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Black First-Generation Professionals : Leaders that You Never Heard of Before, An Exploratory Study of Lived Experiences

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BLACK FIRST-GENERATION PROFESSIONALS:

LEADERS THAT YOU NEVER HEARD OF BEFORE -

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF LIVED EXPERIENCES

A DISSERTATION

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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

We hereby approve the Dissertation

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Abstract

Black First-Generation Professionals (BFPs) represent groups of individuals who were the first in their families to attend and complete a college degree; they are also first in their families to attain White-collar professional careers. This qualitative study sought to understand the lived experiences of BFPs in the workplace; complexities of upward mobility, identity development and family relationships were also explored. The success stories for all participants came at a cost, a burden, a toll, or some sacrifice for a greater good. Upward mobility in the Black community can be viewed from two opposing ends of a gains-loss spectrum. On one end, there are significant gains that are attached to one's academic and career success; on the other end, there are losses or experiences that are often unseen, unrecognized or unnamed. Ambiguous loss and Black identity development theories were used as guiding frameworks for this study. Analysis of the data collected revealed five main themes: 1) tripartite workplace: stressful, powerful, and triggering; 2) mentorship: critical element for success; 3) identity is nuanced; 4) upward mobility: hidden experiences and feelings; and 5) family expectations and motivating factors for success. Implications and future considerations are outlined.

Key words: Black professionals, first-generation college students, mentorship, Black identity development, ambiguous loss

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to all those who have come before, those presently pushing boundaries, and those to come. This work is meant to shine a light and give voice to those that have toiled and taken an unexpected journey. To the fifteen (15) participants who gave me all access to their reality -- I am honored and proud to share your stories! Black excellence is not a myth; it is a reality.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

It is a weird sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of continually searching at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two mind, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in a single dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

~ W. E. B. Dubois (1903)

I remember being approached with a question by an administrator from a previous institution early in my professional career. The question, and what it meant, would become a pivotal moment and somewhat of a pandora's box in my personal and professional life. The administrator said, "Duane, which do you prefer to be called, African American or Black?" At that moment, I, who had only identified as Jamaican up until that point, paused for what could be compared to a computer processing information at warp speed. I did not know the 'correct' answer. I had never been asked that question, nor had I any reason to contemplate the deep and historical meaning of racial identity in America (Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Jackson, 2002) based on my Caribbean roots and cultural upbringing. For the next ten seconds I not only had to decide which was 'correct', but I had to see myself as one or the other or both. In that moment, I felt as if I was representative of an entire group; I was not sure if I even belonged but I acknowledged the importance of my response in that moment.

It should be understood that to identify as African American, Black, or as a person of African descent, is to have varied experiences when considering the history of the United States and the transatlantic slave trade in the western hemisphere. Such history includes exploitation,

oppression, and atrocities (Palmer, 2018) that have yet to be atoned for and present complex experiences for all, but in particular for Black people. Such experiences are not unique; rather they are experienced by an entire group whose lives reveal a nuanced and complex history. America is said to be the melting pot, where cultural differences of immigrants 'melt together' to form something magnificent and beautiful. While this ideology has some legitimacy, the utopian perception is marred with a history told in two tales; one by the dominant victor and the other by the loser. Quite naturally, blending one's culture, heritage, traditions, and identity into a 'melting pot' results in pieces of each individual being lost or suppressed, whether intentionally or unintentionally, or unacknowledged in some sense.

The question posed to me allowed for a process of self-reflection, allowing me to acknowledge my identity as I knew it or how individuals who 'looked' like me were socialized in viewing one's identity in America. My identity was not based on how I viewed myself, but rather on how others have been socialized in the United States and how I assimilated into that role. While my racial identity became a focus during that period, it was not the only issue that presented itself as complex and nuanced. Being the first in my family to graduate from college and to pursue further professional degrees resulted in a move from low socio-economic status to a middle socioeconomic status; in other words, I was moving from a blue-collar to a White-collar professional environment based on the social location of my family. White-collar occupations are considered middle class and non-manual, whereas those in blue-collar occupations make up the working class (Landry & Marsh, 2011). The meaning of these lived experiences--that is, as Black first generation professionals--are explored in this study.

Background and Context

As rates of people under 30 who are attending college increase, it is likely that there may be an increase of First-Generation College Students (FGS) seeking post-secondary education. FGS are students who come from families where neither parent completed a four-year college degree (Covarrubias et al., 2015; Ishitani, 2003; Wang & Nuru, 2017). As a result of increases in FGS college enrollment, there may be more individuals moving from blue-collar to White-collar professional spaces (Terry & Fobia, 2019). To provide context, consider that in 1850, 4.1 million of the 16.4 million people under the age of 30 (25 percent) were enrolled in school; by 2010, 75.9 million of the 126.0 million people under 30 (60 percent) were students (Bauman & Cranney, 2020). In 1955, there were 2.4 million students enrolled in college and by 2018, 18.9 million were enrolled; in 1967, 26 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds were attending college, whereas in 2018, 41 percent of the same group were enrolled (Bauman & Cranney, 2020). In 2018, a little over half (54 percent) of the 17.8 million undergraduate college students and 57 percent of the 4.3 million graduate students were non-Hispanic White; Black students made up 2.6 million (15 percent) of all undergraduates, and 583,000 (14 percent) of graduate students (Bauman & Cranney, 2020). Such increases may present challenges for some FGS as they move into White-collar careers; this includes adapting and understanding a culture and system that previously was unfamiliar to them (Lubrano, 2004; Terry and Fobia, 2019), while entering into a workforce that is aggressively shifting based on technological advancement, automation and political influences (Kurer & Palier, 2019).

Workplace inclusion and advancement can be a barrier and challenge for individuals from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds (Terry & Fobia, 2019). Individuals from low SES backgrounds may not have access to cultural capital (Jez, 2014) and resources leading up to and

during college; as a result, they typically do not have access to similar resources as they enter into White-collar spaces (Terry & Fobia, 2019). Terry and Fobia (2019) in their review define background resources for entrance into college and into White-collar spaces as: access to trusted adults, both within and outside of the family, who can guide a young adult towards gaining admission to and subsequently graduating from college; and cases where children grow up with family members or others in a social network who teach them the nuances of White-collar office culture, the importance of networking, and the importance of having career mentors that look like them. In their review, an employee who lacks background knowledge and resources of wealth, education, and White-collar work are often the first member of their family to have a White-collar professional position, and are defined as a First Generation Professional (FGP). While past studies have explored the experiences of FGPs or the barriers and challenges faced when accessing these White-collar, elite spaces (Ashley & Empson, 2013; Cook et al., 2012; Sommerlad, 2012; Velasco, 2021), there is no existing research that specifically looks at this group based on their identity of being Black. Research is warranted to explore what it means to be the first in their family to enter White-collar professional spaces, and to understand what this means when considering one's identity of being Black.

Black First Generation Professionals (BFP), as referenced in this study, are individuals who identify as Black, as First Generation College Students (FGS), having earned a master's or doctoral degree, and now working in White-collar professional spaces. BFPs represent an area ripe for exploration when considering their experiences as they move from earning a college degree to working in White-collar, professional spaces. BFPs' identity of being Black in America, what it means for them to be a Black person in a professional setting, and the

(re)construction of their family relationships were considered in this study. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the lived experiences of individuals who identify as a BFP.

Abridged Literature Review

There is no research explicitly on the experiences of BFPs as defined in this present study. Previous research tends to focus on either the experiences of being a FGP (Olson, 2016; Terry & Fobia, 2019) or the experiences of being a FGS pursuing terminal or professional degrees (Roksa et al., 2018) or issues facing African Americans in the workplace (Wingfield, 2007). However, while past research focuses on the transition from college to career, or advanced career and upward mobility experiences (Bartik & Hershbein, 2016), there are no studies that explore the intersection of being Black and FGP, termed in this study as Black First Generation Professionals (BFPs). The transition from college to professional work is problematic for individuals who are First Generation Professionals (FGP) (Olson, 2016). FGPs, as discussed in this study, are individuals who are often the first members of their family to have a White-collar professional position. These individuals were also the first in their families to attend college and whose parents did not earn a four-year college degree (Wang & Nuru, 2017). Olson (2016) found that FGPs working full-time had to negotiate new relationships with past, present, and future, all while trying to make meaning of work life and their identity. The research that exists focuses on FGPs and their shift from low-SES to middle or upper-SES status (Bartik & Hershbein, 2016; Terry & Fobia, 2019) and discusses their experience without reference to or understanding of relevant intersectional approaches (Crenshaw, 1989) when considering one's race and/or gender. For Black individuals, it is as important to understand what it means to be the first in one's family to move from a blue-collar to White-collar professional work, as it is to understand how they identify within the African diaspora in the United States. Demo & Hughes

(1990) found in their study concerning Black identity that it is fair to view Black identity as a

"multidimensional phenomenon, and that being black means different things to different

segments of the black population" (p. 371).

The African diaspora represents a collective of many identities, cultures, traditions, and

ethnicities in a post-transatlantic slave trade era (Palmer, 2018). In order to understand the

experiences of individuals who identify as people of African descent, it is important to

understand the intragroup identities and experiences before turning outward to intergroup

interactions, such as Black-White relations in the United States. Past research has documented

how historical events have shaped the Black experience across the western hemisphere (Palmer,

2018) and the legacy of such events. Moreover, Black individuals in the United States tend to be

'lumped' or categorized into one group, ignoring the differences or unique experiences (De Walt,

2013). A contemporary view on Black experience, however, presents the ability to critically

analyze places that promote upward mobility for those in lower socioeconomic statuses (Landry

& Marsh, 2011) and their function in those spaces, as well as their nuanced experiences with

family as they experience mobility. Such opportunities for upward mobility are often in

institutions of higher education and White-collar spaces (Cole & Omari, 2013). Previous

literature has reviewed and documented what it means to be the first in one's family to attend

and successfully complete college (Capannola & Johnson, 2020; Means & Pyne, 2017), or to be

the first in their family to enter into White-collar spaces, previously unfamiliar in their family

(Johnson & Stern, 1969; Lubrano, 2004; Terry & Fobia, 2019), or factors concerning ideology,

inclusion, and diversity in the workplace (Kelly, 2007). In reviewing the literature, there is no

study focusing on the intersections and experiences of BFPs. As racial tensions in the United

States have become heightened in relation to historic (Chaney & Robertson, 2013) and more

contemporary events involving police brutality (Ellis & Branch-Ellis, 2020), and as social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) have led the charge on identifying, dismantling, and recreating systems that have been oppressive to Black people, this study will add to the body of the literature about BFPs and their experience. While the state of Blacks have improved in the United States, a critical lens will unearth experiences that challenge how educational institutions and the workplace interact with, and create inclusive and equal opportunities for, its constituents.

An important factor in conceptualizing the lived experiences of BFPs is to understand the role of family from a Black perspective. Historically, Eurocentric and Afrocentric approaches to family stability have been different (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993). For instance, in order to understand Black family functioning, Hill (1998) suggests using an ecological systems approach that allows examination of factors at the societal, community, and individual levels. As cited by Hill (1998), Allen (1978) posits that the studying of Black families is static and suggests use of a developmental approach as a means to link Black families to the demands and resources to the Black community and wider society. Previous research has shown that the structure of the Black family is not 'nuclear' and is more likely to be 'extended', with kin and kin assistantship playing a significant role in family functioning (Hofferth, 1984; Mills et al., 1999). The concept of a nuclear family was based on a married couple with unmarried children and meant to be the primary form of family organization (Sudarkasa, 1975). This idea was brought into focus during the 19th and 20th century, when European scholars and missionaries described or compared Black family structure as 'less advanced' than their own (Sudarkasa, 1975). Such description and theorizing was detrimental to the understanding of Black family functioning during that period (Sudarkasa, 1975). For Black families, their collective environment consists of families, neighbors, and friends (McAdoo, 1978). Black extended families are formed around a

consanguineal core, i.e., 'blood relatives', as opposed to conjugal core, i.e. a nuclear family.

(Sudarkasa, 1975). Another important factor in understanding Black family functioning is from a

cultural heritage perspective (Sudarkasa, 1975). In connecting the Black family in the United

States with that of African values, Sudarkasa (1980) differentiates the idea of nuclear family:

>Labelling the father-mother-child unit as the "nuclear family" does not make it invariably
>
>so. Other role configurations are sometimes more appropriately designated as the nuclear
>
>family in a given society. It is clear that in many African societies, what is most
>
>appropriately designated as the nuclear unit within the extended family is not the "nuclear
>
>family" of the West. (p. 44)

Sudarska (1980) further noted that researchers and anthropologists who study African societies

should clearly understand that "large and complex family groupings do not present to Africans

the 'problems' that they present to Europeans" (p. 44). Although marriage and the atypical

nuclear family was important, it was not as important to family functioning as it is in the West

(Sudarska, 1980). Thus, to begin to understand the experiences of BFPs, it is important to

understand family structure and functioning in Black communities, especially when compared to

the Eurocentric values that are oftentimes used as the standard for all others.

Statement of the Problem

"If I had an hour to solve a problem I'd spend fifty-five minutes thinking about the problem and

five minutes thinking about solutions."

~ Albert Einstein

For all the accolades and benefits attached to educational attainment, it is not known how

these experiences affect or shape BFPs' identity within White-collar professional spaces nor how

their experiences affect past and present family relationships. Education plays an important role

in the collective upliftment and socialization of people in society (Cole & Omari, 2003).
However, while education provides an equal opportunity for all to accomplish personal and
societal goals, it may embody a change in human behavior and an understanding of the world in
which we live. Academic achievement in Black communities in the United States represents
social mobility (Cole & Omari, 2003) and sheer triumph given the oppressive history faced since
the transatlantic slave period (Jackson & Cothran, 2003). In spite of multiple structural and
systemic barriers designed to keep Black people in a lower social or class hierarchy, they
continually overcame obstacles faced. Over the course of four hundred years since the first slave
ship arrived at the inception of what would become the transatlantic slave trade, Black people
have progressively worked to improve their state as a people; this work continues to present day.
It is prudent to understand that such a drive for success in Black communities in the United
States is deeply rooted and connected to entering spaces that once precluded their involvement;
inherently, a sacrifice in some form is to be expected when challenging the status quo. One such
space is entrance into institutions of higher education; a space that represents opportunity and
upward mobility for BFPs. For BFPs, being the first in their families to attend college is both the
entrance into a new segment of their lives and the closing of parts of their past family
relationships.

 BFPs' earlier experiences as FGS are important to conceptualize in order to begin to
understand where any indifferences may begin to occur. As noted earlier, FGS are students who
come from families where neither parent completed a four-year college degree (Covarrubias et
al., 2015; Ishitani, 2003; Wang & Nuru, 2017). FGS tend to come from backgrounds that are
low-income backgrounds (Gibbons et al., 2019). A cursory search for the phrase 'first generation
college students' from 1858 - 1989 produces a little over 16 thousand results; contrastingly, a

search with the same phrase from 1990 - 2021 results in over 1 million results. This suggests that researchers are perhaps increasingly interested in understanding and creating knowledge about FGS and their experiences. Wildhagen (2015) suggested that families' views on the cost of college attendance and its social value, resulted in a reduction in enrollment, and a new focus on the FGS population. As a result, administrators began to pay attention to this group and their unique needs (Wildhagen, 2015).

