it was important that the beginning of the relationship was established in a positive manner.

Once participants were selected, a formal verbal and written informed consent was emailed to them (see Appendix C). This document was also provided in person at the start of the first interview. The participant and I both signed and dated the document. This is standard in all academic research involving human subjects and implemented to ensure participants’ rights are respected and they are knowledgeable about all requirements of their participation, including the ability to cease participation at any time (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). Additionally, before conducting the study, approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Montclair State University was sought and granted (see Appendix D). The IRB Number for this study is IRB-FY15-16-217. Participants were made aware of the possibility of emotional discomfort/distress due to the disclosure of personal information and prior experiences through this interview study (Seidman, 2006).

The invitation to participate in the study included the purpose of the study, expectations of participants, and length of interviews. Although there were no foreseen
physical or medical risks for participation in this study, participants were asked about past experiences which resulted in disclosure of sensitive information and some emotional discomfort. This emotional risk was explicated in the informed consent along with information on seeking services if needed. Additionally, participants were informed that because their participation was completely voluntary, they could cease participation in the study at any time for any reason and their termination would not result in any retaliation or penalty. There was no monetary compensation provided for participation in this study, however, participants were informed that their contribution helps the researcher fulfill a requirement for graduation and may inform practice. Also, participants in interview studies often indicated that the experience was affirming (Seideman, 2006). Participants expressed similar sentiments after our interviews.

For purposes of confidentiality, participants chose pseudonyms to protect their identities. Interviews were recorded with an electronic device which was kept in a locked case. Once the interview was transcribed, the audio recording was erased from the device and saved in a password protected dropbox along with the transcribed interviews. Both the audio recordings and transcribed interviews will be kept on a password protected device for a period of 3 years. No identifying information such as address was attached to the interview. Finally, participants were informed that findings would be reported in my dissertation study and possibly future articles, and were provided a written document with all of the outlined information for their records. This study did not include children nor did it target vulnerable populations; therefore, special conditions were not necessary to discuss. Due to the use of a qualitative interview method being employed for this
study, issues of transferability, confirmability, trustworthiness, and credibility were addressed (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

Criteria for Inclusion

Initially, criteria for participation in this study required participants to be at least 25 years of age and identify as an African American female. However, a participant was recommended for this study who was 22 years old. I felt her story offered a significant contribution to the study. Therefore, after discussing the participant with members of my dissertation committee, it was decided that her story would add more depth to the study and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) must be contacted. The Institutional Review Board was contacted and revisions were made. Once the IRB approved the change (see Appendix E), she was able to be included in the study. Participants must have been raised by a female head of household in an under-resourced community (i.e., poverty) by state standards. Questions were asked, such as “did you qualify for free lunch as a child” to ascertain income level. Most participants disclosed that at some point during their childhood, they were on public assistance or lived in the housing projects, which qualified them for the study.

The initial criterion of age was identified to allow time for completion of an undergraduate degree and/or obtain gainful employment. However, the age minimum was decreased to 21 to allow for the inclusion of rich stories that proved to be valuable to the study and offered more richness and depth. Although most participants included education in their definitions of success, time was given because education level impacts economic stability or vulnerability (Kind & Hargrove, 2013). Additionally, it was
important that participants expressed fulfillment/contentment in their lives and that others recognized them for their contributions in ways they recognized themselves. Again, the goal was to obtain a diverse sample of participants in regards to age, however participants also differed in education level, marital status, and income level. Participants were solicited through snowball sampling procedures. Recommendations from the community were provided and participants also offered recommendations. Participants who were raised in middle to upper middle class homes and communities were excluded from this study as they were not the focus. The goal was to gather information from a diverse sample who met the selection criteria.

Data Collection

An in-depth interview design was used in this phenomenological study, in which each participant was interviewed on two separate occasions in 60 - 90 minute intervals. Initially, interviews were intended to be 60 minutes. However, many of the interviews exceeded that timeframe. Although I reminded participants that we had surpassed the 60-minute time limit, they seemed excited to continue and tell their stories and I felt it important to allow them to do so. Once all data was collected, transcribed, and analyzed, findings were reported to key informants via email and telephone as a way to verify findings and a form of member checking. Member checking refers to the process of bringing findings back to participants to ensure their responses are being accurately portrayed (Seidman, 2006). Although the second interview, served as a form of member checking, after both rounds of interviews were completed, member checking occurred through key informants. Key informants are specific participants chosen to check in with
to see if the themes that I have selected appear accurate to them (Seidman, 2006). They included one participant from each age group (20’s, 30’s, 40’s, and 50’s) since age was an intentional focus of this study. Discussions with key informants included verifying interpretations of their statements and asking them about themes that arose from various participants in the study. Interviews were the primary unit of analysis for this study. A semi-structured interview was used to gather information (see Appendix A).

A phenomenological interview method was appropriate because interviews “allow access to the context of people’s behavior” and provides the means through which to understand that behavior (Seidman, 2006, p.10). A semi-structured format provided both structure to the first interview and room to allow for further development as this was an inductive process. Because the accepted definition of success is limited, I was interested in interviewing women who were able to reflect, name, and define successes in their own lives, and what was learned from them regarding how they are constructing their life journey. Rather than a point of arrival, I was interested in how they continued to make their way in a society that routinely oppresses and disenfranchises this population of women.

*Interviews*: During the initial meeting, participants were asked for basic demographic information (e.g., age, income, household makeup, marital status, education level, etc.) and then a semi-structured interview (see Appendix A) was used to gather information about participants’ background, upbringing, and current lives. Questions focused on understanding how participants narrated their successes and identifying to what/whom they attributed their success. Qualitative research is characteristically
“emergent and flexible” (Merriam, 2009, p. 16). Because my process was iterative, the interview questions evolved as I began to hear themes across interviews. Therefore, analysis began immediately and continued throughout.

The second interview was used to follow-up on areas that could be explored more thoroughly and to bring back information from across interviews. For example, the fourth participant in my study brought up an issue that others after her also brought up. Therefore, in the second round of interviews I brought that theme back to the three participants prior to this interview for their feedback and interpretations. Thus, those unaddressed areas were explored with other participants as well. The second interviews ranged from 40-90 minutes depending on the participant. Although new themes did not emerge in the second interviews, further exploration of previously discussed responses occurred. Also, participants provided more examples to support earlier statements.

Researcher Journal: I used this journal to record my immediate thoughts and feelings after each interview. This helped me to process my thoughts and increase my awareness about information and insights gained throughout the process. Additionally, I was able to document my biases and assumptions as it related to the content, as well as gain a better understanding of my role as a researcher conducting insider research.

After conducting the first interview I decided to keep this journal with me at all times. I noticed that even when I was not interviewing or analyzing, the research was constantly on my mind and I reflected continuously on this material. It was through this journal I was able to see the impact of the sociopolitical environment on my research. I
also relied on this journal to document ideas discussed in meetings with members from my dissertation committee as well as my reactions to those meetings.

*Critical Friends*: Critical friends included peers in my program and other doctoral programs who served as consultants to help increase accurate representation of the data. I belong to a writing group that consists of two other doctoral students who served as my critical friends. I discussed themes with them as they emerged. This helped to ensure I was accurately portraying the voices of participants and served to address my own biases toward the population and this research topic.

Conversations held with my critical friends proved extremely useful as they provided another lens through which to view participant stories. They also were able to point out ways in which my biases may have been shaping my interpretations of participant stories. Furthermore, through these conversations I was better able to make connections and identify similar threads across interviews.

Themes were brought to my critical friends to help me to contextualize stories. Themes that surprised, confused, or disturbed me were discussed in detail with my critical friends in person, through email, and via the telephone. These meetings occurred frequently and throughout the study.

**Data Analysis**

Once I completed transcribing the interviews, information was analyzed thematically. Transcribing and analyzing interviews began immediately and was ongoing. First, significant responses were chunked based on the researcher’s interaction with the text (Seidman, 2006). Chunking involved identifying significant responses in the
transcribed interviews. For example, regardless of the relationship with fathers, anytime participants described their interactions with their fathers, I would chunk it by highlighting the passage in a specific color based on the topic identified. I saw this as significant because all of the participants in this study were raised by their mothers so talking about their fathers was important to capture.

Next, individual passages were highlighted and grouped into themes based on connections between interviews (Seidman, 2006). As I identified themes, I looked for similarities and contrasts between interviewees’ responses. For example, there was a consistent theme of welcoming father relationships and when participants explicitly stated this, those passages were highlighted. During both the chunking and grouping process, I consulted my critical friends and engaged in conversations with other researchers who were not as connected to the study, including my committee members. Additionally, I followed up on themes both in the second interview and after the second interview with key informants as a form of member checking to ensure I accurately captured their statements.

Participant chosen pseudonyms were used to maintain the anonymity of participants in these discussions. This was another method of ensuring trustworthiness and credibility as well as a manner through which to address my biases. I felt it was important that participants be allowed to choose their names as opposed to assigning them names to avoid perpetuating the practice of assigning identities to them. The magnitude of doing this will be more evident in chapters 4 and 5.
Data was analyzed using the coding method that included an organized filing and categorization system to manage the data (Seidman, 2006). Coding is the process of placing responses into the themes that have been identified throughout. For example, as themes were recognized, I used an Excel Spreadsheet to organize the themes. Quotes were saved under the appropriate pseudonym and placed in the column of the corresponding theme.

As the interviewing process occurred, it was expected that new themes would emerge that were not present in current research, which expanded the thematic categories. Due to analysis occurring simultaneously with coding, new themes continued to emerge throughout the data collection process up to a certain point. At the 7th interview in the second round, it was evident saturation had been reached. However, I completed the interviews with the remaining participants for the integrity of the study, to ensure I captured all participants’ stories, and to verify saturation.

Analytic memos were also completed throughout the interviewing process. I used memos to document my thoughts, feelings, and impressions after each interview (Groenwald, 2004). They also allowed me to reflect on and interrogate my initial reactions to participant experiences, which provided more data. Analytic memos summarize impressions about the participants’ experiences rather than the individuals themselves, and must be completed as close to the interview as possible to minimize forgetfulness and enhance accuracy of observations (Cuesta Benjumea, 2015). Because memos are another form of data, they were also stored in a locked journal and placed in a locked case with the audio recordings. All written information (e.g., transcriptions,
analytic memos) were kept on a USB and backed up in Dropbox. The recordings remained in a locked case with the audio recorder when not in use.

**Trustworthiness**

Ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research is often done by being transparent about all the steps taken to conduct the research, including limitations and challenges (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Researchers clearly state the obstacles encountered, decisions made to address obstacles, and the flaws that exist. Qualitative researchers commonly explicate their relationship to the research as I did in my researcher's stance above. This stance allowed me to clearly articulate my positioning to this study, including my theoretical lens and upbringing, both of which colored the presentation of findings. Additionally, member checking occurred throughout this study, which is the process of reporting findings back to participants once themes have been identified to ensure an accurate depiction of information given. During member checks, participants were provided with my interpretations of their comments for verification. They also were provided an opportunity to provide clarity. The second interview served as both my first form of member checking as well as a means to explore themes further. During the second interviews, I also brought a copy of the transcript from their initial interview as a reference. This was useful because oftentimes participants asked to be reminded about their responses. As previously stated, four participants were chosen as key informants based on their age group. Findings were discussed and verified with them via email and telephone conversations. Key informants were made aware of themes that emerged from the study and provided their reactions to the themes as well as further
explanation. Furthermore, I regularly consulted my critical friends group, which consisted of two other doctoral students in the dissertation stage, by sharing themes of information to ensure I was presenting information accurately and to minimize researcher bias. Speaking with key informants at the end of the study was another way to enhance trustworthiness of the study via member checking.