First Generation College Students (FGS) are a well-documented population in educational research, typically focusing on three key areas: how they compare to continuing generation college students in terms of demographics (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Keefe, 2020); their transitional experiences from high school to college (Alford, 2017; London, 1989; Riester, 2019; Wang & Nuru, 2017); and their ability to be retained and persist towards graduation, and subsequently, into careers (Olson, 2016). Previous studies have looked at issues and challenges facing FGS such as their levels of engagement and development (Pike & Kuh, 2005); attrition and persistence (Ishitani, 2003; 2006); mental health, academic challenges, and family support (House et al., 2019). Other research tends to focus on a deficit view of this population (Bond, 2019; Pascarella et al., 2004). There has also been research surrounding their pursuit of further education beyond a four-year degree (Holly & Gardner, 2012; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011; Roksa et al., 2018), indicating that FGS experiences, beyond a four-year degree, are just as important to understand. FGS represent a group that has unique needs and, in some cases, must 'break-away' (London, 1989) from the traditions of their culture and family of origin in pursuit of upward mobility (Hinz, 2016). Institutions of higher education in the United States of America tend to promote individualism, oftentimes not acknowledging tendencies and traditions of their family of origin (Gordon, 2021).

In order to challenge racial and class oppression, academic achievement is seen as an accessible and viable mechanism for Black people (Cole & Omari, 2003). However, for all the accolades and residual benefits attached to educational attainment, it is not known how these experiences affect or shape BFPs' racial identity within White-collar professional spaces nor how their experiences affect past and present family relationships. If Black communities are built upon the notion of a collective force, how does society's promotion and culture of individualism co-exist in White-collar professional spaces with an entire group whose experiences and culture operates from a communal essence? If Black people in the United States, historically, have assimilated into the dominant culture (Metzger, 1971), how does this act of assimilation reinvent itself in White-collar professional spaces and how is it acknowledged?

Also significant in this study is the paradox that education presents for Black people. By virtue of educational attainment, BFPs have the potential to create upward mobility for themselves and family members; however, within this same experience of educational attainment, different paths may be created when compared to their family upbringing. These new paths may bring into sharp focus both past and present family relationships and may create new ones/new conceptions and models that challenge our dominant understanding. The problem, therefore, is that BFPs' racial identity and experiences are understood from the dominant culture's lens, which historically, has marginalized Black people. While few studies indicate research on the experiences of FGPs (Ashley & Empson, 2013; Cook et al., 2012; Sommerlad, 2012; Terry & Fobia, 2019), a majority of studies reviewed focus on what the new professionals encounter as they make their way into such spaces (Dinise-Halter, 2017; Wesley, 2018). As noted earlier, FGPs are defined as individuals who are the first members of their family to have a White-collar professional position. However, absent from the literature is an understanding of the

experiences of BFPs and how they construct and make meaning in a system that tends to attach

deficit narratives to this group. To date, access and inclusion in White-collar professional spaces

have been viewed from a socioeconomic status perspective, looking at what it means to move

from a low SES to a middle or upper SES (Johnson & Stern, 1969; Terry & Fobia, 2019), or

from a gendered perspective, looking at how women conform or challenge workplace roles and

expectations (Bauer & Murray, 2018; Kelly et al., 2010). The different lives being created by

BFPs may begin to shape during college years. Such different pathways continue into careers

and tend to involve nuanced experiences related to their racial identity in unfamiliar spaces and

when considering existing and past family relationships. However, the complexities and layered

nuances of being a BFP in these White-collar professional spaces have not been examined in the

literature.

Research Question

The literature focuses on experiences of FGS as they make their way through and into

early career years. Additionally, the literature has looked at experiences of individuals moving

from low-SES to middle or upper-class. However, the literature does not contain research

exploring individuals whose experiences encapsulates all of the following: being a FGS, Black,

and the first in their families to enter into White-collar careers; collectively, the intersections of

these identities may unearth experiences that are unaccounted for in the literature. Based on my

review of existing literature and gaps concerning the experiences of BFPs, the following research

question was explored: What are the lived experiences of Black First-Generation Professionals as

they pursue their work lives?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the lived experiences of Black First-Generation Professionals (BFPs) as they pursue their work lives. Through qualitative inquiry, I will investigate how structural and systemic factors have and continue to shape the racial identity of BFPs, how education has impacted their mobility, and how their current lives may be different when compared to their family upbringing. Specifically, I investigated what trade-offs, losses or gains, may have occurred as a result of educational attainment and how they make meaning of those experiences. The following questions represent areas that I explored in order to understand the lives of BFPs:

1: How were family relationships viewed or constructed during earlier and later stages of their careers and what was family support like during these different periods?

2: What were things that were lost or gained as a result of their educational attainment?

3: What does it mean to be the first in their families to enter into White-collar professional spaces?

4: How did their identity of being Black impact their experiences in the workplace?

Significance of the Study

"The price one pays for pursuing any profession or calling is an intimate knowledge of its ugly side."

~ James Baldwin

Almost one hundred and twenty years have passed since Du Bois (1903) brought to the fore the concept of a 'double-consciousness' experienced by Black people in the United States.

The concept of double-consciousness suggests that in America, African Americans operate in two states of being; in one, they attempt to identify as American, and in another, attempt to align with being a Black person. Existing in one space, with 'two minds', can be difficult, daunting, and arduous for any individual. This concept remains as significant in the twenty-first century as it did in the twentieth century. The United States has recently been experiencing a heightened sense of polarized race relations since the election of both Barack Obama and Donald Trump (Bostdorff, 2017; von Feigenblatt, 2020). Moreover, there has been a documented rise of social justice movements as seen in the Black Lives Matter movement (Pierce, 2020). Race relations and the history of Black experiences in the United States would suggest that a study of BFPs is salient at this point in time. While there has been research on the experiences of FGPs in workplace settings, there is little research on BFP's as it relates to 1) their racial identity within White-collar professional spaces, and 2) the nuances of past and present family relationships. To create inclusive spaces in education and workplace settings, understanding issues facing BFPs is warranted. Moreover, previous literature references the experiences of Black people in the context of "African American", often ignoring the varied diasporic identities. A qualitative study of BFPs can capture contemporary issues and experiences in professional spaces and in family life that may otherwise go unnoticed. Acknowledgement of this view and how it translates into policies and practice is significant for educational institutions and workspaces that are predominantly White. Given the historical context of Black people's experiences in the United States, this study can further existing research surrounding experiences of Black people in professional spaces who may also be experiencing upward mobility. If Du Bois' concept holds true and salient today as it did at inception, then such issues may be congruent within the varied diaspora communities that are 'lumped' into one in workspaces.

Institutions that purport to provide equity and access to all people in the United States are, ironically, at the basis of possibly perpetuating barriers and challenges for Black people in the United States. Given that the experiences of BFPs' mobility and trajectory may begin during or after college, identifying and addressing issues that may be encountered as they enter into workspaces is significant to their persistence and success. If the number of FGS entering and graduating from college is increasing (Bauman & Cranney, 2020), it is possible that the demographic entering into White-collar professional spaces may also shift. Furthermore, it has been documented that historical policies and practices make upward mobility a difficult and stressful process for Blacks who operate in predominantly White-dominated educational and White-collar professional settings (Farmer & Ferraro, 2005; Frazier, 1957; Hudson et al., 2020). In their study of upward mobility of Blacks in America, Hudson et al. (2020) found that aside from overt forms of discrimination and racism, participants indicated that they felt increased stress from hypervisibility in White spaces, such as workplace environments. Not only were these external stressors noticeable in their study, but pressure to support family financially became a 'pain-point' for Blacks who had now attained a level of financial freedom, possibly not known to their family and/or peers. In their review, Landry & Marsh (2011) stated that while past research has focused on experiences and development of the Black middle-class, what remains missing include aspects of their self-image and self-concept as affected by race or class position.

The upward mobility of Blacks when compared to Whites is quite nuanced and layered (Hudson et al., 2020), and this study can help uncover and illuminate those contemporary experiences. For instance, one study found that the health of Black people experiencing upward mobility also experienced an element of "diminishing returns" (Farmer & Ferraro, 2005).

Diminishing returns, as posited in that study, found that as education levels increase for Blacks, their self-rated health status was not the same as Whites (Farmer & Ferraro, 2005). In their study of data across the span of twenty years, Black adults did not enjoy similar 'returns' in self-rated health as White adults with increased income and occupational prestige did. While all people with lower levels of education shared similar health issues, those experiences were different once SES status improved; access to health and promotion as well as segregation appear to have more significance.

These issues brought to fore, i.e. Black racial identity and experiences in White-collar professional spaces, family relationships, and overall health and wellbeing, overlap and demonstrate contemporary, and perhaps hidden, issues facing BFPs in the United States. Black experiences in the United States are complex and have been negatively portrayed in mainstream media (Kumah-Abiwu, 2020). BFPs may be facing identity issues in the workplace settings, difficulty and nuanced family relationships, and perhaps, health challenges that do not appear as though they are connected to contemporary experiences of Blacks in the United States. Using critical bifocality (Weis & Fine, 2012), the complex situations that BFPs may encounter, can be explored. Thus, this research may have implications related to: the types of support provided to Black students in institutions of higher education; the promotion of inclusive workspaces that recognize variations within the diasporic community; and the ability for practitioners to have context of BFPs' experiences when providing wellness or counseling services - which may impact the overall health for BFPs.

Definition of Terms in Study

This section will provide definitions for information and terminologies used in this study.

African American: Descendants of enslaved Africans in the United States.

African Diaspora: People of African descent who live outside continental Africa.

Black: Individuals or people of African ancestry.

Black First Generation Professional: Individuals who identify as Black, First Generation College Students (FGS) who have earned a master's or doctoral degree, and work in White-collar professional spaces.

Blue-collar work: Occupations that are considered working-class and usually involve manual labor (Landry & Marsh, 2011).

Caribbean community: Individuals born in the West Indies may include groups such as Africans, Indians, Spanish, English, and Chinese; however, for the purpose of this study, Caribbean community refers to only those who identify as Black or of African descent.

Continental African or African: Individuals who identify as Black and who reside in nations of continental Africa.

First generation college student: Students who come from families where neither parent completed a four-year college degree.

First generation professional (FGP): Individuals who are the first members of their family to work in a White-collar professional position.

Professional Careers: careers that require post-secondary education and advanced training or expertise in a particular field. These types of roles required no physical labor.

White-collar work: Occupations that are considered middle-class and non-manual (Landry & Marsh, 2011).

Summary and Chapter Organization

In this chapter, I introduced the experiences of individuals who identify as BFPs. I have briefly outlined some research surrounding the experiences of FGS and FGP, looking at them in relation to their racial identity and family relationships. Both racial identity and past or present family relationships will be explored within the context of educational and workplace environments. I have articulated the significance for this study based on current social issues in the United States and the need to understand hidden experiences of BFPs.

In Chapter 2, I will conduct an in-depth review of the following focus areas as it relates to the experiences of BFPs in the United States: Black identity within the African diaspora, family relationships in the Black community, Black professionals in the workplace, Black upward mobility, and Black career mentorship. These focus areas will help to create a holistic understanding of Black experiences from a micro and macro perspective. Stated another way, the literature review will highlight key periods and events from past to present that help shape the lived experiences of BFPs. Lastly, the review will highlight gaps in the literature and provide a theoretical framework for understanding experiences of BFPs. Chapter 3 will outline the methodological approach that was used and my positionality within this study. Chapter 4 will illustrate findings of this study based on themes formulated and answers to the research questions proposed. Lastly, Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of findings, implications, and areas for future research.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this literature review is to understand the historical and contextual experiences of Black people in the western hemisphere from the point of the transatlantic slave trade to contemporary periods. This chapter will contain an in-depth review of the literature concerning formative psychological and social experiences of Black individuals throughout the African Diaspora. Specifically, the following topics will be reviewed: Black identity within the African diaspora, family relationships in the Black community, Black professionals in the workplace, Black upward mobility, and career mentorship for Black professionals. The literature reviewed will explore how historical events, such as structural and systematic oppression, have influenced culture, identity, and behavior for BFPs. This chapter will also highlight gaps in the literature as it relates to understanding how BFPs engage in society, its institutions, and how structural and systematic oppression in the United States may impact their lives and social class. It should be noted that BFPs tend to be 'lumped' into one category as a singular group (e.g., Black, African American, people of color); a review of the literature will help to contextualize why this is a problem and shape the purpose for this study.

The terms Black and African diaspora are meant to be interchangeable terms. However, the term Black will be used to describe people of African descent, irrespective of geographical location. While the term Black has or can be viewed in a negative manner, it will be used in context of being positive and affirming.

Black Identity within the African Diaspora

The following section will include a review of how scholars and historians have studied the lives of Black people and their geographical movement over time. The terms 'Black' and

'People of African descent' will be used interchangeably. It is important to note that Black

identity discourse predates the more commonly discussed Atlantic slave trade period; the

distinction of two periods will be highlighted: one where movement was voluntary and another

which was involuntary and involved forceful removal. Both periods are of equal importance in

understanding Black identity in professional and contemporary discourse. Nigrescence theory

"presupposes there is not a single form or type of Black identity and that a large sample of Black

adults reveals a broad range of identity orientations, resulting in a classification challenge"

(Cross et al., 2014, p. 127). While Black discourse and continuities of the African Diaspora are

spoken in a singular, general manner, the movement across geographical locations brings to

focus differences of those experiences; these continuities and differences are outlined below.

African Diaspora

Previous studies have discussed the African diaspora in three distinct identities, attached

to the Caribbean, African American, and continental African communities (Palmer 2018;

Sutherland, 2011). It is important to have an understanding and acknowledgement of the usage of

the term 'African diaspora'. While groups within the African American and Caribbean

community may homogenize and use the term 'African' to describe all people on the continent

of Africa, people on the continent itself have traditionally identified themselves based on their

ethnic group (Palmer, 2018). In recent times the term 'African' has become more of an

'accepted' term when referencing people in African nations. Palmer (2018) states that for many

scholars, the term 'African diaspora' simply means 'Africans abroad'. The term African diaspora

can be defined as "an organic process involving movement from an ancestral land, settlement in

new lands, and sometimes renewed movement and resettlement elsewhere" (Palmer, 2018, p.

216). For the purposes of this study, the term African diaspora will be used to refer to those

individuals who experienced movement from their homeland and are recognized as people of African descent, and the term African will be used to refer to people who reside in nations of continental Africa.