**Transferability**

In quantitative studies, researchers seek generalizability which refers to the extent to which results from the study can be applied to the general population of participants. However, the goal in qualitative research is not to generalize to a population; transferability implies that the results from this study may have implications in other instances or similar populations. Other individuals who share commonalities with the participants in the study may be able to identify with their reported experiences. However, results cannot be said to address this population as a whole.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability denotes that the research is presented in a way that is consistent with and true to participants’ voices (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam, 2009). This was addressed by ensuring the sample size was large enough to produce saturation but small enough to gather rich, thick descriptions about participants’ lives (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, since findings are presented thematically, providing direct quotes from the transcripts which reflect the themes demonstrates a reflective process. Furthermore, the researcher journal which captured my thought process, examined my role as a researcher, and enhanced my meaning making, contributed to confirmability.
Credibility

Credibility, in qualitative research pertains to the rigor of the research process (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Thus, consistency and thoroughness were vital to this study. Initially, this was accomplished by investing sufficient time with participants. This was also established by conducting member checks throughout the interviewing process to ensure participants’ stories were accurately depicted. Also, transcribing the entire interviews and not just the sections that appeared to be significant helped to capture the context of responses. Lastly, throughout the process I consulted with my critical friends group, who provided an external check of my assumptions and meaning making, helping to enhance and further my emergent findings.

My Contribution

This study is significant because I highlight the lived experiences of African American women who were raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of households and have been able to move forward. Because their voices are missing in current literature, information obtained from these women will increase our understanding of their perspectives on their lives and how they have made their way. This frame took into account the limited opportunity these women have been provided and the need for them to rely on other sources, whether internal or external, to assist in their journey so far. Furthermore, by including women who may not be deemed successful in White American terms, we can increase their visibility in our field.

Information gathered from this study can provide a different perspective of participants, thereby impacting the work of practitioners, researchers, and instructors.
Additionally, the hope is that information gained through this study will be used by administrators and policymakers to influence the way things are done (Merriam, 2009). Through a lens of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Blackness Theory, I collected in-depth information regarding the lived experiences of African American women raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of households.

A limitation of this study is the small sample size, which is common in qualitative research. A small sample does not allow for generalizability; however, it does allow for richness. Therefore, results from this study may not be applicable to the majority of African American women who meet the established criteria. However, findings allow for transferability, which allows others who meet these criteria to make connections to their own experiences, as well as those working with this population.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided a detailed explanation of the research questions that guided this study and a description of participants, including criteria for inclusion. Data collection methods and reflexive measures were also provided. Chapter four presents the findings from the current study by theme. Participant quotes are provided as evidence for the themes that emerged from this study.
Chapter 4: Findings

Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand how African American women raised by female heads of household in under-resourced communities described and experienced success. Chapter 3 detailed my process of gathering this information and participants provided rich responses that will be presented in this chapter. Before presenting the results, it is important to introduce the participants in this study to allow for a richer understanding of their responses. Provided are brief summaries of each participant that include their physical description and demographic information (i.e., age, education level, marital status). All of the participants in this study identified as African American women. Following the summaries will be the results from the thematic analysis of 26 interviews conducted with 13 participants. Though unexpected, many participants disclosed histories of trauma and mental health issues; this will be discussed later.

Participants

Table 1 summarizes the demographics of the participants in this study. Following the table, more detailed background information is provided on each participant. Their chosen pseudonyms were used for each participant.
Table 1

Demographics of Research Participants (n=13)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th># of children</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Previous Counseling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sabrina</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1 living</td>
<td>Lead Teller/Oper Spec.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Associate's</td>
<td>In Relationship</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorena</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Master's</td>
<td>In Relationship</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>PhD Student</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Associate's</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Stay at home mom</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciara</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Master's</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Physical Therapist Asst.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Master's</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Social Worker</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mobile Technician</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1 relinq</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Imani</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
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<td>Master's</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Business Owner</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sabrina

Sabrina is a 22-year-old African American female who is married with one son. She gave birth to twins but her daughter passed away at the age of 6 months old. This event prompted her to seek online/phone counseling, however she only attended briefly. She resides with her mother and step-father, and considers her family to be middle-class. Sabrina attends community college majoring in Dance. She is of average height and build, with tan colored skin, and natural hair.
Lisa

Lisa is a 24-year-old African American female college student. She has an Associate’s degree and will have her Bachelor’s degree this year. She has two children and is in a long-term relationship with her boyfriend who is the father of her children. She works part-time while attending school full-time. She does not see the benefit of counseling. She is tall with dark skin and natural hair.

Lorena

Lorena is a 28-year-old African American female who is a PhD student. She has worked as a mental health counselor but is currently focused on her doctoral studies. She has no children and is in a committed relationship with her boyfriend who is White. Her relationship has resulted in a wedge between her and family members, specifically her mother and sister. She has received counseling in the past. She is tall with brown skin and natural hair.

Grace

Grace is a 31-year-old African American female. She is an entrepreneur with several businesses contributing to her stream of income. She is currently in college working toward her Bachelor’s degree. Grace is married to her husband and father of her three children. She has light brown skin and is of slightly above average height.

Eva

Eva is a 32-year-old African American female. She has two children and recently married the father of her children. She is a high school graduate and a stay at home mom.
as she gave birth one month before our first interview. She has light skin and is average height and build. She has received counseling for a prolonged period of time and expressed that she has struggled with depression since adolescence.

Ciara

Ciara is a 34-year-old African American female. She has an MBA and works in physical therapy. She was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan but currently resides in Houston, Texas. She has no family in the area. Ciara is single and has no children. She has brown skin, is average height, and full-figured. She reported that she has struggled with her weight. She has not received counseling although she feels she would benefit from doing so.

Denise

Denise is a 34-year-old African American female. She is single and has no children. She bought a home a few months before our first interview. She completed most of the renovations on her own (i.e., flooring, sheet rock, painting, etc.). She works a full-time and part-time job. Denise is short in stature, has a small build, and has dark skin. Recently, she has experienced some medical concerns that resulted in hair loss. She was the first in her family to complete her Bachelor’s degree. She also has a Master’s degree in Criminal Justice.

Simone

Simone is a 35-year-old African American female who has two children. She was previously married to their father but divorced in her 20’s. She is currently in a committed relationship with her boyfriend and they recently purchased a home together.
Simone is a tall, thin woman with dark skin and very short hair that is blonde. She works in corporate America but also works as a beautician to supplement income and because she enjoys it. Simone has a very unique name and chose her pseudonym because she wanted an easy name for once. She was the first in her family to attend college and has earned an Associate’s and Bachelor’s degree.

Phoenix

Phoenix is a 36-year-old female. As a teenager, she gave birth to a daughter that she relinquished because she wanted her to have a better life than the one she felt she could provide at the time. It was an open adoption and she remains in contact with her daughter and her daughter’s family. Phoenix has struggled with medical issues throughout her life. She began having more intense health problems and almost died several times. Ever since she received her kidney transplant she reported that she has not had to go back into the hospital. While recovering she experienced marital issues and is now divorced. Phoenix has brown skin and is average height and build.

Imani

Imani is a 44-year-old African American female who is a teacher. She married young and had two daughters. She later divorced her husband. After having her third daughter with her then boyfriend, she remarried. Imani is from Newark, NJ and is a teacher in a predominately African American school. She is tall with dark brown skin and wears a curly weave in her hair. She talked a lot about being a proud Black woman except for the hair. She wishes God could have given her pretty hair that curled up when
wet. She was the first in her family to attend college. Imani has earned both a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree.

Sasha

Sasha is a 46-year-old African American female. She is currently married with two sons. She is average height, full figured with dark brown skin. Her hair is of medium length. Her mother passed away less than a month before our first interview. Sasha attended predominately Black schools her entire educational career, including college. She is currently a teacher in a predominately Black school. She was the first in her family to attend college, and has obtained two Master’s degrees.

Peace

Peace is an African American female. She had her son while in her 20’s but did not remain with his father because the relationship was unhealthy. She married at 30 and has one biological son and two step-children. After high school, she received a full scholarship to study engineering. She left college after one year because she felt it was not for her. She has worked at her current job as a software development specialist for over 29 years. She and her husband had their home built in a suburban neighborhood. She has dark brown skin and is of average height and build. She wears glasses and has short natural hair. She was the first in her family to attend college.

Barbara

Barbara is an African American female. She had two children while in college which resulted in her terminating her education at the time. She did not remain with their father. Barbara later returned to school and eventually earned her Master’s degree and is
currently a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. Barbara got married in her 40s. She is of above average height, is full figured, and has dark brown skin. She was the first person in her family to attend college.

**Thematic Analysis**

Participants provided rich descriptions regarding their definitions of success and the people, things, and characteristics that helped them to define and experience success. As will be illustrated, relationships, particularly family relationships (i.e., parents, children, spouses, etc.) were not only metrics of success but were integral supports throughout the journey toward success. Furthermore, relationships were intertwined with definitions of success. For example, educational attainment emerged as significant for participants, in part because of what it meant to their families and communities. Additionally, as will be explained below, although relationships framed success for these women, these relationships were not perfect, yet still important for participants.

Two major themes emerged from this study: *Success Is Ubuntu* (see Chapter 2) and *I Am Not a Stereotype*. There were also subthemes that emerged within the major themes. Although participants provided rich stories and explanations, their responses were complicated. As such, there is crossover between themes and subthemes in this study. Two subthemes under *Success Is Ubuntu* were: *Education is paramount to success*, and *I wanna be at a place where I have enough*. There were also two subthemes under the theme *I Am Not a Stereotype*: *I don’t have an attitude*, and *What’s wrong with Mammy*. Under the subtheme *What’s wrong with Mammy*, two other subthemes are nested within: *Family over everything... even over me*, and *Making peace with my place*
is necessary for survival. See Figure 1 in Chapter 5 for a graphical depiction of these themes and subthemes.

**Success Is Ubuntu (I Am Because We Are...)**

My analysis of African American women’s reflections on success led me to recognize that success is not an individual pursuit for these women but instead it happens in relation to others. The relationships about which the participants spoke revealed and emphasized a core assumption that permeates African culture, or the construct of Ubuntu. As stated in the literature review in Chapter 2, Ubuntu refers to the interdependence that exists within African culture, including African American culture. All of the participants in this study (n = 13) spoke about success in terms of relationships. Their definitions and descriptions of success highlighted interdependence between them and their families. When asked about success, although participants provided concrete answers, they highlighted the relationships in their lives. Participants stated that cultivating and maintaining healthy relationships were not only indicators of success, but those relationships were also key to their success and survival. Therefore, success was a success because of their family’s support, the ability to support one’s family, and on behalf of their families and ancestors.