While there are similarities that exist across geographical boundaries, differences have organically formulated as each group constructs their own identity (Sutherland, 2011). One central link between groups of the modern African diaspora is that of slavery and systematic oppression (Jackson & Cothran, 2003; Palmer, 2018). The movement of people of African descent can be conveyed and understood based on two distinct periods: pre-modern and modern African diaspora (Franklin, 2010; Palmer, 2018). The pre-modern period involved the great exodus, the movement of Bantu-speaking (Nigeria and Cameroon) nations within continental Africa, and the movement of traders, slaves, and merchants to parts of Asia; the modern period is centered around the transatlantic slave period and movement of Africans and people of African descent to other societies (Palmer, 2018). Despite the negative commonality, there are other notable, positive, similarities. Palmer (2018) states that "members of diasporic communities also tend to possess a sense of 'racial,' ethnic, or religious identity that transcends geographic boundaries, to share broad cultural similarities, and sometimes to articulate a desire to return to their original homeland" (p. 216). It is also important to understand that scholars and writers associate these shared sentiments in a very fixed and uniform manner (Palmer 2018), ignoring how the different diasporic communities may have constructed and formulated new cultures and traditions, albeit any common connection to their ancestral land. One such segment of the diasporic community are individuals from the Caribbean.

Caribbean community

Individuals who were born in the West Indies are commonly referred to as Caribbean

people (Jackson and Cothran, 2003). The Caribbean, as a region, is made up of a mixture of

groups such as Africans, Indians, Spanish, English, and Chinese (Bamikole, 2007). The mixture

of groups has been termed 'creolization' and is used to describe the culture and identity of a

people that is distinct from their place of origin (Bamkole, 2007). The Afrocentricity or

assumption that most individuals from the Caribbean are Black may be linked to movements and

the popular identity of Rastafarians - an identified politico-religious and social movement within

Jamaica with strong ties to Ethiopia (Bonacci, 2016; Fox & Smith, 2016; & Ifekwe, 2007), as

well as the recognition of reggae music as a genre worldwide (Anderson & MacLeod, 2017).

Thus, based on discourse of Black struggles, Black culture across the world, and repatriation to

the 'motherland' by Rastafarians and reggae musicians (Grieves, 2018; Ifekwe, 2007),

Afrocentricity is commonly acknowledged or associated with the Caribbean as a whole.

'Motherland' is a common vernacular used to represent the homeland for all people of African

descent (Morrison, 2016). Though both Rastafarianism and reggae music were birthed in

Jamaica, the culture and movement of both are synonymous and widely accepted across the

Caribbean region, the United States, and the larger world (Grieves, 2018).

It has been documented that a strong bond has and continues to exist between the

'motherland' of Africa and its child, the 'Caribbean' (Njemanze, 2011). However, there has been

a debate in scholarship surrounding the nomenclature of the terms Caribbean vs. Afro-Caribbean

(Bamikole, 2007). For example, the tradition of planting a newborn's umbilical cord shortly after

birth is a tradition that has origins in Africa; spiritual practices such as Santeria in Cuba, Obeah

in Jamaica, Voodoo in Haiti or Shanga in Trinidad are variations of African religions (Njemanze,

2011). As a result, the ontology of Caribbean identity and philosophy is often connected to

Afrocentric ideologies, behaviors, language, and mannerisms, music and religion (Njemanze,

2011). Thus, individuals who have migrated from the Caribbean to the United States, oftentimes

seeking better economic opportunities and upward mobility, may have experiences that suppress

their identity under the larger umbrella of being Black or African American, as understood in the

larger, mainstream media. In this context, i.e., Black individuals from the Caribbean, the

literature has not explored how such suppression of one's identity may manifest in professional

spaces in a contemporary United States, nor its effect on contemporary family life. For

Caribbean individuals who have migrated to the United States, it is important to understand how

they are categorized under the 'umbrella' of being African American.

African American community

In this study, African American refers to individuals who were descendants of enslaved

Africans brought to the United States. The term 'African' and 'American' are conjoined based

on the modern period of the African diaspora's movement in the transatlantic slave trade. The

identity and formation of the vernacular 'African American' in the United States has been shown

to be a very complex issue (Hanchard, 1990; McPherson & Shelby, 2004; Thomas, 2002).

Hanchard suggests that the nomenclature has gone through many iterations (colored, negro,

Black, African American), and yet still, the shifting identity of the term 'African American'

continue to be misleading as it excludes the experiences of other groups within the diaspora,

resulting in a one size fits all rhetoric in the United States. As stated by Clark (2007), "because of

the experiences of African Americans and their identity being imposed on them, self-definition

and self-identification is an integral part of African American self-determination" (p. 170).

Hanchard (1980) sums up the complexity of the term African American stating "African as

prefix to American as it is colloquially understood seems to suggest that the real meaning to

Black identity lies in the American, and this may be closer to the mark than the proponents of

hyphenation would care to admit" (p. 38). The uprooting of Africans from their communalist and

social systems and the re-entry into a 'new world' may impact the ability for Black people to

have a singular national identity (Hanchard, 1980). A recent study by Hall et al. (2021)

highlights the historical ideology connected to the vernacular of 'Black' and 'African American,'

rooted in Black Power and Civil Rights, respectively; both terminologies have shaped race-

relations and impact how groups or organizations are viewed by others. Thus, the nomenclature

and subsequent meaning of 'African American,' may reflect a wider cultural and societal debate

of identity and place in society for Black people in the United States. BFPs in this sense, may not

only encounter elements of unfamiliarity in White-collar professional spaces, but may also feel

the need to navigate their own self-perception against the perception of others as it relates to their

identity.

In *The Soul of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903) speaks of the double-consciousness that is

experienced by African Americans. Double-consciousness suggests that in America, African

Americans function in a both/and world; in this state of being, they experience a reality being

equally an American and African American, navigating both spaces constantly. Previous

research has shown that this 'two-ness' can be a positive conception for African Americans on

college campuses who navigate the individualistic tendencies as purported by mainstream

American and interdependent tendencies based on their African American culture (Brannon,

Markus, & Taylor, 2015). It has been documented that educators may not even distinguish

between voluntary Europeans who entered the United States vs. involuntary Africans who were

forcefully removed from their homelands (Davis, 2005). While the study by Brannon et al.

revealed that universities can leverage this 'two-ness' into helping African Americans persist and succeed in college, there is no research that indicates how the identities and complexities of such identities of BFPs are viewed further into their careers or experienced in their daily work lives and family relationships. This concept of double-consciousness can also be extended to BFPs in two variations: 1) recognizing their multiple identities embedded in being 'Black', i.e. being Caribbean and African American or being African American and African, etc. and 2) recognizing how they may straddle between being one individual in their professional setting and being another in their family lives. Thus, if identity for Black individuals has been a complex issue, historically and in contemporary periods, understanding the intricacies through the eyes of BFPs may elucidate further meaning. Although the definition for African Americans as described in this study, is tied to being born in the United States with lineage to enslaved ancestors, there is also another group whose identity and upbringing are important to understand; specifically, those born in the United States to parents who emigrated from Africa.

African Immigrants: 1st and 2nd Generation African Community in United States

The complexities of identity for people of African descent holds true for African immigrants and their American-born children (Clark, 2008). First generation African individuals are those who migrated from Africa and now reside in the United States; second generation African individuals are individuals who were born in the United States or emigrated at a very young age to parents who emigrated to the United States (Clark, 2008). African immigrants make up a small share of the nation's immigrant population, but their overall numbers are growing – roughly doubling every decade since 1970 (Pew Research Center, 2017). Older, first generation African community members have been shown to experience more discrimination than second generation members, who may have assimilated to a larger extent (Nkimbeng et al.,

2021). While previous research has documented the experiences and racial identities of

Caribbean immigrants and African Americans (Benson, 2006), research looking at the

complexities for second generation African communities and the intra-racial group differences

are limited (De Walt, 2013). For African immigrants, their Black identity and racial socialization

is nuanced, as if caught between two worlds from which they come from or belong. Asante et al.

(2016) in their study revealed that "identity negotiation strategies used by the participants to

negotiate their Black identity are contextually contingent, nuanced, complex, and sometimes

contradictory as individuals search for a sense of embodied agency and selfhood within spaces

where Black self is entrenched in the collective experience" (p. 371). In this sense, parts of their

African identity may be inhibited due to the cultural construct of what it means to be Black.

Becoming 'African' in the United States is also a racialization process whereby African

migrants' 'ethnic' identity is used to distinguish Africans from African Americans assuming that

'African' is not a race but African American is (Asante et al., 2016). If the complexities of racial

identity presented above are a source of contention within the diasporic communities, then it is

perceivable that the larger American culture and institutions may have difficulty creating

inclusive spaces for these diasporic communities.

  Thus far, this chapter has reviewed the use (and misuse) of the term African Diaspora and

has looked at the various diasporic communities based on people of African descent. The

literature reviewed focuses on these groups' broader attributes, their evolution over time,

focusing on identity racialization in the United States. As this study focuses on the lived

experiences of BFPs, understanding the complexities and construction of their identities, as it

relates to family relationships and work life, present opportunities to contribute to an unexplored

segment of the literature concerning Black Identity in the United States. As these identities evolve over time, this study can help elucidate some of the nuanced experiences of BFPs.

Family Relationships in the Black Community

This section will discuss how the trajectory of BFPs begins to manifest. In particular, a review of the literature will explore the significance of family relationships in the Black community and its role in healthy family functioning. College years represent a significant period in one's personal and professional growth (Gofen, 2009). For families of FGS, the support provided to their students reflect their unfamiliarity with meeting the needs of a college student. For BFPs, this period begins to establish their entrance into spaces that are unfamiliar, yet life changing.

Family Structure and Support

Historically, the Black community has depended on the strength and resilience of the family network and support system as means of survival (Hill, 1972; McAdoo, 1978). Previous research has shown the importance of family systems in navigating the various historical and societal events experienced by Black people (Hill, 1972). Hill (1972; 1998) provides a strength-based view of how Blacks in America, contrary to negative stereotypes being purported, are founded on five core attributes: 1) Strong work orientation; 2) Strong religious orientation; 3) Strong belief in family; 4) Strong achievement orientation; and 5) Adaptability of family roles. Hill (1998) references Du Bois' (1898) stance that our ability to understand Blacks in America cannot be accomplished without systematically assessing the influence of historical, societal, cultural, economic and political constraints. This reference by Hill undergirds aspects of the aforementioned section which discusses how the identities of Blacks in the western hemisphere have been shaped based on geography.

The Black family must be understood in the context of the larger, White dominant

society, which ignores a strengths-based perspective for Black families (Brice & McLane-

Davison, 2020; Hill, 1998; Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993). In their study, Brice & McLane-

Davison (2020) reviewed the significance of the National Association of Black Social Workers,

an organization that has formally connected the strengths perspective to strengths-based

scholarship and practice with Black families. In their review, it was this organization that

decreed the need for Blacks conducting scholarship and community building for their own

communities. The study highlighted the need for culturally appropriate understanding by Black

social workers and the consequences should a strength-based perspective on Black families not

be adopted. Understanding of Black families and the support they receive are hindered

inherently, from the practices and education received in higher education. Unless addressed from

the structural level within the higher education spectrum, the deficit-based practice will continue

(Brice & McLane-Davison, 2020). With that notion, it is conceivable that BFPs may not be

understood from the perspective of the dominant group in their educational and professional

settings. Previous research has reviewed Black families from the context of an 'underclass'

system (Wilson, 1984) to more recent, explicit studies of a 'caste' system (Wilkerson, 2020).

Early studies by Frazier (1948) indicate early concepts of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological theory

(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) that consider various levels of the system--from micro to

macro--and that over time, affects Black family functioning. Though this early study appears to

speak from a deficit-lens, it does articulate factors that are synonymous with context at various

levels of the ecological system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Further understanding of

Black families has also been linked to a cultural view (Hill, 1998). Adopting a western

vernacular of Black families, i.e. assessing Black family functioning based on Eurocentric terms

such as 'nuclear' or 'normative', is an oversight and dismissal of cultural norms espoused in African culture.

Black families are also forced to depend on themselves to alleviate everyday pressures that are brought on by historical events in the modern post-transatlantic period. In one of the early studies about Black upward mobility, McAdoo (1978) looks at the interdependencies within Black families as it relates to the reciprocity of resources within extended family systems. It was suggested that the extended family pattern remains a viable cultural component for the emotional state and well-being of Blacks, irrespective of socioeconomic status and stability of middle-income over multiple generations (McAdoo, 1978). Interestingly, the study raised the notion that individuals may have to choose between the family of procreation or the family of orientation (McAdoo, 1978; Stewart, 2015). These experiences represent the formative notion that a trade-off may occur as individuals in Black families achieve upward mobility. McAdoo (1978) illustrates this trade-off stating that "the individual has two alternatives: 1) he/she must continue some form of participation in the obligatory reciprocity structure, or 2) he/she must isolate both him/herself and his/her family of procreation from his/her family of orientation" (p. 763). In their review of family support in the Black community, Wilson & Tolson (1990) highlight the fact that addressing issues within the Black community must include the extended family structure that supports and acts as a protective factor against such issues. Described as a coping mechanism, Black family networks represent a crucial element of their identity. A recent study by Gordon et al. (2020), explored how Black students on a college campus created extended family networks as a means of replicating cultural norms from their upbringing. As such, exploring the lived experiences of BFPs should consider elements of their family dynamics as it may help explain their evolving identity and its meaning.

Family Support in College

It is well-documented that family relationships operate as a foundational and focal component in the development of an individual's well-being (Susilo, 2020; Thomas, Liu, & Umberson, 2017). As such, it is important to discuss the kinds of family support BFPs may have experienced during college years when their identity of being a FGS emerged. In this sense, families play an integral, often overlooked role, in helping their FGS achieve academic success (Capannola & Johnson, 2020; Rondini et al., 2018; Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, & Burgos-Cienfuegos, 2015). London (1989) conducted one of the earliest studies about the relationship between FGS and their families. He explored the intricacies of family relationships and roles using a family systems lens in order to understand the impact of upward social mobility. His findings suggest that pursuing higher education is indicative of discontinuity from family norms and traditions; this 'break-away' is a disruption to the family unit. Recent research has expanded on the role of families for FGS, noting the significance of nonmaterial resources pertinent to their pursuit of academic success (Gofen, 2009). Such non-material resources include families' habits, behaviors, priorities, time, belief systems, and values (Gofen, 2009). For BFPs, the college journey represents a period when their identity development will go against the family script resulting in family tension (Stewart, 2015). Hunter et al. (2018) specifically noted McLoyd and colleagues' (2007) indication that African Americans, historically, have had strong roots in extended kinship systems, church, and community. Boyd-Franklin (2006) found those ties to be essential for the mental health of African Americans. Stewart (2015) found that the upward trajectory for the individual pursuing a college degree resulted in difficulty sharing resources and time with family members.