Success was often equated to the ability to meet the needs (i.e., financial, emotional) of family members. For example, although Sabrina acknowledged typical financial standards of success, she indicated that achieving financial stability was meaningless if the needs of the family were not met. She stated,
I define success, success is not just, getting all the money you can get and being rich and having everything. Success is being rich, excuse me, success is being rich to me, emotionally, mentally, and in your family. Success is not just saying, I made it and I have money, and me and my family don’t ever have to worry about money, that’s not success because, you and your family may not be worried about money but how are ya’ll looking as a unit? Like, if you have kids, if you and ya wife have kids, do your kids see you as somebody who can protect them emotionally, who can protect them physically? Do they see you and connect you with security, not just financial security but is is my mom or my dad gonna support me the way I need to be supported as their child? Are they gonna love me unconditionally? Do my mom and dad see me as a burden or do they see me as a privilege? That’s real success, being rich not in the finer things but, in life.

Eva echoed this idea that success was doing things for family and the perception that family members held of her abilities to meet their needs was an important measure of success. She stated,

…like I could look back and say I was successful because like I showed my kids that you know I work hard for the things that you know I have. I, I work hard for what I have, and now I’m not working cuz I just had a kid but you know working hard and it may be going to a job every day or it may be taking care of your house you know and taking care of your kids. But making sure that the things that should be taken care of, whether it’s your your kids, your dog, your husband, you know, your family, making sure those things are taken care of.
Again, success was measured by the example set for others and the ability to care for the family. Both of these quotes highlight the concept of Ubuntu, that the success of these women is tied to the success of their families. Additionally, success is not only the ability to care for others but also the responsibility that these women feel toward others.

As stated previously, participants also found their relationships to be proof of their success. Peace stated,

So what’s success for me is character and relationships, like do you have healthy relationships? And that’s what I was, excuse me, that’s what I was thinking about when I left because for me it’s not about what I have, it’s about how healthy my relationships are because they sustain, that’s what sustains me, and the one that I’m more focused on is--- making sure my relationship vertically is correct but I think relationships to me is success. Like do you have healthy relationships? Can you have a healthy conversation with people? Do you get along with people?

Like others, Peace noted that her relationships are what sustain her. Other participants also identified relationships they felt were necessary for their survival. For example, Grace stated that she felt “God was saving me when he sent me him [husband].” Imani attributed her survival and success to her mother solely, although she recognized the significance of other relationships in her life. Again, this supports the concept of Ubuntu, that existence or survival is dependent upon others.

**Education is paramount to success.** When analyzing the concept of Ubuntu within the participants’ reflections on success, I recognized an additional subtheme that emphasized the role of education within the women’s definitions of success. Although
education is not explicitly a part of Ubuntu, the participants spoke of both education and relationships in a way that indicated that they viewed them as interdependent. During the interview process, participants repeatedly spoke about the importance of their educational achievements and the feelings attached to these achievements such as pride, happiness, and validation, which made the experience feel like a success. They talked about perseverance and hard work, which they felt were necessary in attaining educational goals. Participants also talked about the educational journey being an isolating experience at times, whether that was because they were away from their families or had to remove themselves to ensure they completed their work. Many of the participants were first generation college students and talked about their achievement being meaningful not only for them but for their families. Interestingly, regardless of the level of education achieved, participants still found it to be an achievement. For example, participants whose highest level of education was a high school diploma seemed to express just as much pride as the participants who obtained bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

The majority \((n = 10)\) of participants spoke about educational achievements in significant ways. Participants expressed an understanding that education was necessary to attain enough wealth to meet their needs and care for their families. They also spoke about education as meaningful because of its impact on the family. Participants spoke of their educational achievements in terms of Ubuntu. For example, Sasha spoke about being the first in her family to attend and complete college. She noted that her achievement was an achievement for the entire family. She stated,
...I was the first one in my family on my mother’s side of the family as well as my father’s side of the family to go to college... and then you know when I graduated my whole family was there um, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins. There were like five car loads of them, they drove from Trenton to Virginia um to see me graduate and it was just a, you know, I was just so proud of myself because um it was a major milestone in my life. I could remember my uncle grabbing my diploma, he like this our diploma right here.

Although participants saw completing school as an accomplishment, the accomplishment was not just for them but their families. Other participants shared this sentiment regarding their education. Simone’s daughter was the reason she returned to college to complete her degree. She stated,

When I, when I got my Associate’s (giggle) at uh University of Phoenix, this was back in 2011. I made the decision based off of my daughter, having a conversation with her about college and she looked at me and was like well I’m not going to college, and I said to her, like hell you’re not! I said you’re going, she was like why, you didn’t go? I tell you, two weeks later, I signed up and I started my classes

**I wanna be at a place where I have enough.** This subtheme is related to the larger theme *Success Is Ubuntu* due to participants’ desire to provide for others. The title of this theme is a direct quote from a participant. I recognized that financial security was important to participants through their narratives and noticed they spoke about their financial goals as interrelated with relationships. Additionally, achieving financial
security was not about obtaining status, but instead it was about reaching a point of economic comfort in which they were able to care for their children and parents’ financial needs. This financial aspiration was significant to participants in context of their relationships. Ubuntu was evident in their descriptions of financial success because of how it could impact their families. Because all of the participants in this study were raised in under-resourced communities it was not surprising that they shared stories of struggling financially during their childhood. The majority of participants were motivated by their financial struggles and some began working at a young age, while others worked hard academically so they would never have to return to the challenging economic conditions of their childhood. Some participants expressed that they did not realize as children that they were financially poor until they were either informed or exposed to higher income families. Yet, participants generally realized they did not want to struggle financially, and success for them meant financial security. However, financial security was only seen as success because of their ability to provide and care for their families. Simone stated,

My definition of success is just being, being able to not live from paycheck to paycheck … Um, I just wanna be at a place where, I have enough. We, we, my kids have enough. I don’t have to worry about where this is gonna come from, where that’s gonna come from.

Simone specifically referenced being able to provide for her children while participants who did not have children spoke about being able to care for their parents.
Again, participants seemed to view success in terms of how it could elevate the collective. Lorena stated,

But for me success means being comfortable. And what I mean by that is you know, for me first being comfortable financially, I think that that is something that because I’ve seen my mother struggle and I know I talk a lot about my mother but I also saw my father when I did go visit him, work his behind off too... So, I remember saying telling my parents before I wanna work hard so you guys don’t have to anymore.

Participants talked about finances in two ways; hardship and wellness. They recognized the need to overcome financial hardship by seeking means to obtain income and talked about financial wellness as part of success. Money is a necessity in our society and participants referenced the utility of money. However, it is important to note that several participants specifically stated that success was not about making a lot of money for status, but simply having enough to take care of their families. As such, the reasons they gave for seeking financial wellness may differ from the dominant narrative.

I Am Not a Stereotype

This second primary theme refers to the stereotypes associated with Black women. The majority of my participants ($n=11$) were very aware of the social stereotypes associated with being a Black woman. Participants specifically named three popular stereotypes: Mammy, the welfare mom, and the angry Black woman. Another underlying image that was evident across participants was that of the mule of the world or martyr. The quotes below illustrate that participants understand they have been both
relegated to and, at times, welcomed the societal images and roles associated with Black women. Many of them discussed projections of inferiority by others due to one or more of their identities, and as a result feeling handicapped by the oppression based on their identities. However, participants overwhelmingly talked about not being defined by these stereotypes and not allowing these images to stop them from achieving their goals. Participants discussed a need to work harder (i.e., in school, at work, as mothers) to provide a counter narrative to the stereotypes that were placed on them. Participants expressed that they felt there were more Black women who did not fit social stereotypes than what has been portrayed in society. Therefore, participant responses seem to show that they feel the norm for Black women is behaving in ways that are contrary to the stereotypes, which suggests that those who may seem to fit the stereotypes are the exceptions. Participants also expressed that knowledge of social stereotypes motivated them to avoid fitting into those images. Eleven participants endorsed this theme as integral to their success or continuation of achieving success.

While there were some participants who provided examples of pushing against stereotypes, other participants specifically stated that they did not want to be a statistic or a stereotype, and wanted something else for themselves. Generally, participants were aware of the limitations placed on them but worked hard to not be confined to those expectations. Ciara stated,

Um I guess I, I guess I didn’t wanna be a statistic. Like, um, or a stereotype. It, most people think that African Americans can’t do this um or women can’t do this, or women shouldn’t do this, so that was my drive to show them that I’m not
a statistic or a stereotype. I’m a human and I can achieve what I wanna achieve.

Like taking away race and gender, whatever I put my mind to, I’m gonna do it.

Ciara implied that a Black woman’s humanity is minimized by others due to her race and gender and by their assumptions about gender and race. Participants acknowledged that portrayals of African American women are either incorrect or misleading and they seemed to shoulder the responsibility of presenting an alternative narrative. Grace stated,

So in my mind I gotta make it like I can’t be the statistic, I can’t be the single Black mom with a whole bunch of kids on welfare, like I can’t be her. So, um, and because in my mind there’s so many more of us that are doing better than the ones than they one they portray, I need to make sure that I’m I’m living that

Several participants seemed to express a double consciousness in which they tried to assert their individuality while also understanding that they always have to represent for the race, more specifically Black women. Participants explicitly mentioned consciously fighting against being the stereotype or a statistic, which illustrates that they have an awareness of racialized and gendered stereotypes and that these images are not positive. Individual and systemic levels of oppression experienced due to race and gender identity are evident in the above quote. Participants discussed how this oppression seems to limit exposure to career options and advancement in career.

**I don’t have an attitude, I’m angry.** This is a subtheme of *I Am Not a Stereotype*, and was a direct quote from a participant. As previously mentioned, participants felt stereotypes were often mischaracterizations. They offered explanations of their emotions and behaviors in relation to these stereotypes to illustrate both the
validity of their expressions and how it has been mischaracterized. I recognized this theme because several participants talked about the angry Black woman stereotype and how it was an unfair characterization in multiple ways. I recognized that participants felt the angry Black woman label invalidated their anger as if they did not have a reason to be angry. Statements such as, “I can’t be mad?” and “If you say something, now you’re the angry Black girl” were plentiful, which demonstrated their disagreement with this characterization, and supported the theme. Also, it seems participants felt this label limited their emotions to one expression. For example, if they weren’t smiling then they must have an attitude or be angry. Furthermore, when expressing anger they felt others judged their entire group (Black women) by their individual expressions.

Participants expressed some tension between representing for the gendered race or racialized gender and also just wanting to be seen as an individual. The dominant culture has seemingly relegated these women to specific characterizations with no room for individuality. Furthermore, participants expressed that people respond to them based on these characterizations whether they fit into them or not. Additionally, because Black women have been typecast, their behavior is judged as either acceptable or unacceptable. And although valid, expressing anger or discontent can and has had negative consequences for participants. Lisa stated,

...being a Black female, sometimes I feel like, a lot of people look at us to be like we’re always mad or we’re always angry, we always have a attitude. And, all of us aren’t like that, if we got a attitude, it’s cuz we got a attitude. And it’s like, we
get grouped all together, but if somebody else of another race has a attitude, it’s okay. But if we got a attitude, oh, she just being a angry Black girl, no, I’m mad!