As London (1989) found through life histories, FGS overwhelmingly felt unsettled while in college because of the separation they experience from family and their worry that college will change and distance them from family. FGS often face unique challenges in their pursuits of a path unfamiliar to family (Ishitani, 2003). Such challenges faced by FGS include limited to no access to social and cultural capital. The American university system values individuation, whereas many cultures value a cooperative community that devalues separation (London, 1989). The significance of family relationships in the lives of FGS is oftentimes misunderstood in college environments that operate from and promote, individualistic tendencies in students (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). FGS who come from family systems that operate from a collectivist perspective (Burton & Jarrett, 2000), may experience a culture shock as they arrive on campus. Family systems in this sense, espouse a high sense of collective efficacy in their communities. Collective efficacy is the extent to which social ties among community residents facilitate the collective monitoring of children relative to shared neighborhood norms and practices (Burton & Jarrett, 2000). Evaluating family background and parental involvement indicates that FGS experience a strong 'culture shock' in college as it represents a fundamentally different culture compared to their parents' way of life (Gofen, 2009). Such a 'culture shock' may be further experienced as they make their way into their work life and across their career path. In addition, this is viewed from the lens of a BFP.

As mentioned above, such *individual* tendencies are in direct conflict with the *collectivist* perspective, typical of FGS and their families who identify as Black. The former promotes the individual needs over the family, autonomy, self-responsibility, and the ability to overcome obstacles independent of the group; the latter encourages a sharing of resources with family

members, expectation of participation, and reciprocity within the family system. Although

maintaining family relations can be a source of strain (Stewart, 2015), some research suggests

that family relationships may also act as an important protective factor for individuals struggling

with the adjustment to higher education (Capannola & Johnson, 2020). Rondini et al. (2018)

espouses a strength-based view stating that rather than a departure or disconnection from family,

we should be cognizant of the connections and meanings that support educational attainment for

FGS. In other words, to understand why FGS may have disenfranchised feelings of any form, it

is important to first understand the foundational elements of their existing family relationship

and cultural context. Disenfranchised feelings, as used in this study, is derived from the concept

of disenfranchised grief, first used by Doka (1999). Disenfranchised grief was defined by Doka

as "grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly

acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" (Doka, 1999). Such loss is

disenfranchised when not recognized, legitimated, or supported by the wider society (Corr,

1999). As BFPs begin to emerge from this period of being a FGS, they may begin to construct

their own pathway, one that may look different from that of their family members and

communities of origin. Thus, for BFPs entering into professional spaces upon completion of

college, the previously discussed 'culture shock' may continue to manifest in new iterations,

carrying with it, disenfranchised feelings.

Family Support After College

While the discussion surrounding FGS and their families have been documented in

previous research (Capannola & Johnson, 2020; DeFauw, 2018; Gofen, 2009), there are minimal

studies discussing family relationships for FGS post-graduation. Family support, whether

financial or emotional, are important factors that promote the success for FGS (Roksa & Kinsley,

2018). While some research has placed a deficit view on defining 'family support' for FGS

(Roksa & Silver, 2019), other studies have demonstrated the importance of family support for

FGS (Carey, 2016). FGS who persist to graduation may begin to experience the complexities of

a new identity while maintaining elements of their upbringing. Although limited, existing

literature highlights the notion that coming from low SES poses a barrier to inclusion and

advancement in the workplace (Corrington et al., 2020; Terry and Fobia, 2019). As FGS

transitions into careers, those who identify as Black may begin to experience issues linked to

their identity and for those moving from low-SES to middle-SES, they may experience

challenges moving from blue-collar to White-collar professional space. As noted by Peterman

(2018), socioeconomic status may cause discrimination and even more so when considering the

intersection of race and poverty.

For BFPs, significant changes may occur during this transition making this period a

complex part of their life course (Olson, 2016). As further noted by Olson (2016), by virtue of

being "first in their family", BFPs are, in many ways, experiencing this phase of their lives

without support. Lubrano (2004) articulates this point in his book by stating:

> I am two people. I now live a middle-class life, working at a White-collar newspaper
>
> man's job, but I was born blue collar. I've never reconciled the dichotomy. This book is a
>
> step toward understanding what people gain and what they leave behind as they move
>
> from the working class to the middle class (p. 1)

BFPs may not be able to navigate these nuances (Olson, 2016) and find it difficult to reconcile

being a straddler (Lubrano, 2004) between both worlds. This lack of reconciliation of the two

identities demonstrates a new phase of life experiences for BFPs. Social class and socioeconomic

status tend to focus on income; however, Lubrano (2004) offers a different and applicable depiction which highlights the importance of social class by stating:

> Social class counts at the office, even though nobody likes to admit it. Ultimately corporate norms are based on middle- and upper-class values, business types say. From an early age, middle-class people learn how to get along, using diplomacy, nuance, and politics to grab what they need. It is as though they are following a set of rules laid out in a manual that blue-collar families never have the chance to read (p. 9)

Thus, as BFPs begin to make their way into these White-collar spaces, the unfamiliarity of this new world and the kinds of support from family may be different when compared to individuals whose families have existed and functioned in White-collar spaces previously. The next section in this chapter will review experiences that occur for BFPs as they enter and journey through their work lives.

Black Professionals in the Workplace

The entrance, and subsequent success stories, of Black individuals in White-collar professional spaces is a significant feat when considering race relations in the United States and its role, eventually leading up to the Civil Rights era (Hine, 2003). Hine (2003) suggests that "without the parallel institutions that the Black professional class created, successful challenges to White supremacy would not have been possible" (p. 1279). Furthermore, historical references have excluded how aspects of slavery and racism conjoined to form a management model. (Cooke, 2003). Such management practices have and continue to manifest itself in workspaces. Cooke (2003) states "while the Civil War ended formal slavery in the USA, it did not end the racism that underpinned it. This racism, and resistance to it did not, and does not stop at the door of the workplace" (p. 1915).

BFPs may represent an ever-increasing population in the workplace based on the graduation rates of Black people in the United States. If BFPs represent a group whose experiences are marred by the complexities of structural and systemic oppression, one could posit that such challenges being faced by Black people in the United States are now being fought and dismantled from 'within', by BFPs. For context, from 2000 - 2017, the Black population in the United States increased by 18 percent from 34.4 million to 40.6 million (NCES, 2017). Moreover, the percentages of Black individuals at the bachelor's or higher degree level increased between 2010 and 2020 from 19 to 28 percent (NCES, 2020). This data would suggest that BFPs who have graduated may be entering into professional spaces in larger numbers over the last ten years. Thus, understanding the complexities of life for BFPs as well as the contextual elements of race, ethnic identity or gender, are important categories to untangle when looking at their daily lived experiences in professional spaces. As discussed in the previous sections, the diasporic communities have evolved to form their own identities based on geographical location. It is therefore pertinent for this study, to underpin how Black individuals view themselves as 'being' or 'becoming' Black.

Identity Negotiation and Experiences

In the *Soul of Black Folks,* Du Bois (1903) references his now famous term, 'double-consciousness' as part of the lived experience of being Black in the United States. Jackson (2002) in his exploration of identity negotiation, affirms Du Bois' notion by stating that a significant factor for the twenty-first century relates to *identities*. Black professionals have had to endure experiences that are not akin to other racial groups, oftentimes straddling two worlds (Dickens & Chavez, 2018), as part of their daily lived experiences. Jackson (2002) discusses 'identity shifting' or 'identity negotiation' where one alters how they behave, speak, whether

voluntary or involuntary. Such adjustment indicates a form of assimilation to the prevailing

dominant standard and culture. Identity negotiation is an adjustment of one's identity to match,

compliment or not resist the presence of other cultural identities (Jackson, 2002; Shih, et al.,

2013). Shih et al., (2013) provides further context stating that identity shifting involves

deemphasizing a negatively valued identity and emphasizing or replacing a negative identity

with a positively regarded identity. While their study was centered on discrimination, it did in

fact highlight that identity shifting may be beneficial in the short term, but may create harmful

effects long-term (Shih et al., 2013). Considering that BFPs may have historical experiences of

'identity shifting' in their upbringing, it is conceivable that such mode of operation lives within

the individual, surfacing as a natural reflex as needed.

For Black professionals, the formation of identity, irrespective of the diasporic ties, can

be viewed collectively and may have traces connected to dynamics adopted both during and

following the enslavement period (Ogbu, 2004). In his ethnographic research, Ogbu (2004) states

that in Black communities, regardless of social class and gender, Black Americans tend to code

their experiences with White Americans and with social institutions in terms of race, and not

class or gender. Collective identity can be defined as a people's sense of who they are, their ''we

feeling'' or ''belonging.'' (Ogbu, 2004). People express their collective identity with emblems or

cultural symbols which reflect their attitudes, beliefs, feelings, behaviors, and language or dialect

(Ogbu, 2004). It was noted that during the enslavement period in the United States, Blacks were

constantly straddling two worlds, speaking and acting in one manner to White slave owners and

in another manner, as would be expected in the Black community, among themselves. The

process of identity shifting for Black professionals results in maintenance of roles in matching

the cultural norms and standards in the dominant group while still maintaining ties and

relationships within the Black community. In the Black community, post emancipation, there was an understanding and acceptance of the need to behave and talk like White people (to ''act White'') for education, upward social mobility, equality, and acceptance by White people (Ogbu, 2004). Such interactions, as explained by the term collective identity, permeates over the course of generations and helps to explain 'identity shifting' by current day Black professionals in the workplace. As a result, shifting identities over long periods of time may result in negative self-perception and internal conflict for Black professionals (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). Cultural identities are generally brought into every interaction, with some being unconsciously present and vivid, while others may shift during a persuasive dialogue or sustained relationship (Jackson, 2002). The notion of a collective identity is captured in Du Bois' (1903) *Soul of Black Folks* and was further personified leading up to the Civil Rights era when a variety of Black entities came together in opposition to spaces of exclusion (Hine, 2003). This oppositional collective identity portrayed *Black as Beautiful* (Ogbu, 2004). As music imitates life, a song by Reggae artist, Chronixx, captures the journey of Black identity in his song, *Black Is Beautiful* (Chronixx, 2016):

> *Black eye, Black hair, Black skin, Black queen stand majestic with the Black king*
>
> *Today I'll sing you a Black song you need to hear about beautiful Black things 'cause*
>
> *Most time we hear about Black, we hear about Black magic and Black witches*
>
> *Black list, Black book, Black market, Black Friday, ya spend off your Black riches*
>
> *I've never seen a doctor in Black, nor seen a Black pill fi (to) cure no Black people*
>
> *But I've seen bush doctors like Tosh (Peter) and Marley (Bob) resurrect like a real Black*
>
> *beatle, Malcom (X), Marcus (Garvey), Martin (Luther-King)*
>
> *When you see Walter Rodney ask him*

> *How you nuh hear about Howell often So when the likkle (little) offspring asking, tell*
>
> *them...*
>
> *They never told us that Black is beautiful, they never told us, Black is beauty*
>
> *They never told us that Black is beautiful, they never told us, they never told us Black is*
>
> *beautiful.*

Here, the artist creatively, but pointedly, illustrates how Black vernacular and discourse is

associated with things that are negative, stating that a more positive and uplifting identity has not

been the common rhetoric in the modern era of Black history. This oppositional collective

identity, then, allows for exploration of BFPs, who are also part of this community and whose

educational and work experiences have been constructed during a time of noticeable identity

introspection and embracement. Identity introspection, in this sense, is referring to a broad

acknowledgement within the Black community of who and how our identities are/have been

constructed in the wider American society. Thus, it is important to undergird the construction of

racial identities by differentiating the career experiences of Black women and Black men in a

contemporary sense.

Black Professional Women Experiences

The experiences of being Black and female in professional careers have been the focus of

many studies in recent literature (Dickens et al., 2019; Hall, et al., 2011; Wingfield, 2007). The

intersection of these two lived identities, i.e., Black and female, do not operate independently;

rather, they operate interdependently (Crenshaw, 1989). In this sense, intersectionality, the study

of the meaning and implication of group association, must be applied to BFPs when looking at

the nuances of their experiences in professional settings (Rosette et al., 2016). Those holding

multiple subordinate identities (e.g., Black women) have intersecting identities that create

interactive inequities and disparities (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, such inequities and disparities may result in Black women being perceived as being dominant but not competent (Rosette et al., 2016), in leadership roles.

Black women face monumental challenges when seeking leadership roles. In their study, Rosette et al. (2016) explored two forms of agentic bias based on role theory of prejudice towards female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002): 1) an agentic deficiency view that women are insufficiently agentic to occupy leadership roles; and 2) an agentic penalty, the social and economic repercussions women encounter for operating in an agentic manner that counters prescribed gender role (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Interestingly, the study suggested that although prescriptive stereotypes tend to foster gender biases in evaluations of women enacting masculine roles, this is not the case for Black women. Black women are perceived as more masculine than feminine (Rosette et al., 2016). However, though this may be viewed or interpreted as a positive, it should be underscored with an intersectional lens.

Using an intersectional lens, Livingston, et al. (2012) found that although a (competent) Black female leader might be permitted to display dominance, it is not clear whether there is leniency for Black female leaders who make mistakes, as their mistakes might be interpreted as evidence of incompetence, given their lack of fit with the leader prototype (i.e., White male). Moreover, if Black women do not 'fit' the role of the prototypical leader, the result may be a heavier penalty than for White men—or even Black men—for a mistake made; the less-than-perfect performance may elucidate incongruences between their social affiliation and the established leader ideal (Livingston, et al., 2012). These studies highlight the importance of intersecting lived identities, i.e. being Black and female, and how they result in a compounding, matrix of domination (Anderson & Collins, 2013) for Black women in professional spaces. Thus,

this study must also delineate and recognize similarities and differences experienced for those

who identify as Black women from that of Black men.

Black Professional Men Experiences

Black males face a plethora of unique experiences in the workplace often attached to their

racial identity. Previous studies have explored some of these experiences focusing on issues such

as racial micro-aggressions (Pitcan et al., 2018), gendered racism (Wingfield, 2007), negative

social imagery (Howard et al., 2012), discrimination in executive leadership positions (Williams

Jr., 2014), lack of representation in higher education spaces (Turner & Grauerholz, 2017), and

assimilation as a means of acceptance into unfamiliar space (Jackson, 2018). These issues are

further compounded for Africans residing in the United States (Amoakoh & Smith, 2020), whose

immigrant status is a point of contention at times. If experiences for Black males attending

college (Parker, et al., 2016) are an indicator of their future experiences, then it can be posited

that similar experiences may 'spill' over into their professional lives. An important precursor of

the experiences of Black males in the workplace are the stereotypes and perceptions portrayed in

society by the media (Howard et al., 2012). Black males are pathologized in the media,

producing negative stereotypes that dictate life opportunities for Black male and their families

(Howard et al., 2012). Turner & Grauerholz (2017) found in their study of Black males at a large

research university that their agency and authority was undermined by questioning their

professional knowledge, skills, and abilities. In their review, Howard et al., (2012) discusses how

social imagery has shaped the thinking of people over multiple generations which is reified

through language, media, constructed knowledge, and the purported experiences that are

displayed and widely distributed about a particular group. Historically in the United States,

minoritized groups have been negatively affected by social imagery and in contemporary times, Black males (Howard et al., 2012) face remnants of these experiences in the workplace.