Some participants, aware of the consequences for certain behaviors, were either willing to accept them or had limited options for action.

Though many participants talked about having to overcome stereotypes associated with their identities to succeed, other participants related in some ways to those stereotypes and talked about how culturally appropriate behaviors are misconstrued by outsiders. They even talked about finding utility in the representations carved out by dominant society. For example, the angry Black woman can invoke fear, and sometimes participants found that useful. Imani stated,

I can switch it, I can be Mrs. Smith or I can be Imani. And if you mess with me, my kids, you gon see Imani. So if you want me to be Ms. Smith, you make sure that you come straight. And I will use language just like that because oh why do they talk that way? Why are they so angry? What do you mean, why we angry? It’s in our bones to be strong. You just don’t understand the tone of our voice because you don’t speak our language.

**What’s wrong with Mammy?** This is a subtheme of the theme *I Am Not a Stereotype*, which was a direct quote from a participant who related to this image.

Stereotypes often have some basis in cultural behavior; however, these behaviors are often mischaracterized or misunderstood. The stereotype of Mammy is characterized as a woman in servitude to White families. She is understood to possess positive qualities such as caring and self-sacrificing, which are, in turn, pathologized when applied to
Black women. I recognized this theme because many participants described themselves using the same or similar terms associated with being a Mammy, suggesting that these qualities are accepted, expected, and even desired. Because participants seemed to have some positive feelings toward this image, the title of this theme seemed appropriate.

Denise talked about media portrayals and stereotypes of Black women and how the positive sides of those images are not shown. She said,

There’s the negative stereotypes of the Mammy. Um, but then again you’re taking care of others. So, on the negative side your consi, a mammy, but on the positive you’re nurturing, you’re being a mother, you’re taking care of, you’re getting things done…

Mammy seems to be a unique stereotype because participants did not speak about actively avoiding this role. Whereas they were determined to not be seen as a welfare mom and were vocal about not being seen as the angry Black woman, they seemed to feel obligated to fulfill the role of Mammy. Even when others may not deserve their devotion, the participants seemed to put others before themselves.

*Family over everything…even over me.* Nested within the subtheme of *What’s wrong Mammy* were two other subthemes: *Family over everything…even over me* and *Making peace with my place.* As previously mentioned, participants provided examples of putting others’ needs before their own. Aside from *Family over everything* being a common euphemism in Black culture, I named this theme because every participant provided examples of times when they needed support or protection, but chose not seek it to maintain the needs of the family. Family was so important to participants that they
often took on the role of mule or martyr to try to preserve the family. Hence the title of the theme *Family over everything... even over me.* This self-sacrificing is evident in their perceptions of their relationships with their fathers and in their decisions to protect others over themselves. Although participants experienced disappointment and injustice, they often chose to maintain harmony in the family over their own safety and justice.

Furthermore, they seemed to value family connection so much, they were willing to overlook and forgive the failures of others in their lives. Participants’ responses were so layered that I identified another layer of subthemes that demonstrated how these women put others before themselves: *He’s still my dad* and *Self-sacrifice is Black women’s work.*

*He’s still my dad.* This nested subtheme of *Family over everything... even over me,* references statements by several of the participants when discussing their feelings for their fathers. I felt it was an appropriate title because several participants used these exact words when discussing their fathers, and it addressed the relationships between the women in this study and their fathers. Furthermore, I noticed that this phrase seemed like a statement of forgiveness because it often came after disclosing an example of disappointment, as in despite his failings, he’s still my dad. Because all of the women in this study were primarily raised by their mothers, it was surprising to not only hear the participants discuss their fathers, but also the way in which they talked about their fathers. Participants’ fathers were either completely absent during their childhood or had an intermittent physical presence and all of the participants expressed being disappointed by their biological fathers. Several participants provided examples of being abandoned
by their fathers and having to overcome issues that they felt were a result of his absence (i.e., self-esteem, molestation, relationship issues) in order to work toward success.

However, despite their childhood experiences, 12 participants reconnected with their biological fathers, with 11 reconnecting in adulthood. These reconnections seemed to occur in very significant ways. They talked about being a different person now, and that they did not want to hold a grudge. They also seemed to feel they benefitted in some ways from his presence in their lives. Because participants found relationships to be so important and integral to success, maintaining this connection to their fathers may have been connected to success for them, particularly because they were willing to forgive their fathers to maintain their relationship. Participants expressed that despite the disappointments they were open to having relationships with their fathers and some even actively pursued these relationships. Although participants generally expressed openness to having their fathers in their lives, with many of them seeking their fathers out, many of them described their current relationships as tenuous. Six participants noted that currently they have a strained relationship with their fathers but still respect the biological connection. Although participants were raised with little to no involvement from their fathers, they did not identify as children without fathers. Actually, participants shared that just the fact that they were their fathers warranted openness, love and care. Several participants mentioned that although their fathers were not active while they were children, their current presence was impactful enough that it cancelled out all of the absent time. Phoenix stated,
…my dad, uh like lived with us until we were about 7 or 8 years old and then he just left. Never really knew why but kinda pieced it together in adulthood. Um, always kinda had you know like a back and forth type of relationship with him. Just, he never really identified with us. Um, my sister and him kinda got into it way more than I did um but I got sick in two thousand and six (2006) and um, renal failure. My dad really was there for me like in a way that he had never been my whole entire life. So I felt like at that point you know, everything that happened in the past did not matter. It, you know, when I really really needed him, he was really really there for me.

Several participants provided more recent examples of their fathers’ involvement in their lives that they felt were more important than the past. Although some participants currently have strained relationships with their fathers, others spoke positively of their current relationships. Interestingly, participants seemed to now accept that their fathers will disappoint them and attribute this to who he is by saying, “oh that’s just my dad.” Being able to accept their fathers as they are, allowed them to maintain relationships with them. Grace stated,

Um, I always wel to, welcomed a relationship with him… Um, I I don’t, and even now like just recently he did something that disappointed me, but now I’m at the point where I’m like, that’s my dad. Like, that’s I don’t expect anything else from him…So, to be able to have that now it don’t matter to me that I didn’t have it then, cuz I have it now. … Not worrying about what happened hasn’t happened,
or what has already happened but just being content in the space that I am right
now, and right now I have my dad, we have a relationship, and we good.

Participants valued the relationships with their fathers so much, that they were
willing to accept past, current, and future disappointments to have them in their lives.
Even participants who had not experienced a sustained reconnection with their fathers
still felt he warranted respect based on the biological connection. For example, Sasha
and her sister paid for their father’s funeral and burial expenses although they never had a
relationship with him and Sabrina expressed stated, “…you’re my biological father,
we’re connected by blood. So, if we don’t talk cool, if we talk, great! I’m a still love you,
cuz you’re still my father at the end of the day.” Several participants expressed this exact
sentiment.

*Self-sacrifice is Black women’s work.* This nested subtheme of *Family over
everything... even over me,* provided another example of the Mammy stereotype which
requires Black women to be self-sacrificing. I chose the name of this theme because the
majority of participants expressed it was their duty to put their families first because they
felt no one else will do it. Because participants related so much to the stereotype of
Mammy, it made sense that they would feel obligated to be self-sacrificing. However,
this self-sacrificing seemed to just be a part of the job of being a Black woman. They did
not seem to know if they wanted to sacrifice or if they were forced to sacrifice. Many
responded with another common African American phrase saying “it is what it is,”
suggesting that sacrificing is simply a Black woman’s work. Also, many participants,
even those who experienced molestation, felt that there were people who suffered more
than they had, and expressed gratefulness. Several participants in this study revealed they were molested as girls \((n = 6)\). Regarding success, participants felt they needed to forgive their perpetrators and remain silent about the molestation for various reasons in order to move forward in their lives. Participants talked about forgiveness as a means to separate themselves from the incident as well as find meaning through the experience.

Most participants who shared this experience felt they needed to protect their mothers from the shame and guilt that would likely come as a result of the disclosure. Participants also talked about protecting themselves from the negative responses they may have received as a result of the disclosure (i.e., being blamed, not being believed). Additionally, participants talked about protecting the molesters as well. Furthermore, it seemed that participants accepted the molestation which helped them to move through it.

When asked why she did not inform her mother Imani stated,

Like what I did tell her was what I told her but never the full blunt of it because I don’t want her to carry guilt. I’m, I’m good. I’m okay and you did well. And I want her to have that in her repertoire of parenting… So I know if I say anything, anything damaging that might hurt her in a way. She may not be able to understand or recover somewhere in her psyche.

This was a recurrent theme, where several participants chose to sacrifice their own well-being for the sake of the well-being of others. As children they chose to protect others, and even as adults, they continued to feel the need to protect others. When asked why she still has not informed her mother Grace stated,
I don’t know. Uh, hurting her, making her feel like she um, I don’t wanna throw up her because I feel like if you know, if she was a little more on it it probably wouldn’t have happened. Um, so, because of all the mistakes that she’s known she’s already made it’s like here let me throw another at you. Um, that I you know, um cuz she knew him, because um she brought me around him and stuff like that.

Again, family was so important to participants that even though they would have benefited from the support of their mothers during this time, they chose to protect them.

**Making peace with my place.** This is a subtheme of *What’s wrong with Mammy?* I recognized that participants who experienced trauma had to find a way to cope with their positions in their family, culture, and in the larger society in order to continue to move forward. They were able to rely on relationships (God and counseling) to hold them together. As previously stated, participants have been relegated to and welcoming of the role of burden bearer (mule, martyr), as evidenced above, which is another construct under Mammy. As such, they have sought to make meaning of their experiences. Although not themes, participants made meaning of their experiences through their relationship with God, and some participants sought counseling. This meaning making is detailed below.

**God prepared me to help others.** All of the participants in this study identified as Christian, and the majority of participants looked to their faith in God to both provide strength to help them through their experiences and make meaning of their experiences.
This relationship with God was just as important to participants as their family relationships. Sabrina stated,

…it’s so important to me because it has always gotten me through... and I questioned it for a while, don’t get me wrong, I questioned, I questioned everything about it like if, if I’m one of God’s children, why would he allow me to go through everything that I went through as a as a child? … Like, if I’m this princess like the bible says I am, why, just why? But, even though that stuff has happened and as an adult I now realize it didn’t just happen for me. It happened because with what I want to do with my life, I’m not just gonna be, my story is just not gonna be for me, it’s gonna be for other teenagers and young kids that are going through the same thing, they just feel like they so alone.

Several participants talked about God using their stories to help others. They seemed to make peace with their traumas because they could connect with others who experienced similar situations and help them. Peace stated,

I realize how many issues that have literally touched my life when I was working for Contact of America… they were recruiting people to work the hotlines. But before you could work the hotlines you had to go through a um a week of training… So one day we dealt with um maybe Depression. Another day it was um abuse, another day it was um drugs, another day it was whatever, right? … So, we’re in there like alcoholism. I’m like, that’s touched my life directly. I grew up in a alcoholic family, cuz my step-father was a alcoholic and he was in my life since I was probably 11/10. Then we deal wit abuse, I’m like well I grew up wit
abuse. My dad was abusive, I was abused. Um, never, I’ve never been verbally abused. Um, then we had to deal with Depression, and I was dealing directly with someone at that time that had I that suffered from Depression real bad and so I was dealing with Depression. Then it was about um the drugs, and I was like okay well my husband is a ex um uh drug addict. So every area, and that’s when the Holy Spirit was like, well every area of your life has been literally, directly, for the most part, touched by one of these issues.

Being able to help others seemed important to participants and they felt they were able to do this because of how God has helped them through their personal experiences.

*I need counseling but...* Participants in this study discussed feeling a variety of mental health challenges including depression, anxiety and stress. Furthermore, each participant detailed difficult times in their lives such as marital problems, molestation, and sickness. Participants talked about emotional and mental health as indicators of success and six sought counseling for a variety of issues. Participants who sought counseling had varying experiences. Some found it helpful and others did not find it beneficial. Although the majority of participants felt they would benefit from counseling, they were concerned about the therapist not being able to relate to them and understand their perspective. A recurrent concern was the lack of access to African American professionals. Barbara stated,

I was really anxious, because I hadn’t been using any drugs, it was just regular Barbara dealing with regular Barbara stuff, and so I, um, heard him say, I’m having, you you, she’s having a nervous breakdown…Now,
you know, back in the day when people say somebody’s having a nervous breakdown, you think crazy! I’m like okay, I’m not crazy, I’m just a little stressed. But when they said that, I took on, I’m having a nervous breakdown. Broke down, start crying (laughs) cuz I didn’t understand because you don’t know their frame of reference and so my frame of reference for a, somebody’s having a breakdown, is you you crazy, they gon take you put you in Princeton House and then you gonna be in the corner rocking, all that…But, I went to a therapist, and um, you know, you you, when you go to a therapist, you need to have somebody that you can relate to, and you need to be able to talk to that person open and honest, and they need to kind of have an understanding of what you might have been experiencing. Every person I went to, and I don’t know Caucasian therapists because that’s not who I am. But some people can’t work with some people, and this chick that I had, just, lost ball, high grass and I found myself (laughs) telling her, like, you don’t know what you talking about; you don’t know what you’re doing. And, it just got worse.

Although some participants did not see the utility of counseling, those who attended counseling shared mostly positive experiences. Participants who were open to counseling addressed issues such as lack of counselors of color who were accessible and being fearful that their counselor would not be able to relate to them. For example, participants were unsure if White counselors would be able to understand cultural nuances and were fearful they would be mischaracterized.
Participants mostly wanted counselors who looked like them. Due to the limited number of counselors who identify as Black, this preference is oftentimes not met. Participants talked about how they felt having a Black counselor might eliminate the need to educate their therapists about context that is general knowledge in the African American community. They also talked about fearing something they said or did would be misconstrued or that they would have the added pressure of code switching in sessions.

**Summary**

Thematic analysis revealed several findings related to how these African American women view success. Relationships were extremely important to participants and colored every aspect of success mentioned in this study. Educational achievement was important to participants for several reasons. Participants felt successful in being the first to achieve a specific educational level and in their ability to balance school and family life. External validation from educational achievement was also meaningful to participants and contributed to them feeling successful. Furthermore, they viewed their educational success not as an individual accomplishment but an accomplishment for the family and at times, an accomplishment for the community.

Participants also experienced trauma and hardship in their lives, and felt they needed to be able to overcome obstacles in order to experience success. Participants shared their experiences of abuse and getting through it, as well as having to experience and overcome other issues (e.g., divorce, financial difficulty, lack of father involvement). They often took on the role of martyr to preserve their family relationships because those relationships were that important. Although participants also talked about the difficulty
of growing up with limited or no involvement of their fathers, overwhelmingly they remained open to their fathers and respected the biological connection they shared. This relationship was so important that they maintained it even when experiencing significant disappointments. Also, power and oppression was evident in participants’ lives. They talked about the characterizations of Black women and how they impacted their lives. Some participants found these characterizations to be limiting, others worked hard to avoid fitting into those images. Some participants asserted that culturally appropriate behavior has been mischaracterized and related to some of the stereotypes in a positive way.

Again, relationships were important to participants. Relationships were both integral to and indicators of success for participants. They mentioned several people who were significant in their lives, most commonly their mothers and fathers, significant others, and God. However, other relationships were also noted such as extended family and friends. Participants viewed sustaining healthy relationships as a sign of success and their relationships were meaningful for them.

Although participants were raised by female heads of households, relationships with their fathers, although tenuous at times, were meaningful, desired, and welcomed. Findings suggest that molestation is a serious issue for these women and its impact can continue into adulthood. Multiple participants have either alluded to or explicitly talked about being abused as children. However, they were able to rely on God to help strengthen them and move them forward. Interestingly, participants also seemed to take on a martyr role, or mule of the world. Their struggles were justified because now they
could help someone else. Finally, participants were mostly open to counseling and those who attended had mostly positive experiences. However, there may be a disconnect between African American women and the counseling field due to the lack of mental health professionals of color.

Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of the findings. Included will be my interpretations of participants’ stories within the frame of Blackness Theory and Feminist Standpoint Theory. Finally, implications and suggestions for future research will be provided.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how African American women who were raised in under-resourced communities by female heads of household described successes in their lives. Additionally, it was important to understand to what they attributed their successes. After a brief overview, I will provide an analysis of the findings from the study.

Summary

I embarked on this study seeking a definition of success that resonated with African American women. I had a particular interest in African American women who were raised by female heads of household in under-resourced communities not only because it was my story, but also because the literature which focused on them often revealed dismal outcomes (Robinson & Werblow, 2012; Williams & Bryan, 2012) or presented their stories from either a deficit-based perspective (Baldridge, 2014; Jones, Zalot, Foster, & Sterrett, 2007; McCloud, 2016) or White American perspective (Harding, 2006; Hill Collins, 1997). Although I expected that participants’ definitions of success would differ from the dominant narrative, I did not know how their definitions might differ. However, findings from this study revealed that participants largely viewed success in terms of relationships.

I identified two main themes in this study: Success Is Ubuntu and I Am Not a Stereotype. The first theme refers to the importance of relationships in participants’ lives. All of the participants spoke about success in terms of relationships. Maintaining and sustaining relationships was not only a sign of success for participants but relationships
were also identified as the reason participants were able to experience success. Relationships provided not only motivation and support, but also an opportunity to experience needed connection or Bonding, as defined by Cross and Strauss (1998). The second theme, *I Am Not a Stereotype*, although addressing how power and oppression played out in participants’ lives, identified yet another significant relationship that influenced participants’ ability to experience success – their relationship with society. The participants' relationship with the larger society (dominant culture) was contentious as they had to confront and navigate limitations placed on them based on their race, gender, and class, and at times the intersections of these identities. Ultimately, I gathered that although participants have been able to experience success as they define it, they also acknowledged that there were areas of pain they continued to carry on a daily basis. I hope that this study not only opens societal perspectives about success, but also results in finding ways to address the oppressive systems that not only make it difficult for these women to achieve success but also mutes their successes.

**Discussion**

I have chosen to present this discussion in order of the themes I identified in the previous chapter. Chapter 4 illustrated participants’ responses to the main research questions, while this discussion focuses on my interpretation of participant responses. I will also illustrate how the two main themes I identified are connected to each other and to success. As seen in Figure 1 below, the themes and subthemes of the study are depicted and I will discuss the significance of the findings related to those themes.
Figure 1: Graphic Depiction of the Themes and Subthemes

Success Is Ubuntu

The first main theme, *Success Is Ubuntu*, is translated as I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am. When asked to define success, participants named constructs that seemed to align with White American culture; education and money. Both of these measures of success were highly visible in the literature, as participants in those studies were intentionally sought based on their educational achievements or affluence (Chambers, 2003; Robinson & Werblow, 2012; Seales, 1987; Sterrett et al., 2009; Tucker et al., 2010; West-Olatunji et al., 2010). Although participants’ responses initially confused me, it was important to keep in mind that all of the participants in this study were American, therefore, their subscribing to the dominant narrative of success
should not have been surprising. However, further exploration revealed that the way in which participants spoke about education and money differed from the dominant narrative. They were not driven by individualistic desires such as competition and status as is valued by White American culture (Katz, 1985; Mangino, 2014), but participants were driven by their relationships.

The two subthemes I identified under Success Is Ubuntu were: Education is paramount to success and I wanna be at a place where I have enough. The majority of participants named educational achievement as a measure of success. However, they talked about the impact their education had on their families. For example, several participants were the first in their families to achieve a certain educational goal. Those who were the first stated their achievement belonged not only to them but to their families. Other participants spoke about returning to school after having children and how they wanted to set an example for their children about what was possible.

The literature in Chapter 2 also revealed that education was important to African Americans. Education was seen as a way to move out of poverty as well as a buffer against some of the issues that were said to impede success (i.e., poverty) (Hanson, 2007; Jackson, 2013; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). However, it seems that participants in this study not only saw education as a way to escape poverty but also a way to lift up their families. Because of this we may need to reconsider the way we view literature that examines African Americans who terminate their education prematurely. It has been established that education is important; however, family seems to be even more important. In under-
resourced communities, it may be necessary to leave school in order to enter the workforce or find ways of earning income to support the family.

Many of the participants in this study returned to school after having children. Although they expressed they always wanted to continue their education, it did not seem feasible at the time, especially because their children became their priority. These findings are significant because they suggest that African American girls and women have educational journeys and needs that may differ from those of White Americans but nevertheless lead to positive self-images, pride, and feelings of accomplishment when reaching educational milestones.

The second subtheme, *I wanna be at a place where I have enough*, refers to accruing wealth. Many participants talked about financial wellness. Although participants were not motivated by individual desires such as wanting a certain vehicle or type of home, they were concerned about being able to care for others, specifically their children and parents. This indebtedness was also found in the literature review, in which teens felt they owed their mothers for the support they received (Williams & Bryan, 2012). While the depths of the relationships in the aforementioned study were not detailed, my participants felt responsible for their parents regardless of their relationships. Participants also did not seem to work toward grander things in life, but simply wanted enough. They talked about having enough so that their children’s and parents’ needs were met. They also talked about struggling financially either growing up or in the present and wanting to be at a place where they could *breathe* or not have to worry about how they were going to pay bills. Our society promotes accrual of wealth (Katz, 1985;
Mangino, 2014), however, it is important to understand that these women were not necessarily seeking to become wealthy. The studies presented in the literature review seemed to define success for participants, which resulted in responses on possible pathways to reach those predetermined definitions of success. However, the finding that was most consistent between this study and literature presented in Chapter 2, was the significance of relationships.