For some Black males, their interactions in low SES settings are typically with those of their own identity, i.e. other Black people, while as they enter into a middle or upper-class group, they tend to be surrounded by predominantly White peers (Reid, 2014). Black male experiences, in context of their identity, typically begin to shift or become salient during the college years; such experiences are compounded if attending a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) (Parker et al., 2016). Their study, using an ecological systems framework, explored the microsystem interactions of Black males under the larger influence of the macrosystem. Microsystems refer to the individual, their personal beliefs, values, as well as the frequency and kinds of interactions with family, peers, and their community; macrosystems refer to the cultural values, beliefs, systems, and institutions. These larger - macro - ideals and expectations inform institutions that will ultimately impact the individual (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Parker et al., (2016) posited that participants in their study had a sense of false pride; one that allowed them to feel as if race does not inherently affect their ability for success. These young Black males felt that their success was not predicated on assistance from the university, but solely their own responsibility. While this notion and drive is to be admired at the personal, micro-level, it demonstrates the inherent barriers that Black males face both at multiple levels of our societal system. Extending this finding to BFPs may allow for a deeper understanding of larger - macro- factors that affect this group in relation to their race and gender as they pursue professional careers.

Another factor to consider when looking at Black males in the workplace is the Person-Environment fit (PE). PE theory seeks to understand if an individual will be more successful in an environment that aligns with their values or conversely, will they find it difficult to be

successful if in an environment that is conflicting with their goals and desires (Roberts & Robins, 2004). In such environments, the physical, social, and cultural elements must be considered when thinking about the individual and their ability to succeed. Roberts & Robine (2004) found in their study that PE fit was related to higher levels of personality consistency, increases in self-esteem, and decreases in agreeableness and neuroticism (Roberts & Robins, 2004). This would suggest that Black males who enter into spaces inherently different from their norm, may encounter a variety of challenges, many of which go unaccounted for and can inhibit upward mobility. This section has demonstrated the nuanced and complex experiences for Black males in professional settings. For BFPs in general, these daily lived experiences are filled with hindrances as they manage their professional career and pursue upward mobility.

Black Upward Mobility

Although the Black middle-class was not widely researched during the first half of the twentieth century, scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois and E.F. Frazier acknowledged and wrote about within group differences (Landry & Marsh, 2011). These 'within group' differences are in part a natural outcome of varied experiences for people of the African diaspora in the western hemisphere or, as documented in the United States, based on government intervention. In discussing the difficulties of Black identity and group upliftment, Frazier (1957) states that members of Du Bois' 'talented tenth' who were on missionary work in Black communities, found it difficult to connect with the masses of poor Blacks. As a result, the Black middle-class is viewed in some instances as 'fragile' based on a race-regulated foundation (Collins, 1983). Race-regulated refers to specific government programs and policies that result in an increase in Black hiring and subsequently, upward mobility as opposed to a natural market-driven process (Collins, 1983). In essence, the Black middle-class was not created from a change in market

behavior; rather it was created from a change in policy when specific programs were created. These programs included the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs; the Federal Contract Set-aside Programs; and the federally funded Social Welfare Services (Collins, 1983). In his review at the time, Frazier (1957) states that the Black middle-class may have damaged or low self-esteem as a result of conformity to White standards as means of acceptance. This statement may hold true in contemporary periods for Blacks in the United States and underpins, in part, the significance of this study.

Although state and federal policies intentionally prevented wealth-building and disenfranchised Black people (McGrew, 2018), a significant shift and expansion of the Black middle-class occurred after World War II (Cole & Omari, 2003; Collins, 1983; Landry & Marsh, 2011). It should be understood that a distinction was made between Black upper-class and Black middle-class during this period. The former has remnants from the enslavement period when skin color was used to create a division within the Black community; the latter was a direct result of World War II ending, when there was a migration of Blacks heading northward. This period was during segregation in the United States and led to a demand for professional services in Black communities (Cole & Omari, 2003). This demand led to an increase of Blacks in the workforce and as referenced in Landry & Marsh (2011), Wilson (1978) posits in his thesis that there was a "decline in the significance of race". While there were many changes in policy, e.g., admissions criteria for college acceptance and affirmative action which sought to reduce discriminatory practices, race continued to play an integral role in opportunities and upward mobility of Black people (Landry & Marsh, 2011). Race has and continues to be a salient theme surrounding the experiences and opportunities for BFPs trajectory and success. However, the success of BFPs are not solely based on policies or structures, but also linked to mentorship and access to it. For

BFPs, while overcoming structural and oppressive barriers are important factors in understanding

their lived experiences, their ability to succeed may also be connected to appropriate and

necessary mentorship.

Black Career Mentorship

Mentorship is an integral part of career development and advancement in any field

(Henry-Brown, 2005; Iheduru-Anderson, 2020) and can be an invaluable asset for BFPs.

Mentorship can enhance one's self-image, confidence, and competence (Henry-Brown, 2005). A

review of the literature has indicated that career mentorship for Black individuals is limited and

does not provide sufficient access to mentors who can best understand their unique social-

emotional needs and insights (Iheduru-Anderson, 2020; Walkington, 2017). Such limited and

minimal access to career mentorship for BFPs can contribute to structural barriers preventing

advancement (Walkington, 2017). In the review conducted by Walkington (2017), it is posited

that access to career mentors can remove structural barriers and can "aid in penetrating the glass

ceiling" (p. 41).

One study of Black males in corporate America indicated that participants found it more

difficult to find mentors in senior positions and believed that all Black males should have at least

one mentor (Cornileus, 2013). Previous studies have shown that career development theories

focusing on career advice and guidance do not meet the needs of many Black individuals (Murry

& Mosdi, 1993); rather, mentors, role models, and family involvement appear to be a more

effective approach (Murry & Mosdi, 1993). The importance of having Black mentors or support

groups who share similar experiences in White-collar professional fields provides an avenue to

address stressors and challenges, oftentimes not seen by others (Isaac, 2019). Killough et al.

(2019) found in their study that mentorship not only encourages professional development, but

also promotes a sense of togetherness and breaks up any isolation or feelings of minimization in such spaces. In their study, Somani and Tyree (2020) demonstrated that Black broadcast journalists relied on mentors, who were not affiliated within their industry, to help guide them in terms of career advice and workplace discrimination or problems. Yet, the study revealed that daily discriminations, acts of tokenism, or microaggressions were left unresolved, pointing to a need for in-group mentors or affinity groups (Somani and Tyree, 2020).

In summary, a cursory review of the literature has shown that mentorship for Black people overall plays an important part in their success. Studies across career sectors such as the healthcare (Iheduru-Anderson, 2020), broadcast and journalism (Somani & Tyree, 2020), or higher education industries (Walkington, 2017), help elucidate a common theme: mentorship for Blacks serve as a protective factor for their development and success.

Two overarching themes have been covered thus far in the literature review: 1) educational attainment presents both gains and losses for BFPs, and 2) racial identity is an important and complex issue for members within the diasporic community. To undergird and elucidate these two overarching themes, the following sections will provide a theoretical lens from which the study was guided.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks that will be used to guide this study are Ambiguous Loss Theory and Black Identity Theory. Both theoretical frameworks provide the ability to understand the experiences of BFPs through these lenses. Thus far, this chapter has outlined relevant topics and issues connected to the lived experiences of BFPs. The following section will provide a theoretical framework for understanding interactions that shape past and present family relationships and how BFPs experience issues connected to their racial identity in various spaces.

Ambiguous Loss Theory

Ambiguous loss theory provides a framework that allows us to examine not only gains related to academic achievement and upward mobility, but it allows us to examine any loss that may be experienced. As discussed in earlier sections, some FGS students may have experiences of leaving family behind (Covarrubias et al., 2020) and in such cases, may be experiencing a form of ambiguous loss. For BFPs, their ability to navigate new spaces such as college and White-collar professional settings requires entrance into a world not previously known while still maintaining ties to the world from which they were raised; such mobility involves straddling two worlds and may result in both gains and losses.

Ambiguous loss is a loss that remains unclear (Boss, 2007). As described by Boss (2007), one premise of ambiguous loss theory is that uncertainty or a lack of information about the whereabouts or status of a loved one as absent or present, as dead or alive, is traumatizing for most individuals, couples, and families. It is further argued by Boss (2007) that absence and presence are not absolutes as our loved ones disappear physically or fade away psychologically. The latter is relevant to understanding how loss may be experienced by BFPs. The ambiguity between presence and absence creates a unique kind of loss that has both psychological and physical qualities (Boss, 2007).

Practitioners have applied ambiguous loss research as a theoretical concept when working with families in areas of war, terrorism, natural disasters, chronic illness, and disabilities (Boss, 2007). Ambiguous loss occurs when a family member is either a) physically present, but psychologically absent or b) physically absent, but psychologically present (Boss, 2016). Ambiguous loss theory has been used widely to explain various forms of loss such as leaving one's homeland (Perez, 2016); family estrangement (Agllias, 2011); mixed-orientation marriages

where one partner is heterosexual and the other is homosexual (Hernandez & Wilson, 2007);

foster care (Mitchell, 2016); and gender transitions (McGuire, Catalpa, Lacey, & Kuvalanka,

2016). However, it has not been used to explore feelings of 'loss' that may be experienced by

BFPs from the point of college and into their work lives.

Using an ambiguous loss theoretical lens to understand experiences of BFPs, would

suggest that as they begin their college tenure and move through their career -- places where their

paths and experiences differ starkly from family -- a trade-off from things gained and

relationships lost, may occur. When applied directly, BFPs may be physically present and have

some form of direct contact with family, but psychologically absent or disconnected from family;

thus, BFPs may operate through a different or constantly shifting social identity when in the

presence of family members and while in White-collar professional spaces may find themselves

'adjusting' or permanently shifting to accommodate an unfamiliar space. Reconciling any

'shifting' identities presents the opportunity for meaning-making by BFPs; in cases where

reconciliation is absent, disenfranchised feelings or ambiguity may be experienced.

As described by Boss (2016), ambiguous loss has ten core assumptions: 1) assumes that a

psychological family exists and that this perceived construction of one's family may differ from

the physical or legal family structure; 2) as an external situation--the root cause of the loss is

assumed to be neutral; hence, how it is perceived has valence—the higher the degree of

boundary ambiguity, the more negative the outcomes; 3) cultural beliefs and values influence a

family's tolerance for ambiguity and how it is perceived; 4) truth is unattainable and thus

relative; 5) ambiguous loss is inherently a relational phenomenon and thus cannot be an

individual condition; 6) it is assumed that there is a natural resilience in families; 7) it is assumed

that a phenomenon can exist even if it cannot be measured; even if ambiguous loss is not

quantifiable, it exists phenomenologically; 8) With ambiguous loss, closure is a myth; without

finality, the loss and grief may continue indefinitely, for years or a lifetime, and even across

generations (e.g., slavery, the Holocaust, genocide, war, terrorism, forced migrations); 9) People

cannot cope with a problem until they know what the problem is; naming the stressor as

ambiguous loss therefore allows the coping process to begin; and 10) If a loss remains unclear

and ambiguous, it is still possible to find some kind of meaning in the experience. This requires a

new way of thinking, one that is not binary, but dialectic.

Black Identity Theory

First appearing in the 1970's as a response to the civil rights movement era, Black

identity development (BID) is a theoretical framework that covers the various stages of

consciousness Black people tend to follow as they develop their Black racial identity (Jackson,

2012). It is important to first distinguish racial identity theory as a guiding principle. Racial

identity theory refers to the psychological implications of racial-group membership and belief

systems based on differential racial-group membership (Helms, 1990). Racial identity is a

developmental process probably experienced in various forms by people in the United States

(Helms, 1990). It is also significant to note that although BID is influenced by Black culture and

racism, it is suggested that it be grounded in Black heritage and culture (Jackson, 2012). Relating

to that point, Helms (1990) suggests in her review of racial identity terminology that Black

identity theories tend to focus on the similarities of psychological development based on race

rather than ethnicity. Specifically, BID theories attempt to explain how Blacks can identify (or

not identify) with other Blacks and ways in which they gain an affinity (or not) to identities as a

result of racial victimization (Helms, 1990).

Two major theoretical frameworks emerged surrounding BID: one termed Client-As-Problem perspective (CAP) and the other termed Nigrescence or Black Racial Identity (NRID) (Helms, 1990). Nigrescence is Latin based and stands for 'becoming Black' (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). The former approach was centered from a deficit perspective and primarily sought to address White (people) fears in fields of counseling or psychotherapy; the latter focused on how one 'becomes Black' and incorporated premises of self-actualization (Maslow, 1998), the psychological connection to being Black, and less about assimilation identities. While there are a variety of theoretical models and approaches for understanding BID, this study will utilize a NRID perspective (Cross, 1971) to help explain how BFPs' own identity may have been shaped over time.

NRID in its original construct included four stages of identity that people progressed through (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). As described by Belgrave & Allison (2010), the four stages are as follows: Stage 1: Pre-encounter - where there is an orientation toward White culture and away from Black culture; Stage 2: Encounter/Dissonance - where individuals encounter events or a series of events that completely alter the perceptions of themselves or perceptions of Blacks; Stage 3: Immersion and Emersion - where a new way of thinking is adopted that includes being Black with immersion beginning and emersion ending this phase; and Stage 4: Internalization and Commitment - where the individual has internalized a new identity and old and new conflicts have been resolved, with prior anxieties and defensiveness of previous stages gone.

A modified model of NRID included a lifespan perspective that was adopted to explain BID (Parham, 1992). The updated model viewed the four stages in the original concept by Cross (1971) as they were experienced in three phases of life: a) late adolescence/early adulthood, b) midlife, and c) late adulthood (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). One of the differences in Parham's

updated model assumes that a person's identity may begin at any of the stages depending on changes and transitions experienced in one's life - i.e., childbirth, marriages, career - and does not have to be sequential (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). Further augmentation of the NRID model based on the various groups within the African diaspora was suggested by deWalt (2013) as a means of addressing variations of Black identity. Worrell et al. (2001) made it clear that NRID presupposes that there is more than one type of Black identity and that not every Black identity is alike. Since this study will incorporate BFPs who may have varied experiences based on their place of origination and their cultural upbringing, NRID can be used to elucidate these varied identities when considering their current careers and family relationships. The study sought to incorporate participants born in the United States, or the Caribbean, or those born in the United States of African or Caribbean parents.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided an in-depth review of the literature as it pertains to the lived experiences of BFPs. Specifically, four (4) main themes were outlined within this literature review: First, an introduction of common vernacular used to describe people of African descent around the world, their experiences in the modern era, and in particular, their racial identity as it relates to the geographical location; second, the meaning and connection of family for Black people and its linkage to Africa, Black family structure and functioning; third, BFPs entrance and evolvement into middle-class and professional workplace settings when considering their racial identity and interplay with family relationships; and fourth, mentorship for BFPs as they advance or have advanced in White-collar professional roles. The chapter concluded by providing two theoretical frameworks that were used to provide focus to the topics within this study and elucidate salient tenets of BFPs lived experiences.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Black First-Generation Professionals (BFPs) represent groups of individuals who were the first in their families to attend and complete a college degree; they are also first in their families to attain White-collar professional careers. BFPs, for the purposes of my research, include individuals who have pursued further education beyond a bachelor's; specifically, a master's or doctoral degree. BFPs' work lives and experiences may be starkly different from their upbringing. In order to understand how their educational experiences and Black identity have shaped their lived experiences, I posed the following research question:

1. What are the lived experiences of Black First-Generation Professionals as they pursue their work lives?

Qualitative Methodology

The primary purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the lived experiences of BFPs as they pursued their work lives. For instance, factors included daily work experiences, past/present family relationships, racial identity, and motivating factors that lead to their success. A qualitative approach was selected for this study as it allowed for an "understanding of the meaning people have constructed; that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). A qualitative approach was suited to understand how people interpret their lives and the process they go through to make meaning of their experiences. Since this study looked at the lives BFPs have created for themselves, understanding how they make sense of their racial and ethnic identities, as well as how they view their family relationships as they make their way through their careers, a qualitative approach was appropriate.