Although research presented in the literature review highlighted the importance of relationships in the lives of African Americans (Epstein, 1973; Halgunseth et al., 2005; Hanson, 2007; Hubbard, 1999; Matthews, 2001; Matthews-Armstead, 2002; Roberts et al., 2011; Robinson & Werblow, 2012; Seales, 1987; Sterrett et al., 2009; Tucker et al., 2010; West-Olatunji et al., 2010; Wiggins, 2005; Williams & Bryan, 2012), those relationships were not seen as a sign of success. As is problematic with research, predetermined definitions of success were evaluated rather than seeking definitions of success from the population. However, even when using White American definitions of success, relationships were seen as significant to success, which was also identified by the participants in this study. Therefore, this study is unique in that it asked African American women to identify and describe success from their own perspectives. As such, relationships were not simply significant in achieving success, it was success. Participants seemed determined to advance educationally and financially because of the support they received from their relationships and because of the potential support they would be able to provide for their relationships. This sentiment is Ubuntu, in that it
reflects how one person’s success is everyone’s success, and that the survival of the individual is dependent upon the survival of her people.

**I Am Not a Stereotype**

The second main theme I identified in this study was *I Am Not a Stereotype*. This theme proved complicated to dissect as there were several layers to address. Participants repeatedly named stereotypes in their narratives about success. Three main points about social stereotypes were evident in participants’ narratives. First, stereotypes were mostly seen as negative because they were limiting and impeded success. Stereotypes forced all behavior from African American women to be seen from a single lens. Therefore, any expression of discontent could only be seen through the image of the angry Black woman. Two outcomes resulted from this constricted perspective: Black women’s emotions may be viewed as invalid and opportunities eluded them because they were only seen in one way.

The second revelation about social stereotypes that I noticed was that at times, participants found utility in stereotypes. This was addressed in the subtheme *I don’t have an attitude, I’m angry*. For example, the angry Black woman is seen as full of rage, potentially violent, and domineering. Women found this to be useful, particularly when they felt threatened or disrespected. Although anger was not a personality trait, they could portray this character effectively, at times intentionally instilling fear in others. Because I want to be careful how I am presenting this, it is important to note that this character emerged only in response to a threatening situation. None of the participants in this study shared stories of being the initiator. However, they did feel that this was a
character they always needed to have available because they were often in potentially threatening situations (e.g., work, store). Therefore, using the angry Black woman character was a buffering technique.

Lastly, there was one particular stereotype that participants seemed to embrace – the Mammy. This was discussed in the subtheme *What's wrong with Mammy*. I recognized that most participants felt they had no choice in portraying the Mammy character. They felt that it was their duty to wear a happy face while sacrificing themselves to care for others. They felt it was their responsibility and the responsibility of women to sustain the family. This is an important finding because it illustrates the danger of a single story (Adichie, 2009). We must be aware that our perceptions of the Mammy stereotype may be misguided. Also, it is important that we not write off Mammy as a bad image, and consider why she exists. Although the character was contrived by White American society, historical and continued oppression seems to ensure the necessity for her survival. Because oppressive circumstances have resulted in African American family disruption (Boyd-Franklin, 2006, Parham et al., 2011), African American women have been positioned to ensure the family is sustained. In my opinion, this is admirable; however, my participants just felt it was a part of life.

There were two nested subthemes I identified within *What’s wrong with Mammy*. They were *Family over everything, even me* and *Making peace with my place*. These subthemes address another stereotype that, although present in participant narratives, was not explicitly stated. As mentioned in Chapters 2 and 4, Hearston (1937) talked about the Black woman being the mule of the world and Lewis (2007) referred to this role as the
martyr. It seemed to me that participants not only seemed relegated to this position, but were also accepting of it. Evidence of mule of the world and martyr was presented in their narratives about their fathers and their stories of molestation as I discuss below.

Most of the participants were welcoming of relationships with their fathers despite disclosing repeated disappointment regarding their fathers. When asked why they continued to welcome a relationship with their fathers, the most common response was “he’s still my dad.” The biological connection was valued by participants so much that they chose to forgive their fathers and just accept the disappointment as a character flaw. Several participants said, “that’s just my dad,” meaning because I want him in my life I am willing to accept repeated disappointment. In my analysis, I considered whether each woman's choice to maintain a relationship with her father was an attempt to fight against another stereotype of the fatherless child. Regardless of their unspoken motives, it was clear that participants experienced emotional pain in their relationships with their fathers, but they did not choose to shed these relationships. There is a huge gap in the literature which focuses on African Americans’ perceptions of non-residential fathers. However, Cartwright and Henriksen (2012) were surprised to find that their five male participants still had respect for their fathers who were absent in their lives. Thomas et al. (2008) briefly spoke about a father having a physical and psychological presence. Although my participants’ fathers did not have much of a physical presence in their lives, the psychological presence was clear.

Another example of putting others before themselves was evident in their choices not to disclose their stories of molestation. More than half of the participants revealed
they were molested as children. However, most participants who were molested never disclosed the experience, not even to their mothers. They provided several reasons for withholding their stories, the most common being their felt need to protect their mothers. Participants stated that they did not want to hurt their mothers with the information. Participants said things such as, “her psyche would not have been able to handle it,” “I didn’t want to say here’s another thing you did wrong.” Even as children, they felt the need to protect their mothers’ emotions over their own safety. This was a very surprising finding because it did not emerge in the literature, and I struggled to understand the connection to success. However, although difficult, it was important to realize that this trauma was also significant to my participants’ success. It was one example of how their identities relegate them to this bottom position (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; bell hooks, 2000; Epstein, 1973; Hurston, 1937; Robinson, Blockson, & Robinson, 2007) and how they recognized their place, and thus had to figure out how to move forward in their lives despite the trauma.

Both their narratives about their fathers and their stories about being victimized support the concept of the mule, which descends from the Mammy stereotype. They disclosed several examples of putting others’ needs before their own. They not only felt this was the expectation of them as Black women but also willingly took it on. They even minimized their stories making statements such as, “I know people have been through worse.” On one hand their reconciliation is consistent with the first theme about Ubuntu. Maintaining relationships seemed to be of supreme importance for participants. However, the concept of Ubuntu is about a shared responsibility of the collective, which
is not present in assuming the role of the mule or martyr. It seems participants felt success was shared but the pain was theirs alone to carry. As such, they needed to figure out ways to carry the pain to be able to continue moving toward success.

All of the participants identified as Christian and relied heavily on their faith to make meaning of their experiences. This was not a surprising finding as religion, specifically Christianity, was significant in the studies presented in Chapter 2 (Grey, 2011; Irvin et al., 2010; Loder, 2005; Mainah, 2016; Reid & Robinson, 1984; Robinson & Werblow, 2012; Swanson, 2006; West-Olatunji et al., 2002; Wiggins, 2005). However, in the literature review, religion and spirituality was used as a coping mechanism (Grey, 2011; Swanson, 2006; Wiggins, 2005), opportunity for bonding (Robinson & Werblow, 2012), safe haven for children and adolescents (Irvin et al., 2010), and a way to make meaning out of life experiences (Loder, 2005). The literature did not address a need to use spirituality to make meaning out of trauma. However, as reflected by reports from the participants in my study, the literature repeatedly supported the finding that God was seen as the reason for having strength to succeed (Grey, 2011; Loder, 2005; Mainah, 2016; Reid & Robinson, 1984; Swanson, 2006; Wiggins, 2005). I found that forgiveness was a significant part of my participants’ narratives as well as this idea that their pain was purposeful. Several participants felt they endured traumatic situations so that they would be equipped to assist others with similar stories. Even with this meaning making, participants disclosed there remained some struggles in their lives. They all valued mental and emotional wellness but were apprehensive about counseling. Most participants felt they would benefit from counseling but had reservations for various
reasons. The most common reason for apprehension related to the perceived culture of counseling. Participants stated that there was a lack of Black professionals in their area and they did not want to feel the need to code switch or educate their therapists about their culture. This is consistent with research on cultural mistrust, as explained in Chapter 1 (Terrell & Terrell, 1989). Also, it may help to explain why there remains a high dropout rate in counseling for African Americans (Beaumon-Lafontant, 2007; 2008).

Overall, participants defined success in terms of relationships. They felt their healthy relationships were an indicator of success and they felt their success was due to the support they received from their relationships. Relationships were so important that they were willing to put others’ needs first even at the cost of their own emotional or even physical safety. Furthermore, although literature presented in Chapter 2 addressed the impact of social stereotypes on African American women’s success (Charleston et al., 2014; Seales, 1987; Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013), it did not address the utility in stereotypes or embracing stereotypes, as was found in this study. Generally, participants in this study and in the literature felt that social stereotypes based on their identities impeded their ability to achieve success. They noted that others’ perceptions of who they were influenced their progress in the workplace (Seales, 1987; Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013), impacted their experience educationally (Charleston et al., 2014), and shaped their social interactions, including their interactions with family members. Lastly, participants were able to make meaning out of their traumatic experiences in order to move forward in their lives. They recognized there were areas in which they still needed healing and
were open to counseling; however, cultural issues resulted in apprehension to pursue counseling.

**Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of the study are those common in qualitative research. A small sample size of 13 participants does not allow for generalization of findings to the population. However, the goal of this research was not to generalize but to gain thick, rich descriptions of a phenomenon. This type of understanding can only be gleaned through qualitative means of research. Another limitation was the seemingly homogeneity of the sample. Although I was particularly interested in African American women, all of my participants identified as cisgender, heterosexual, and Christian. Therefore, participants who share differing sexual identities and orientations, and different religions may see success differently or highlight other oppressed identities beyond race and gender that influenced their success. However, a strength of the sample was the variance in age of the participants. The youngest participant in this study was 22 years old and the oldest was 58 years old, which allowed for connections in unique ways.

**Critique of the Findings**

Participants pointed to relationships when answering questions about success. However, little acknowledgment was given to personal characteristics that may also have contributed to their success. For example, participants generally did not name things such as self-determination, intelligence, or other personal characteristics that may have assisted in their success. They chose to credit their relationships for their progress. As previously mentioned, this could be due to my phrasing of questions (see Appendix A).
However, because African Americans and women are communal by nature, their responses may not have changed significantly. A focus group may have also allowed for the identification of other themes based on participants’ interactions with each other. Many participants referenced a strong desire to avoid being a statistic. As a researcher, I could have pushed more on this as it could have pointed to self-motivation. However, it could have also furthered the discussion on power and oppression as it relates to their relationship with society. Their strong desire to avoid being a statistic was in response to messages they received from society.

Furthermore, other theoretical frameworks that attend to the layered identities of participants may have allowed for a unique understanding of the narratives provided. For example, although Blackness theory specifically attended to the race of participants, Black Feminist theory (Hill Collins, 1990), theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), or relational cultural theory (Miller, 1976) may have allowed for a different understanding of responses given the attention to race, gender, and class. Although I feel I captured participants’ stories well and accurately, my findings were complicated. Some of the discrepancies or contradictions may have been explained differently through the use of another theory.

**Implications**

Participants were clear about the significance of relationships in their lives. As such, it is important that we gain an understanding of how our counseling, education and training, and research and practice are impacting the relationships in these women’s lives. Many of our counseling theories (e.g., Person-Centered, CBT) focus on the individual
which may be counterintuitive when working with African American women (Katz, 1985). Counselors may encourage clients to not worry about what others think and live their lives for themselves; however, this guidance could be damaging as these women were not living their lives for themselves. Imposing White American values onto African American women could possibly lead to detrimental and unfulfilling outcomes.

Furthermore, power and oppression were apparent throughout this study. Participants were aware that expectations were not high for them and they had to overcome obstacles to achieve success. Therefore, in addition to intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness, scholars and counselors must seek to engage in advocacy at the systemic level. It may be beneficial to advocate for wrap-around services in under-resourced communities that could provide the supports necessary to assist African American girls and women in their educational journeys. Education was clearly important to participants and significant to success. Educational achievement contributed to their sense of pride as well as family and community pride. Therefore, we must ensure that we are both providing the necessary supports to help them achieve this success and examining the policies and structures in place that make it difficult for them to achieve educational success. It may also be beneficial to implement policy in secondary and post-secondary schools in which discrimination can be reported and addressed. Bonding opportunities for African American girls and women are also encouraged in schools as it can serve as both a buffer to discrimination and a way to affirm their identities.

We need to examine our notions of success and the reasons we are resistant to move away from these notions. Additionally, the standards we promote are based on
White American values and as such have resulted in the invisibility of these women because they are not seen as they are. The social constructions developed in the dominant narrative place limitations on these women and invalidate their experiences. Education and training programs must be aware of how power and oppression plays out in African American women’s lives and how they navigate it. Furthermore, because racial relations in society are often duplicated in the counseling session, counselors must address difference in the counseling session in intentional ways. Subsequently, educators and trainers must prepare future counselors to increase self and other awareness, and skills to address difference in counseling sessions. Modeling is one way this could occur. Educators and trainers must intentionally address difference in their classrooms and be prepared to work through the tension and discomfort that could arise. Although, these issues are likely addressed in multicultural courses, multicultural counseling should be evident across courses. Counseling programs should intentionally seek to diversify their counseling programs so that a more diverse group of counselors can emerge, as participants were explicit in their desires to have a Black counselor.

Researchers must be careful when conducting research from a dominant perspective, as they may interpret emotion and behavior incorrectly. I encourage researchers to discontinue conducting research on marginalized populations and instead conduct research from the margins, from a lens that reflects the culture of the people. If this is not done, we continue to run the risk of perpetuating a single story (Adichie, 2009).
As stated above, participants experienced trauma in their lives and expressed that they would benefit from counseling. However, they were apprehensive due to the lack of Black professionals in their area and a fear that a White counselor may not be able to understand cultural nuances. Participants did not want to feel they needed to censor themselves or educate their therapists about their culture. Research shows that clients prefer working with someone who shares their race (Helms & Carter, 1991). This was also true for these participants. Therefore, counseling programs must do a better job at intentionally seeking diversity in their programs. Less than 4% of counselors identify as African American (Sanders Thompson, Bazile & Akbar, 2004). This is problematic because if clients are seeking counselors who are racially similar, then African Americans are less likely to get what they want.

Finally, several participants experienced molestation. As counselors, we are trained to report incidences of abuse and are mandatory reporters. We must understand that this disclosure will possibly result in family disruption. Considering the historical oppression that African Americans have faced and the disruption in family that has occurred historically since the 1600s (Parham et. al, 2011), we must understand the impact of reporting on our clients’ lives. There is a loss that occurs which compounds the historical loss already experienced by this population. We cannot take this lightly, because it could verify the mistrust African Americans already have toward the profession. Therefore, counselors are perfectly positioned to advocate for more culturally sound practices in this area. Given counselors’ presence in community health agencies, educational institutions, and the child welfare system, we have knowledge and
interactions with both families and systems. Ideally, advocacy that impacts legislation to minimize disruption, increase supports, and improve education would not only benefit families but may help in minimizing cultural mistrust.

The implications of this study point heavily to the need for advocacy at all levels. Counselors are positioned perfectly to advocate for clients as they are often invited into spaces in which clients are not. Therefore, involvement in counseling organizations and entities such as the American Counseling Association (ACA) and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) offer avenues to advocate for culturally sound research practices, education and training curriculums, and policies. Because advocacy is seen as essential to counselors’ duties, we must ensure we are fulfilling this role.

**Future Research**

This was an extremely rich study and as such, every finding could not be included. Therefore, there remains significant room to further this research. Given that African American women come from a collectivistic background, conducting a focus group may have been beneficial and could have provided more nuanced discoveries. Often areas of significance come out in focus groups that may be missed in individual interviews. For this reason, one of my goals is to repeat this study and add a focus group component.

As stated in the limitations, this sample consisted of self-identified heterosexual Christian women. Therefore, there was no variance in sexual orientation or religion across participants. As marginalized identities are added, absence in the literature seems
to be even starker. Therefore, although African American women’s voices are muted in research and other areas in general, the voices of African American women who identify on the LGBT spectrum are largely absent. Therefore, conducting this study with African American women who have varying sexual orientations and identities would be beneficial not only in discovering other perspectives but also increasing their visibility in the literature.

Also, because faith and God were so important to participants in this study, we must strive to understand how African American women with different religious beliefs experience success. For example, what do those who are atheist rely on to help make meaning out of their experiences? How do Muslim women rely on their beliefs? Success could be more determined by religion than culture for some African American women.

Furthermore, this study only focused on African American women, and their stories may differ from those of Afro Caribbean backgrounds and African immigrants. Being Black is not a monolithic experience. As such, it would be beneficial to ascertain the immigrant experience and the experiences of 2nd and 3rd generation Blacks (those who know their country of origin).

Because the focus of this study was success, significant areas were not explored as thoroughly as they could have been. Relationships were important to participants and exploring these relationships in more detail may be beneficial. For example, examining the role of extended family in a more in-depth manner could be useful. Also, although participants’ biological fathers were absent or had intermittent involvement, some participants mentioned father figures (men who were not their biological fathers) that
were significant in their lives. These relationships should also be explored. Finally, although participants talked about their faith and the role of God in their lives, this is another relationship that could be explored more fully. All of these relationships deserve continued attention. I used Feminist Standpoint Theory and Blackness Theory to frame this study; however, due to the attention to relationships, other theories may suit this study and attend to relationships in more nuanced ways. Relational Cultural Theory’s focus on connections would be fitting for this study. Similarly, Intersectionality Theory would address race, gender, and class in ways Blackness Theory may have been limited.

As noted in Chapter 2, the majority of literature on African American women and success was found in dissertations. This would suggest that there is an interest in this topic. However, this interest did not result in peer-reviewed publications. This discrepancy needs to be evaluated in more detail to gain an understanding as to why this is the case.

No quantitative research that addresses success and African American women currently exists. Conducting a more expansive study would be useful as it could allow for broader generalizations to be made. For example, a larger survey study asking participants to rate notions of success could provide for greater connections and maybe lead to the development of a suitable measure of success for African American women. Also, a quantitative study that looks at what percentage each variable contributes to success could be beneficial (i.e., openness to father accounts for 8% of the variance in success for African American women). Additionally, research that focuses on the relationships among success, academic achievement, mental health, racial identity, and
the use of Blackness Theory strategies (bonding, bridging, buffering, code switching, and individualism) would make sense. Furthermore, more strengths-based research focused on African American women is needed in general to increase their visibility in the field.

It is interesting that although media outlets have reported that African American women are now the most educated group in America (The Independent, 2016; The Root, 2016), the stereotypes they contend with offer a different narrative. I believe the pervasiveness of social stereotypes about Black women result in their success being seen as exceptionalism. However, the participants in this study felt there were more Black women succeeding than what is portrayed, which would make them the norm. Imagine what they could accomplish if oppression did not exist.

**Conclusion**

Overall, although the African American women in this study have figured out a way to survive and achieve success, I want more for them. They have been able to set and achieve goals, develop and sustain healthy relationships, and overcome tragedies in their lives to achieve success. However, they continue to struggle with the aftermath of abuse which impacts their social and personal lives. Although they remain open to their fathers, they still feel the sting of his absence in their lives. Participants respected their mothers and felt a responsibility to protect them, yet they did not seek their mothers when they were needed most.

Social constructions of African American women are limiting and leave little room for growth or change. The findings from this study suggest that African American women feel a need to work harder just to move away from the expectations society has of
them. Conversely, social constructions of success are also limiting because they are
couched in White American values, which may not be relevant to these women. These
women, although I want more for them, have achieved success, regardless if it is
recognized writ large. However, counselors are in a unique position to validate their
success and see them as they desire to be seen.
Still I Rise
BY MAYA ANGELOU

You may write me down in history with your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt, but still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you? Why are you beset with gloom?
’Cause I walk like I've got oil wells pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns, with the certainty of tides,
          Just like hopes springing high, still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken? Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops, weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you? Don't you take it awful hard?
’Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines diggin’ in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words, you may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness, but still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you? Does it come as a surprise,
That I dance like I've got diamonds at the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history’s shame. I rise.
          Up from a past that’s rooted in pain. I rise.

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide, Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear. I rise.
          Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear. I rise.

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise
I rise
I rise.
References


Hurston, Z. N. (1937). *Their eyes were watching God*. J.B. Lippincott & Co.


Kivel, P. (2000). Social Service or Social Change? In *The revolution will not be funded: Beyond the non-profit industrial complex.* (pp. 129-149)


Appendix A

**Semi-structured interview**

Intro: I am particularly interested in talking with you because you are someone selected because of the way you’ve been able to move forward in your life. I’m going to ask you questions about how you’ve managed to do that, particularly in the face of oppressive and marginalizing systems for women like us.

1. Think of a time in your life when you felt you achieved something or reached a certain point – maybe even surprised yourself. Describe that for me and how you made your way?
   a. Who helped you with that?
   b. What was helpful along the way?

2. Thinking back on your life up to now, describe the significant or most impactful relationships for you.
   a. Family, fictive kin, mentors, friends, teachers, etc.

3. (If it does not come up) Thinking about your identities, for example race, gender, sexual orientation, class, how might they have influenced your ability to achieve?

4. How have your goals changed or remained the same over time?
Appendix B
Recruitment Flyer

OPPORTUNITY TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY ON AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

- This study is focused on the experiences of African American women raised by single mothers.
- Participants will be asked to complete two 60 minute interviews.
- Participants must meet specific criteria, including
  - African American female
  - 25 years of age or older
  - Raised by a single-mother
  - Raised in a low-income community

Ebony White, Doctoral Student in the Counselor Education Program is conducting this study. If you are interested in participating or have more questions, please contact her at Whitee9@montclair.edu
This study has been approved by the Montclair State University Institutional Review Board, study #00_____.

Appendix C

Consent Form

CONSENT FORM FOR ADULTS

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you sign this form.

Study’s Title: Exceptional but not an exception: Understanding how African American women make their way.

Why is this study being done? To gain an understanding of how African American women are able to make their way in the face of societal challenges.

What will happen while you are in the study? Participants will participate in two 60 minute interviews.