Qualitative inquiry allows concepts and emerging theories to be inductively developed and built through interviews, observations, documents, or other artifacts (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The identity and intersection of participants' experience from a Black perspective provides important context for this study. A qualitative approach was fitting in order to understand how BFPs navigate the complexities of their environments; environments which were established on a system that promoted exclusivity, social class hierarchy, and racial oppression. Such experiences shaped how BFPs view their opportunities and how they connect (or disconnect) from their communities.

The following sections will discuss the specific qualitative methodology used in this study. Additionally, participant selection and criteria will be outlined; data gathering methods, data analysis, trustworthiness of study, positionality, and limitations of the study will also be detailed.

Qualitative Research Design

BFPs have entered and will continue to enter unfamiliar and new spaces literally *and* figuratively, physically and psychologically, as the American society as whole, becomes a more inclusive environment to all. As a BFP myself, I too, have my own perception and understanding of the nature and process of my experiences; these experiences have and continually evolve over periods of time. According to Merriam & Tisdell (2016), "qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon" (p. 23). A basic tenet of any qualitative research is the construction of reality based on the individual's social environment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In applying this same principle, a qualitative research study was well suited to uncover and interpret the experiences and meanings associated with BFPs as they move into

professional spaces and how they make sense of their worlds. A qualitative study was selected as appropriate to collect and analyze the data as it aims to understand "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6).

Social Constructivism Interpretive Framework

Social constructivism in qualitative studies posit that individuals seek to understand the work in which they function and operate (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Moreover, a qualitative study allows the researcher to explore a complex problem or issue based on context (Creswell & Poth 2017). Furthering this explanation about participants in a qualitative study, Creswell & Poth (2017) explain:

> They develop subjective meanings of their experiences - meanings directed toward certain objects of things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meaning into a few categories or ideas. The goal of research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation.

BFPs may have experiences that are unearthed and unaccounted for in their family, work, or home environment. In order to understand how BFPs interpret both their sense of self as a Black individual and as a Black professional, a qualitative study helped in making linkages or meanings to existing theoretical concepts or frameworks that do not fully explain the intricacies and processes of such complex lived experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2017).

Participants

The study included interviews with individuals who identified as descendants of African ancestry. Specifically, participants were a mixture of individuals who self-identified as African

American/Black, Caribbean, or from an African country. It should be noted that the terms

'Black' and 'African American' are oftentimes used interchangeably; however, the term 'Black'

was used for consistency in this study. The study explored the lives of those who have not only

earned a bachelor's degree, but rather, looked at the experiences of those who went on to pursue

further education. Thus, the following determinants were used as criteria for participating in this

study:

        1) Have earned at least a master's degree or doctoral degree

        2) Must have worked in a White-collar profession full-time for at least 5 years

        3) Must be the first in their family to enter into a White-collar profession

        3) Must identify as Black and be born in America, Africa or the Caribbean

        4) Must identify as being a First Generation college student

Given that many BFPs may have come from families synonymous with blue-collar work,

identifying participants who have entered into White-collar professional spaces allowed me to

understand this change and how they have made meaning of their lives. Another element for

BFPs include a nuanced positionality, one in which their interests, beliefs, dispositions, and

attitudes have changed or may be evolving. For BFPs who begin to create a new life, and a very

different life compared to their upbringing, the relationships, interests, and experiences may not

be the same as before and can cause a disruption in the family homeostasis, norms or traditions.

Similarly, as BFPs begin to navigate their complex work lives, their social location and identities

begin to interplay in settings that may cause a heightened sense of self-awareness and a

recognizable acknowledgement of historical views and behaviors converge based on their Black

identity.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants for this study. From that process, 15 individuals agreed to participate; 8 (53%) identified as females and 7 (47%) identified as males. A majority of participants indicated that they had attended a PWI during college; 14 (93%) attended a PWI and 1 (7%) attended a HBCU institution. More than half of the participants (53%) had earned their doctorate; 27% were doctoral students and 20% had earned a master's degree. 9 (60%) grew up in an urban neighborhood, 2 (13%) spent their first years in an urban neighborhood, but moved to urban settings for the majority of their upbringing, 1 (7%) grew up in a rural town, and 3 (20%) grew up in a suburban neighborhood. Detailed demographic information for all participants are listed below in *Table 1*. This form of sampling draws on the assumption that each participant has 'special experience and competence' (Chein, 1981, p.440; as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each participant participated in a semi-structured, in-depth interview to build information-rich cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All 15 participants were interviewed once and 8 participants were interviewed a second time before saturation was reached (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Convenience and random sampling were used as the primary mechanisms based on availability of participants. My tenure in higher education provided me with a network of individuals who met the criteria for research participants and provided access to this group. Through conversations within my network and use of the LinkedIn platform, I was able to identify research participants for this study. Interviews were conducted for approximately 60 - 90 minutes over the course of six weeks. Questions were asked about their upbringing, community they lived in and their family views with education; their challenges as a FGS during college; their family relationships and how it had evolved; their experiences in their professional careers, their racial and cultural identity; experiences with race and racism; and their experience with mentorship as it relates to their overall success.

Table 1. Demographics

Name	Gen der	Age	Degree	Attended	Home neighborhood	Years in Profession	Job Title	Identity
Aida	F	42	Master's	PWI	Urban	11+ years	Asst. Director	Jamaican
Christopher**	M	29	Doctorate	PWI	Urban	6-10 years	Director, DE&I	AA/Black
Ebony**	F	44	Doctorate	PWI	Urban	11+ years	Director, Health Industry	AA/Black
Engage**	M	53	Master's (2)	PWI	Urban	11+ years	Librarian, Higher Ed.	AA/Black
Harmony	F	42	Doctoral student	PWI	Urban	11+ years	Director, Higher Ed.	Haitian
Jane**	F	31	Master's	PWI	Suburban	6-10 years	Research Assistant	Ghanaian/AA/Black
John**	M	32	Doctorate	PWI	Urban	6-10 years	Director, Higher Ed.	Jamaican
Lina	F	42	Doctorate	PWI	Both	11+ years	Director, Human Resources	AA/Black
Marie	F	36	Doctoral student	PWI	Urban	11+ years	Licensed Group Therapist	Haitian
Mikayla	F	37	Doctorate	HBCU	Suburban	8 years	Director, Human Resource	Trinidadian
Nubie**	M	34	Doctoral student	PWI	Urban	11+ years	Asst. Director, Higher Ed.	Ghanaian
Rashad**	M	38	Doctoral student	PWI	Urban	11+ years	Director, Higher Ed.	AA/Black
Roni**	M	35	Doctorate	PWI	Suburban	11+ years	Director, Higher Ed.	AA/Black
Sweet Tea	M	46	Doctorate	PWI	Rural	6-10 years	Faculty, Higher Ed.	AA/Black
Wisdom	F	44	Doctorate	PWI	Both	11+ years	Director, Non Profit	AA/Black

AA - African American | 1st Gen American - born in America to immigrant parents | PWI - Predominantly White Institution | HBCU - Historically Black College and Universities | DE&I - Diversity, Equity and Inclusion | ** - Participants were interviewed twice

Data Gathering

Interviews

Fifteen in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant and eight participants were interviewed a second time to confirm findings. This process involved 'asking, watching, reviewing' (Wolcott, 1992, p. 19) as cited in Merriam & Tisdell (2016, p. 105). Semi-structured interviews were guided by a set of questions but followed no particular order and were flexible. Conducting the interviews in this format allowed participants the ability to provide emerging or new ideas (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Prior to being interviewed, participants were asked to provide a response to a reflective question surrounding the topic of the study; of the fifteen participants, ten responded with a mixture of either a short paragraph, a sentence or a few bullet points. As a result, I was not able to analyze responses ahead of interviews as most completed the question a few hours before being interviewed. The written responses were intended to be included as part of the data and provide an opportunity for analysis.

Following the first round of interviews with all fifteen participants, a follow-up interview was requested to discuss emergent themes from analysis. The intended order for the second set of interviews was based on the order conducted in round one; however, availability of participants was the determining factor in the final order of interviews. During the second set of interviews, I solicited feedback -- member checks -- from participants to confirm my interpretation of the meanings of experiences described (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Saturation of the data was reached after interviewing eight of fifteen participants twice. Saturation occurs at the point when there is no new information being produced from data analysis (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

At the time of this study, the use of remote technology for interviewing, i.e. Zoom, Skype, and other remote platforms, had become integral as part of the research format. This was directly connected to the pandemic of 2020/2021. As such, thirteen interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform in real time and as Salmons (2015; cited in Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) states, 'e-interview research' has both pros and cons in using this method. Primarily, an interview conducted remotely allowed for a broader participant pool, irrespective of location; two participants were located outside of the state where the research was conducted. Additionally, the availability of the participants was limited based on their busy lives. In addition to interviews, other forms of data gathering were utilized. These are discussed in the following sections.

Analytics Memos and Research Journals

Other forms of data gathering included analytic memos and journals. Analytic memos were used to document and reflect my coding process and code selection, to understand how the process of inquiry is materializing, and to discover emergent themes and subthemes in my data -- possibly leading toward theory (Saldana, 2016). In using analytic memos, I was able to question, consider, debate, and explore the research topic as an on-going heuristic process. This process allowed me to use memos to establish why or what is being done in order to make meaning of the data. An important aspect of this heuristic process was to establish my thoughts over time; to understand how the study may have started and how it changed or evolved based on data corpus in the analytic memos. Saldana (2016) cites Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 43) who stated that the process of writing analytic memos is not linear "but should blur and intertwine continually from beginning of investigation to its end." In this sense, documenting the codes and themes being formed provided additional, even more insightful themes.

A journal was used to highlight and make visible my thinking, responses, and feelings (Lutrell, 2010). For instance, very early on in the interview process -- interview # 4 -- I made note of similar connections revealed by participants. Specifically, I was able to refer to the BID theoretical framework and the associated stages of development. In doing so, I began to think about where participants were in their identity development and the associated reasons leading into that stage. Furthermore, returning to the literature and theoretical frameworks constantly, allowed me to rethink how I needed to frame my inquiry to gain understanding of their experiences. My identity as a BFP was contextually significant in this study; currently, the climate in American society centers on race and immigrant discourse, racial tension, unrest, and social justice and equity talks. As a BFP and immigrant, my indigenous/outsider positionality (Chavez, 2008) provided a unique understanding of the experiences faced by those who have similar or shared identities.

Within my journal notes, I documented the huge responsibility I felt in not only capturing participants' stories, but I also made note of having an exhilarating feeling of being able to interpret and share their experiences. An interesting observation, as documented in my journal, revealed how hyper-vigilant I became with any topic related to my ongoing research. In thinking about my racial identity and awareness in my notes, I reflected on a response received in an email from a White colleague; this email contained a response directed towards me that could be considered micro-aggressive. In documenting those feelings, I was able to draw comparison with how the daily lives of participants heavily influenced their ongoing thinking and lived experiences. This also made me aware of how an individual's intention can be on the opposing end of the outcome. Applied to this study, I began to consider how these predominantly White

spaces can be a space that constantly fosters these interactions and experiences -- whether

intentional or not.

Data Analysis

The primary purpose of conducting data analysis was to answer my research question(s).

The data collection and meaning in this qualitative study occurred simultaneously (Qutoshi

(2018). Data was analyzed using the constant comparative method which "involves comparing

one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences" (Merriam and

Tisdell, 2016, p. 32). In essence, as data was being gathered, I analyzed and shaped the interview

process with each participant; being able to make meaning of the data was the primary objective

during that stage of the research. Data gathering and analysis occurred as an ongoing, "recursive

and dynamic" (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 195) process. It was important to constantly keep

my research question in mind as data was constantly compared and analyzed. In analyzing the

data, the following steps were utilized as suggested by Bodgan and Biklen (2011), referenced in

Merriam and Tisdell (2016):

> Step 1: Do not pursue everything. Narrow the study as a means of gathering
>
> more data about the specific topic or phenomena.
>
> Step 2: Decide on whether or not the study will focus on description vs. theory building.
>
> Step 3: Develop a process to quickly assess and reformulate questions to better direct the
>
> study.
>
> Step 4: Plan for upcoming data collection sessions based on previous findings. This
>
> involves reviewing any memos, journals and transcripts as part of the ongoing analysis of
>
> data.

Step 5: Try out ideas and themes on participants to confirm if themes and patterns are

representative of data gathered.

Data analysis was ongoing and continued throughout the research period until saturation

was reached. Initially, my process was more inductive and allowed me to reflect on information

documented in my journal; towards the end of analysis, the process became more deductive as I

looked for further supporting information of emerging themes (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). At

this point, emergent themes, categories and findings were a sufficient 'umbrella' under which

additional findings were covered.

Trustworthiness

In order for readers to 'act on' my findings and implications, they must believe that the

information presented is credible and 'make sense'. For the reader, coming to such 'belief' is

based on "careful attention to a study's conceptualization and the way in which data are

collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and the way in which the findings are presented" (Merriam

and Tisdell, 2016, p. 238). In contrast to the notion of 'validity', Wolcott (1994, p. 366-367;

cited in Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 240) sought something else:

> A quality that points more to identifying critical elements and wringing plausible
>
> interpretations from them, something one can pursue without becoming obsessed with
>
> finding the right or ultimate answer, the correct version, the Truth. For Walcott that
>
> "something else" is understanding.

In viewing Walcott's statement, my purpose was to come to an 'understanding' of the

experiences of BFPs. To demonstrate credibility and understanding of my study, the following

four (4) strategies were employed as outlined in Merriam and Tisdell (2016): 1) *Member-checks*

- this method refers to the idea that feedback is garnered from participants to confirm theories,

themes, or even the researcher's own biases from data gathered at that stage of the research; 2)

Reflexivity - by outlining my relationship to the study, my views, opinions, beliefs, and

experiences with the topic at hand, I can allow the reader to come to an 'understanding' of how

my conclusions may have been drawn or to orient themselves to my approach. Utilizing journals

and memos helped me acknowledge and address any biases I may have brought to the research;

and 3) *Rich Data* - this method refers to the 'transferability' of findings. By providing detailed,

highly descriptive information, readers can assess similarities between them and findings of the

study.

Irrespective of the aforementioned strategies, to ensure the trustworthiness of the

research, "ethical practice comes down to the individual researcher's own values and ethics

(Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 261). Lincoln (1995) as cited in Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p.

261) suggests "standards for validity such as the extent to which the research allows all voices to

be heard, the extent of reciprocity in the research relationship, and so on". As Merriam and

Tisdell (2016) state, the best a researcher can do is to be fully aware of ethical issues and

understand their orientation in relation to said issues.

Positionality

I constantly self-assess where I am in my life, where I am from, where I am going, and

how I get there. I have compared this journey to that of a bush-person who cuts and chops

through shrubs and trees in some form of blind endeavor, not knowing what lies on the other

side. For me, the other side of my research is what excites me; the unknown and the discovery. I

have a deep affinity to those who have entered into a world unknown to them, their peers, or

family. I have always 'blazed the trail' and gone against the grain. In similar fashion, I am not

surprised that I have ended up pursuing a terminal degree. My life has changed significantly

since my days in Jamaica and even my early days in the United States. This change is

gargantuan; going from the lowest of lows to the pinnacle is exhilarating and satisfying.

However, there is always a trade-off. When I think of immigrants who enact their agency to

leave one life behind to pursue another, I can deeply and consciously connect to that experience.

Similarly, as a BFP, I left one world behind to pursue another. Though my current life

experiences are vividly different from my family in many ways, my upbringing instilled values

that were timeless and transferable, irrespective of the worlds I may straddle. On the other hand,

there are experiences I have which can be termed as disenfranchised or unacknowledged, similar

to those mentioned by participants. Disenfranchised in the sense that friends, families, publicly

applaud being the first in my family to accomplish a college degree; conversely, losses or

experiences that I am no longer engaged in as a result of my academic and career path go

unacknowledged. For example, during my doctoral journey the mile-marker of passing my

qualifying exams was lauded among my scholarly peers and career network, while this same

achievement was difficult to appreciate by most of my close friends or family. My belief and

conversations with participants would suggest that the lack of any response from family was

connected to their own lack of full understanding of what that milestone represented. In my day-

to-day work life, conversations with colleagues are usually from a more 'dominant-culture'

perspective; in these conversations and experiences, being 'watchful' and filtering every phrase,

word or action, is a prerequisite when engaging with those familiar with these spaces. From my

lens, such experiences can and have been replicated in many instances as I progressed in my

career and educational pursuits, highlighting the straddling of different worlds, constantly. My

personal and educational experiences have certainly disrupted my family role; these experiences

have affected, positively and negatively, the relationship between me and my family. As a BFP, I seek to understand those unaccounted feelings that may be silenced, invalidated, or suppressed.

As a Black male living in the United States, I am often contemplating my identities; one that sees me as a scholar and professional worker vs. one that brings into full focus that I am a Black male, subjugated to the oppressive forces and systems that have plagued this country and institution well before my arrival; or both, perhaps? Existing in predominantly White professional spaces has resulted in some aspects of assimilation on my part; assimilation is expected when in a foreign space. However, I have never questioned the degree of assimilation I may have experienced, which may be in part due to my immigrant status, and also my moving into a White-collar professional space; in other words, I may have been reticent to challenge the status quo in both cases out of some unacknowledged fear. Important in understanding how I approach this research is to understand how much assimilation and 'shedding' of my Black, immigrant identity is and was necessary. One of my first experiences with 'shedding' was in the context of attire. Moving from a tropical to a location which experiences four full seasons meant that my dress attire inherently changed; a 'hoodie' sweater offered warmth during my long waits at the bus-stop to and from school during my college years. However, my racial socialization and understanding of how Black males in America were portrayed in the media and society required me to be 'less identifiable' by society's standard. Though I didn't realize it at the time, such shifts in my behavior was only the beginning of assimilating into a culture that constructed the meaning of parts of my identity; one that said to function as a 'good citizen', I must 'shed' who I am so I can become who society deems 'appropriate'. Such learned behaviors became more of a 'norm' as I completed my college tenure and began working professionally. To understand the world I live in, as well as those that may look, act, or speak as I do, requires exploring those core

thoughts and experiences. To make sense of how I have evolved is to also make sense of what participants' experiences have been as BFPs in current day America.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have explored my research methodology, detailing the research design, methods for data gathering, data analysis, and my positionality within the context of the proposed study. Additionally, I have explained how I established trustworthiness of my findings and limitations of this study. In chapter 4, I will present findings highlighted with themes and rich description of the data in the form of quotations from participants.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the lived experiences of Black

First-Generation Professionals (BFPs) as they pursued their work lives. For the purpose of this

study, BFPs are individuals within the African diaspora who were the first in their families to

attain a college degree *and* the first to enter and hold White-collar positions in the United States.

This chapter presents the principal findings from this research study. These findings include five

(5) themes: 1) tripartite workplace: stressful, powerful, and triggering; 2) mentorship: critical

element for success; 3) identity is nuanced; 4) upward mobility: hidden experiences and feelings;

and 5) expectations and motivating factors for success. Each theme is accompanied by several

subthemes in order to provide further understanding and interpretation of findings. Fifteen

participants were interviewed once and eight participants were interviewed twice over the course

of six weeks.

Theme 1: Tripartite work environment: stressful, powerful, and triggering

The following section describes how participants experienced their daily lives in the

workplace. All participants worked in White-collar professional spaces and had professional

occupations. Reflections on their interactions with their White counterparts allowed for dialogue

about their sense and practice of agency, unaccounted feelings, triggering events, and how they

navigated unfamiliar and stressful territories. It should be noted that the majority of participants'

coworkers were White. Some participants described their feelings of having to work more than

their White counterparts in some instances; for others, they described not having those concerns

and rather, focused on being authentically themselves in these settings. Overall, there were three

areas of focus - stressful, powerful, and triggering - captured based on discussions. These sentiments are covered in the following sub-themes.

Stressors and challenges - representing an entire community

Being the first in any endeavor and trailblazing paths rarely or never taken, is not an easy process or task for any individual or group; such has been the experience for BFPs in this study. BFPs' past and present experiences are inextricably intertwined in how they manifest in the workplace. While all participants describe themselves as being successful, their daily journey and interactions in professional -- and predominantly White spaces -- present various complexities, often unaccounted for or unacknowledged by their counterparts, family, and society as a whole. For example, the experience of being asked to represent all Black people was consistent for many BFPs; navigating those experiences in their daily lives looked different for Wisdom in comparison to Christopher. Wisdom described this by stating:

> It's stressful and then not stressful because what makes it stressful? Because you're in a space which is predominantly White [and] you get to represent all the Black people - that's too heavy and impossible. I can't represent that for you [White-counterpart]. And so, I had to learn that that's not my strength, that's your strength, I had to learn to like delayer and come into [these] spaces as Wisdom, and not the Black female representative.

Wisdom, an Executive Director, in acknowledging that her experiences can be stressful, simultaneously acknowledged that she refused to feed into society's norm of depending on a single person to represent the Black community in her workspace. Christopher, a Director in the Equity field, on the other hand, assumed the responsibility of educating his colleagues in some situations, stating, "anytime somebody tells me we would like for you to talk about Black

identity and Blackness and African American experiences, I was just like, you want one person

to talk about the entire diaspora, you already missed the mark." Christopher's reference of

'missed the mark' implies that the individual has just made a triggering statement blindly. It was

clear in listening to him how frustrated he gets when such remarks are made; however, he also

acknowledged using his role and situation to help educate in constructive discourse with White

counterparts. Rashad-McKay, a Director for a program serving a large Black student body at a

Predominantly White Institution (PWI) reflected on his experience in the workplace, stating, "it

is stressful, but it is powerful because you know that you are defying stereotypes, you are

showing people who need to see like now this is what Black professionals (are) capable of

doing." For Nubie, an Educator who works with many First-Generation College Students (FGS),

he used his experiences to inspire others. He stated that the workplace is "stressful because

there's always an obstacle we have to jump over, always an obstacle, but powerful because it's a

testimony behind us in how we jump over and that can give someone else a sense of hope."

In looking at these experiences thus far, there are three different approaches to navigating

these challenges -- some completely reject any need to carry the stress or burden, some educate

their colleagues in hopes of creating awareness, and some use those moments to create pathways

for others. In essence, for participants in their places of work, there appeared to be a desire for

White counterparts to be more reflective and accountable -- in some sense -- to the history of the

Black experience in America. There was a balance of those who helped educate others about

their experiences as Black individuals with those who were completely removed from the idea of

representing or *carrying* their communities while in these spaces.

Undermining their leadership

　　　　Another type of challenge encountered by BFPs was a lack of respect for their authority

or leadership. Aida, a Vice Principal at an urban high school, reflected, "instead of them coming

to me with things that they (co-workers) should be coming to me with, they go directly to my

principal." Aida indicated that she feels as if she has to constantly remind colleagues of her role.

In one incident where her principal was out of the office and left her in charge, she described

how her authority was challenged in this response:

　　　　I don't think you're listening to me so I'm going to say it again. You're going to take the

　　　　screen (television) out of the office and place it in the conference room. You can use it to

　　　　meet there. "No, no, I was just gonna meet there" [staff], and I was like, no, that's not

　　　　how we operate. And so, I think that in that space or in that moment, I had to check

　　　　[redirect] her and I find myself doing that at work a lot.

The idea of Aida having to 'check' her colleague is a push-back relating to any resistance faced

by BFPs based on the leadership roles they may occupy. The fact that she indicated doing this

frequently confirms that these types of interactions are not random nor intermittent, but

continuous. Ebony, an Executive Director in the health sector, elaborated on this sentiment:

　　　　You have people who do not want to work for you because you are a Black woman and

　　　　then people who are taken aback when you are a very to-the-policy, to-the-book type of

　　　　person. Plus, you're a Black woman and they thought they could bypass the system. If

　　　　you want to hold them accountable, it doesn't work that way.

In this description, Ebony highlighted the unspoken notion or stereotype about Black work ethic.

She highlighted her role as a Black female as being one area of contention and another being her

adherence to rules. For both Aida and Ebony, being in leadership roles not only as a female, but

also being a Black person, requires more effort in holding individuals accountable and garnering respect from direct reports.

Hidden and unspoken experiences

Participants described having hidden feelings or unspoken thoughts as it related to their daily interactions and responsibilities at work. Roni, before fully reflecting, appeared to have normalized some of the challenges before retracting his sentiments. He stated:

> I'm just so used to kind of being in that space. And I don't find it taxing necessarily, I guess in some degree. No, I take that back. I do because when it comes to, you know, who's going to be on the African American month committee, who's going to be on the Black males committee, who should be on the diversity chair, it's always, "Roni, what are you doing, can you help us out?"

Such experiences as described by Roni are usually processed and experienced at the individual level and can result in faster burn-out in an effort to meet expectations of the organization. John, a Director at a PWI, stated that his experience can be lonely as there are not many individuals with whom he can relate. In discussing this sense of feeling lonely, he stated:

> Because no matter how you slice it in any White-collar profession, identifying as Black is always going to be the minority, just based on how the systems are set up. It can be lonely because, it's having conversations with people about the job, the stress that comes with it, the politics; it's foreign to them, you know, so depending on who I'm talking to, I'm probably gearing the conversation around something that they want to talk about, because I can't really talk about my experience in these spaces because it's going to be unrelatable.

John is describing how he masked his experiences in the workplace or in his personal life based on a belief that certain aspects of his life were starkly different from his colleagues. To account for that, he intentionally guided the conversation. Ebony reinforced this sense of loneliness as a leader in her particular field:

> I know only one other Black female that does this. She is the Executive Director of [Organization X] and so you become lonely and you understand that at the same time, you can represent something for your community, and that has a burden also, because you have these millions of nursing students, millions of nurses who expect and deserve more and understand that sometimes you are the voice that your colleagues attach to this race as a whole, which is unfair, because we're all different.

As articulated by Roni, Jon, and Ebony, certain experiences that occur frequently in their places of work are oftentimes hidden or at minimum, not understood to be a reality for their counterparts. Collectively, these excerpts provide context for the various challenges that occurred in their work lives; specifically, being a minority in their fields and not being able to connect with others based on relational differences.

Overachieving to be on par

For many participants in the study, there was a demonstrated feeling of needing to work twice as hard as others in their field. Stereotypes about Black individuals, their competency, and abilities were ingrained in the fabric of American society and manifested in the workplace. John was very cognizant of these stereotypes and the perceptions that his colleagues may have held as he navigated his work spaces:

> [I feel the] need to over achieve and over perform because I've seen situations where people say, "well, that's just how they are, that's why we can't promote them, that's why

we can't give them opportunities." So, to keep the opportunity I have, or to even give

myself more opportunities, I will always have to do more than my White counterparts

because I realized there's an excuse to why we can't move [promote] this person forward.

For John, his awareness of systemic or structural racism and discrimination was at the forefront

of his thinking. He further commented on seeing other Black individuals being overlooked for

promotions. "There's always an excuse to why and that excuse sometimes can be buried in, you

know, systematic racism…to keep the status quo." Aida resonates on doing more in her role just

to validate her belonging, "I usually find myself trying to go the extra mile, just to ensure that

you know, folks realize my worth because I find myself continuously trying to prove my worth."

Ebony spoke about her feeling of needing to meet expectations:

> Even in my current role, and I know that, you know, I'll find myself working three, four,
>
> five times as hard or harder than my colleagues and it is because of certain expectations
>
> and it is because you want to make sure that you're going to go above and beyond
>
> because of perceptions that individuals may have.

This sentiment of perception, expectations and a need to do more than the average person was

consistent for most participants. Marie, a Therapist stated, "I had to do more, especially as a

Black woman, and the society that we live in, feeling like you have to work ten times harder, you

have to do more than your counterparts." Roni had similar feelings in his role as he stated, "I do

see like we have to overachieve because we're already looked at as you know, the minorities in

the division, and I feel like they're always looking for us to mess up." Nubie expanded on this

need to overachieve since he does not have White privilege:

> I've had to work twice as hard in everything that I do, because I think things have never
>
> really come easy to me or to people who look like me, and there are a lot of privileges we

> don't have when compared to being in a White space. In my experience, a lot of people
>
> who identify as White lack cultural competence in terms of being able to recognize that
>
> their experiences are not everyone else's experiences, but also don't really factor in how
>
> historical situations have still had present day implications.