Time: This study will take about 2 hours of your time. This includes two interviews which are 60 minutes each.

Risks: You may experience a variety of emotions during the interviews. However, outside of this there are no foreseeable risks or discomfort to participants.

Data may be collected using the Internet (i.e. Skype); I anticipate that your participation in the interviews presents no greater risk than everyday use of the Internet. Please note that email communication is neither private nor secure. Though I am taking precautions to protect your privacy, you should be aware that information sent through email could be read by a third party. Although we will keep your identity confidential as it relates to this research project, if we learn of any suspected child abuse we are required by NJ state law to report that to the proper authorities immediately.

Benefits: There are no benefits to you being in this study. However, participants in similar studies have reported an emotional benefit.
Others may benefit from this study because it will broaden the literature about this population and may influence practice.

**Who will know that you are in this study?** You will not be linked to any presentations. We will keep who you are confidential.

You should know that New Jersey requires that any person having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been subjected to child abuse or acts of child abuse shall report the same immediately to the Division of Youth and Family Services.

Although the researcher will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality.

**Do you have to be in the study?**
You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you.

**Do you have any questions about this study?** Phone or email the Ebony White, 609-358-0817, whitee9@montclair.edu and email Dr. Amanda Baden, 973-655-7336, badena@montclair.edu.

**Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant?** Phone or email the IRB Chair, Dr. Katrina Bulkley, at 973-655-5189 or reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu.

As part of this study, it is okay to audiotape me:
Please initial: ______ Yes ______ No

**One copy of this consent form is for you to keep.**

**Statement of Consent**
I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I am 18 years of age or older and have received a copy of this consent form.

____________________________________  ______________________________  _______
Print your name here  Sign your name here  Date
Name of Principal Investigator | Signature | Date
Appendix D

Initial IRB Approval Letter

Jun 22, 2016 2:03 PM EDT

Dr. Amanda Baden and Ms. Ebony White
Montclair State University
Department of Counseling and Ed. Leadership
1 Normal Ave.
Montclair, NJ 07043

Re: IRB Number: IRB-FY15-16-217
Project Title: SS Exceptional but not an exception: Understanding how African American women make their way

Dear Dr. Amanda Baden and Ms. Ebony White:

After an expedited review:

- Category (6 & 7)

Montclair State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this protocol on Jun 20, 2016. The study is valid for one year and will expire on Jun 20, 2017.

Should you wish to make changes to the IRB-approved procedures, prior to the expiration of your approval, submit your requests via a Study Modification in Cayuse-IRB.

For Renewal, it is advised that you complete your renewal submission 30-60 days before the expiration date. If you have not received IRB approval by the study expiration date, ALL research activities must STOP, including data analysis. If your research continues without IRB approval, you will be in violation of Federal and other regulations.

Please note, as the principal investigator, you are required to maintain a file of approved human subjects research documents, for each IRB application, to comply with federal and institutional policies on record retention.

After your study is completed, submit your Project Closure submission.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB requirements, please contact me at 973-655-3105, cause Był@email.montclair.edu, or the Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Katrina Bulley
IRB Chair

cc: Ms. Deborah Reynoso, Graduate School, Academic Services Coordinator
Appendix E

IRB Addendum

Nov 21, 2016 10:44 AM EST

Dr. Amanda Bader and Ebony White
Montclair State University
Department of Counseling and Ed. Leadership
1 Normal Ave.
Montclair, NJ 07043

Re: IRB Number IRB-FY15-16-2/7
Project Title: SS Exceptional but not an exception: Understanding how African American women make their way

Dear Dr. Amanda Bader & Ebony White:

After an expedited review, Montclair State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study's modification on Nov 21, 2016.

This modification submission included the following changes:
1) Change has been made to the minimum age requirement of the study from 25 to 21 years of age.

Should you wish to make additional changes to the IRB-approved procedures prior to the expiration of your approval, submit your requests via a Study Modification in Cayuse IRB.

After your study is completed, submit your Project Closure.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB requirements, please contact me at 973-655-5183, cause IRB@email.montclair.edu, or the Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely yours,

Ms. Amy Keener
IRB Coordinator
Appendix F

Transcription of Stories about Molestation

Sabrina

…being molested by my grandfather, for that long, it (sounds), when it’s a family member that close you’re no, you’re no longer a child, mentally. It makes you grow, like it it it forces you to grow up. Cuz you, you’re dealing with something that you shouldn’t have to deal with at 6 years old. And you don’t know why you going through it, and you don’t know why you no longer think like the rest of the 6 year olds that you hanging around. You not thinking about what they thinking about. They thinking about candy and you know uh, dolls, and you thinking about why we still living in this house with this man? And how am I gonna tell my mom what I’m going through, when it’s going on, right under they nose? So I, I had to grow up, mentally, way before it was time to. [I was molested] (sigh) from when I was 6 to about when I was 11. And he stopped when everything hit the fan, and everything got out to the family. He stopped, and then he tried again, when I was 12. He tried it again, but it didn’t work.

Grace

But um, when I was like 11 years old, I experienced molestation. And um, I always felt like, like my mom didn’t protect me, like she didn’t, she just didn’t do a good job of protecting me. Which is probably why I’m like super momma bear over my own kids, like I be ready to kill people over my kids. Um, she, she just never, she just didn’t protect me and I already had that from my dad cuz he wasn’t there. That’s natural, you a girl, your dad’s not there. You, it’s like why he not here to make sure I’m good like, I had no
security. So then my mom didn’t do it either, so I’m just out here with no security
blanket, like I’m just out here in the wind, like (laughs) and so that’s how I felt. So, it
broke me to the point where I, now even though I’m not saying it, I’m not even acting it
out. But in my mind, it’s just me? I’m, am I good eno?, like what is happening, like why,
why don’t nobody have my back, like what is happening? So, that that, when I mean
broken, I just meant like I just wasn’t whole because I didn’t understand where, what
about me wasn’t enough?

Ciara

Um, well, in, I’ve been molested before, but not in my family. Somebody from the
church that I knew for a really long time, and I was, I was in elementary school and I
would always remember like going to church and every time I would see him I would
feel uncomfortable. And at times I didn’t know, it was weird like I couldn’t figure out if
it was reality or if it was something I just put in my head. But I’m like every time I see
this person I’m just I get weirded out by him. So, and I never told anybody, because it, I
just never told anybody, I didn’t know what it was when I was younger… I was in
elementary school, cuz I remember where we were, we were outside, I was walking home
from school and I remember seeing em, and we were outside and then we had like this
really tall grass and you, the grass was like taller than I was. So, of course nobody well I
couldn’t say nobody could see me but, it was kinda hard to see me because it was taller
than I what I was or whatever. And I remember um, before anything really going down or
really happening, um, my sister’s friend yelled my name cuz she saw me walking and
then I like popped up. And I just remember going to my sister’s friend and walking to my grandmother’s house.

Imani

But my mom’s um, at that time he was her boy boyfriend for years and then he became her husband when I was like 14. And the weird part of the the curve ball to this is that he molested me when I was 5. And the only reason I can pinpoint the time was because I remember the school and the grade I was in. Otherwise it would be a blur. And I I don’t even know if it happened twice or three times. Cuz it wasn’t repeated, it wasn’t all the way through my life. It wasn’t at 16. I just remember that time period. And I remember the school I was in and my teacher, and nobody noticed. Nobody noticed. Because I wasn’t complaining, I didn’t I don’t I don’t know I didn’t, from what I remember I didn’t bleed, I didn’t do anything that would indicate something happened to me. And he, now that I look back, he would, he probably touched a lot of kids because he would, there were other kids in our family, like it was his family though. And he would run through the house and chase them and play, the same way he did me. But if you’re a parent and your kids not complaining you might just think, he love kids. He love my daughter. Cuz you running, you on your hands and knees chasing me through the house, acting like a dog, or you know buying me stuff, or it wasn’t even like manipulative that I can remember. Because I didn’t have a, my dad wasn’t on, on on job, on the job… So I didn’t know to talk, I didn’t know to tell. Everything for me was dolls and make believe and I don’t know what are you doing. I think I was watching TV. Like I remember just looking
at TV like this (demonstrates). And being by myself I didn’t know that. Nobody used the word sex, nobody talked about it, nobody’s supposed to touch you there.

Peace

Though, and this is I think the weird part about me, I was abused ah, phy physically, sexually abused at a young age. If you ask me how I think or what I feel about it, probably not much (laughs). Which is to me, is kinda weird (laughs). Because I see how people who’ve been abused. You hear all these struggles and all of that. I mean between neighbors, neighbors, relatives, it was just like a, a ongoing weird, I don’t know, sixties thing, seventies thing, I don’t know. Where I would have like okay, so I’m fifty-two, I would say are at least five, six years, if they’re even alive, seven years older than me, then, so, you know when you young you have a different, the way you see things. So when we moved from out there, I was eleven, excuse me. So eleven and younger, I can’t say how close to eleven, I can’t say how younger, I just remember times being sexually like molested, people, like this one man, this one guy, he’s probably in his sixties now, but would like jerk off on me, never, I don’t remember penetrating, but then you don’t know, cause you hear psychiatrist, psychiatrist say, people block stuff, so I don’t ever remember being penetrated. So I do remember this one person would, and its so, okay so for me, first of all, why was I even home by myself that people could do this, right? So that says something. So he would come, and he would jerk off on me, and just like squirt it all over me, so I remember that. I remember another neighbor again, five, six, seven years older than me, I guess if he was alive; I think he might have passed, I don’t really know, but I would say he would be fifty-eight, fifty-nine, so anywhere from
six or so, um (*smacks lips*) if I remember correctly, I don’t think I was home, I think I was in a neighbor’s house, I remember being up against a refrigerator, and I wanna say this guy put Vaseline on his finger and penetrated me; and then we just had like old people in the neighborhood, like old men, cause when we were growing up, you went to the store for your neighbors, and they gave you like a little bit of change or whatever. This one old man, I remember, Mr. Johnson, would always have people, um, the young girls come, and he would have us come in, give us money, oh I need this from the store, you know dumb stuff, cause that was common then, um, but I think he was a little creepy, and I can’t remember anything specific about him. I remember this other, like she was real crazy lady that lived a couple doors from us, she had a brother or something that use to come, but I think he lived out of town. I remember something about him, I don’t know what, I remember something about some other neighbors, cause we had some families that had like nine or ten kids, back then. In the house that was right next to me in the house they had like probably six or seven sons and probably two or three daughters, the one down the street about the same, they had about nine or ten kids, I remember something with one of them, can’t place my finger on that. So that stuff was kind of ongoing.

Barbara

But I know one time Uncle [name] like tried to touch my breasts (punches hands together) I cold cocked that joker (laugh). Don’t you ever do that! But, again, I was the rebellious one, so [I was a] teenager. Um, at Uncle [name] party…Um, we was having a party in the backyard and he went you know, tried to touch me, and I said now I could
put you on blast, and go out there and tell everybody. But, I ain’t gonna do that to you.

Because I see you hurting (laughing). Cuz I hit him hard. (laughs) I hit him hard.
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