Nubie, in reflecting, found himself having these difficult, but necessary conversations to help in further understanding his experience(s) when the situation presented itself, "I'd find myself having or being involved in conversations to just kind of increase awareness around, kind of, just ethnic groups when it comes to certain particular components and privileges and opportunities." Harmony had a slightly different view on the concept of needing to overachieve:

> I feel more of a pressure to just want to do a good job, than to overachieve to be on par.
>
> But I know that in other people's eyes, I won't be looked at on par unless my credentials
>
> are way surpass, non Black people or White people that are my peers. I've seen that
>
> happen. I was told that I would be hired at a certain title, [but] it was changed without my
>
> notice. I didn't find out that my title was changed and downgraded until I started.

Even though Harmony approached her work with a different mindset, she acknowledged the reality of this concept for others. In her example, she felt slighted in her job title being changed without her knowledge before beginning her tenure. She acknowledged that her own biases could have clouded her judgement in that case; however, she discussed seeing this as a pattern:

> I started to notice the pattern that every time someone Black or Brown applied, that they
>
> might apply for the position as it was posted, but they were getting offered a lower title,
>
> or they wouldn't get the position, but then they would ask them to train other people. It
>
> just kind of highlighted what a lot of Black people already believe to be true, which is
>
> that you have to be, like, twice as good to get half the consideration.

John, Ebony, Marie, Harmony, and Nubie discussed their necessity to overachieve or work twice

as hard in the workplace based on their identity and reality of being Black in these spaces. For

these participants, their feelings were validated based on specific examples of witnessing how

various situations would play out in the work environment.

Enacting agency and power

While some participants had more difficulty navigating their presence in these

professional work spaces, a few participants explicitly talked about a more empowering

approach. Mikayla, a Director for Human Resources depicted her stance:

> You just have to get to the point where you're no longer concerned about what anyone
>
> thinks of you and that's when you're able to find your voice. I'm not sure what happened
>
> or when it changed, but once that clicked, I'm just like, this is why I'm here, to say what
>
> no one says to all of you. But it's difficult to get there. It's scary. You can face push back,
>
> you can face all types of stuff when you get to that point.

For Mikayla, her role also uniquely situated her to advocate and highlight systemic inequities or

policies that work against minorities. Similarly, Lina, a senior level administrator in Human

Resources, espoused a similar form of agency. In one situation she recalled having to highlight

and expose practices that are not equitable:

> I am uniquely positioned to be able to call that [inequitable practices] out. I had to tell
>
> somebody that a policy is exclusionary. "You need to understand that you are excluding a
>
> lot of Black and Brown folks by that policy". They were pissed.

For Mikayla and Lina, both senior level administrators, they were fully aware of their role and

the agency that can be enacted to create more equitable work environments. For others who also

had leadership roles, their sense of agency was something that they simply felt the need to enact.

Rashad-McKay, a Director at a PWI described his view about being in workspaces where he is the minority:

> In my professional spaces, I've always been unapologetically me and I've always understood that for some people, that's going to turn them off. For some people, they're going to embrace that. But at the end of the day, those experiences- undergrad and grad- definitely prepared me to be in spaces where you know, you walk into a meeting and you're the only Black guy. It's like, cool, because I've walked into classrooms and been the only Black guy in class, so I'm completely prepared for this.

Standing in your own glory

Rashad-McKay described his time during college as a minority and how learning to navigate similar spaces prepared him for his current role. He elaborated this sentiment when he stated, "I know that if I know my stuff and I'm good at what I do, that's the only thing that matters. Your perceptions of me and you thinking I can't do it, that's more your issue than it is mine." It was very clear that for some participants, there was a sense of reframing their thought process or simply letting go of psychological burdens that may have been carried. This appeared to be a form of taking a stance in spaces where they have historically been underrepresented and systematically oppressed. Wisdom articulated her positionality, embracing elements of her identity that may have been suppressed:

> I'm learning to not allow White people to be the standard. I'm learning to stand in my own glory, to understand that I am a Black girl from urban America, from Newark, New Jersey, and that has value, even if I don't use the words that you're used to, even if I don't conjugate my verbs as I should, that does not take away or diminish the value that I bring

to the conversation or to the space and for those who don't get that, it is their work to

figure that out.

In expressing her views, Wisdom suggested that the standard by which she is measured is based

on her White counterparts. It was important to note that in acknowledging this standard, she

simultaneously rejected that comparison and did not use such narratives to diminish her self-

perception. Marie offered a similar thought process that occurs in her everyday experiences:

Am I even allowed to wear my shirt that says 'Black Women Are Dope'? Or am I going

to choose not to wear it because this fear that I'm going to offend someone. Does my hair

need to be straight for that first interview that I'm having with them? Or can I just wear

my hair in an afro and have some like bold red lipstick or like, you know, this concept

that you have to be put together in a way to affirm White people while assimilating and

dismissing your own identity as a Black woman. So, I've kinda just been in a space where

I don't care, I'm gonna show up as my full self and who I am. If you don't like it, then

that's your business.

Wisdom, Rashad-McKay, and Marie took on a mindset that they were no longer okay with

conformity or assimilating to fit a narrative. They all appeared to have moved into a space that

acknowledges, but does not allow for society's perceptions and/or expectations to prevent them

from being authentic and unapologetic.

For BFPs, the workplace is reflective of these different feelings and experiences

occurring throughout their professional careers. Collectively, they shared the tripartite of

operating in three spaces in the workplace: one deemed as stressful in the context of how they

felt they needed to operate or navigate such spaces; the second relating to unacknowledged

feelings or triggering events and interactions when their abilities were questioned or undermined;

and the third deemed as powerful given their unique positions as change agents for their

respective communities and families.

Theme 2: Mentorship

This section focused on mentorship and its meaning for participants. Discussions

involved several areas within mentorship connected to their career and personal growth.

Participants discussed how mentorship has contributed significantly to their success thus far, and

allowed for developing one's personal and professional self. Mentorship was discussed as being

a protective factor for their success when considering some of the environmental factors related

to their upbringing. There were several points discussed under the umbrella of mentorship. Sub-

themes included: mentorship's influence on success; social/emotional support vs. instrumental

based mentorship; intersecting identities; lack of access to mentors; threat of a mentee; and

passing the baton.

Influence on success

It was unequivocal that mentorship had great influence on access and continued success

for participants. Mentorship was discussed as being a significant component of both their

educational and career journey. The role of mentorship involved individuals who had achieved

career success for themselves. Lina, a senior level human resource administrator, spoke

glowingly of her mentors, "Every position that I've ever been in, it's been my previous supervisor

who has supported me, mentored me, encouraged me to grow and also supported me with a new

employer, but a higher opportunity." John, a Director at a PWI explained how he copied the

blueprint of mentors who had roles he wished to one day assume, "For the most part, every job

I've had in my professional career and every step I've went up has been because of a mentor who

sat in that seat." Christopher attributed his entire college and career success directly to mentorship:

> Mentorship honestly is one of the pillars, if you will, of my success. I did not get anywhere without mentorship. I didn't get to college without mentors. I didn't get scholarships without mentors. I didn't get a job without mentors. I didn't get a doctorate without mentors.

Christopher revealed that his success thus far was connected to mentorship received. He further described being able to access mentors for continued guidance along his journey, "It feels amazing, empowering to know that I can just tap in when I want to learn more or be better and continue to grow and mature and develop." It was noticeable that participants wanted to acknowledge and make it clear that mentors, their mentors in particular, helped them each step of the way. Nubie described their importance stating, "they can kind of tell you the pitfalls to watch out for and I think that's crucial, critical to where I am today, because I haven't gotten here on my own." Mikayla described her intersection of being a Black female and having guidance from someone with the same identity in a leadership role:

> I think mentors have been irreplaceable for my career because I can get the position myself [but] it's what you do when you get there, that I've always needed guidance around. And it's always been some Black woman, it's never been a Black man, or even a White woman, never been a White man. It's always been another Black woman who is higher than me who learned the lesson before and said no, this is what you have to do, this is how you have to think, this is how you have to show up, this is what executive presence for a Black woman is because it's different for everybody else. This is what you have to do, there's no fear here.

Mikayla further explained that "every mentor I've had has been another Black woman about five levels above and who just pulled me along." This highlights that mentorship is not only key for continued success, but it also is important to have mentors in key leadership roles as a means of navigating those spaces once accessed. Roni looks at his relationship through the lens of family support [or lack-there-of]:

> Without those mentorships or people just being able to sit me down and have those conversations, I don't think I would have been as successful because not having the full family support in terms of, this is what college is and this is the field you're going to go into, no one understands that. So, having these mentors was able to, you know, provide that insight in terms of alright, this is what you have to do. This is the job that you can apply for. This is kind of your trajectory in terms of what you should do after this. If it wasn't for that, I don't think that I would obviously be able to be successful in this space.

For Roni, his sentiments spoke to a void that is sometimes experienced by BFPs who have little to no family support in terms of college or career preparation. The experiences and challenges faced are overcome by support through mentorship. He further stated, "being able to talk to people [mentors] about it and how it operates, and you know what to look for helped in terms of me being able to navigate it and navigate it well." John was influenced by seeing himself through the eyes of a recent graduate with a Ph.D. For him, representation and learning about the path it took others to get to that point in their career was pertinent:

> Them giving me the map of how they got there, that was extremely important. While I'm in grad school, I met someone who has a terminal degree, a [person with a] PhD, who's a Black male, who's not too much older than me. So, it was the first time that I saw okay, this isn't a 50, 60-year-old Black male, [who has] a PhD, this is someone in their 20s

who's about to finish, and I said, oh, it's possible. Let me ask, what's the pathway you

took?

For John, mentorship not only meant representation in terms of one's aspiration; it also stood as

a protective factor for other issues youths faced such as peer pressure. In reflecting on

communities with low levels of engagement in education, he stated that youths can be negatively

influenced through peer pressure. However, he emphatically highlighted mentorship as a

protective factor when he stated, "strong family values, certain peer groups, but mentorship,

mentorship. Yeah, because if you can see, 'oh, wow, I like that person, and they're cool to me

and they're telling me this is what I can do,' that can hush a lot of that peer pressure stuff up."

Social/emotional vs. instrumental support

Participants delineated two types of mentorship: one typically found in Black

Communities -- social/emotional support; the other typically found in White communities --

instrumental support. Social and emotional support, in this sense, references the past and

personal experiences that may be affecting the individual currently; instrumental support relates

to specific outcomes gained from the mentor/mentee interaction focusing on the professional

development and growth of the individual. Harmony made note of the difference by comparing

the Black and White communities. She stated, "mentoring looks different. So, in the Black

community, mentoring might look like it's emotional support. I do feel like in the White

community, based on what I've observed, it leads to tangible outcomes." Harmony suggested that

personal support within the Black community is typically at the forefront of mentorship;

whereas, in the White community, it appears to be focused more on the professional or tangible

outcomes. She further described this sentiment in how she experienced and observed mentorship:

It leads to let's produce something together, let's do a presentation, let me nominate you

for this opportunity, you know, let me introduce you to someone else, you know. And I

think that in the Black community, to be quite frank with you, when I've had mentors that

were, you know, Black, it's kind of like, can you come and do something for me. And,

like, it could be something good, but it's, in a way, asking you to do more where you

might feel like you're already doing a lot anyway, whereas I do think that in the White

community, it has, even just from what I've observed, it doesn't always ask you for

something to help push you along.

Harmony described a quid-pro-quo scenario in the Black community whereas in the White

community, that component was not observed in her experience. Harmony, in her view, felt there

could be a place for addressing both the social and emotional support, as well as the professional

development of the individual:

I think that Black folks are wrapped up in more of that emotional piece and that's kind of

what's been modeled for so long that maybe it just becomes like a recurring cycle. I think

there's a place for it too. But I think that the reason that I think White professionals tend

to climb more [career ladder] is that they actually do find ways to help people climb

more.

Speaking from the lens of a mentor, Sweet-tea, an Educator at a PWI reflected, "I have to

provide space for my mentees to process the bullshit they've experienced before we can even

begin to get to the professional. I want to hear about your experience and I'll talk to you about

my experience." For both participants, the idea of receiving social and emotional support, while

working on the professional development within mentorship was important. Christopher's

sentiment is connected to his own experiences and described being more receptive to mentors

who had a genuine interest in his success. He elaborated:

> You're not my son, you're not my brother, you're not kin to me, but I still love, I still care
>
> about you and I want to see you grow. So, I need you to take my hand and trust me. And
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> honestly, because of that tough love like that, it's made me more receptive to mentorship.
>
> It was acknowledged that progression in the Black community, on a whole, is slower than

should be as a result of the structure of mentorship. Mikayla elaborated on this point:

> I think part of White privilege is that they might need emotional support about other
>
> things, but it's not about being White. I think the whole point of White privilege is we're
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> not saying they don't have struggles, they don't have difficulty, they don't have setbacks.
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> We're saying that the setback, struggles, and difficulties that they do have is not because
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> of the color of their skin as [is] ours. We have the same setbacks, difficulties and, you
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> know, hardship that any human would face and then another layer.
>
> A lot of mentors deal with that layer of the Blackness, not really going deeper into how
>
> can I help you tangibly because they haven't gotten past the layer of being Black.

Mikayla's experience highlights the additional steps that must be undertaken by many Black

mentors before achieving or getting to anything tangible such as resume building, networking,

elevator pitch, image, etc. She described what mentors tend to focus on:

> This is how you need to act, this is how you need to show up to be emotionally stable in
>
> the workplace. That's a huge lift of a mentor, and I've been that mentor to say, 'this is
>
> how you have to show up to remain sane.'

Harmony suggested that mentors need to advocate more in terms of recognition for their

mentees, "If you really want to help Black professionals, you have to help them be visible and

elevate." For Harmony, helping young Black professionals to be 'visible' or to 'elevate' are tangible and instrumental outcomes that can be achieved. She points out, "there needs to be some action. If you have that level of influence, to say, you know, being that big mouth to say like hey, why aren't there any people of color on this short list?" In her reference, she is highlighting the fact that there may be opportunities to be a voice for young Black professionals and without advocacy, the mentor/mentee relationship remains in an emotional or trauma focused state.

Intersecting identities

Irrespective of race or gender, participants had great respect for the impact their mentors played in their lives. However, some were keen to highlight race and/or gender as it relates to their mentor(s). This was prominently stated especially when there were situations of White mentors. Marie reflected, "so my first three mentors were actually White, one White woman and two White men, phenomenal people." Harmony shared a similar sentiment as she stated, "interestingly, a lot of my mentors have been White women. So that's really interesting. And, you know, I think some people might feel surprised." Harmony suggested that her mentor being White is not a familiar space or relationship that Black individuals may encounter. However, many individuals acknowledged how White individuals were, in fact, some of their earliest mentors. Lina highlighted the gender and race of her mentors:

> I've actually had a few, they've been Black women. I have one White man who I like to say, Dr. K., he gave me a shot. And he also, in my opinion, was equity minded. Even back in 2012, when he hired me. I think he had an affinity for strong women. As a hiring manager, I think if you look at his team, his team was all strong women and we were like the rainbow. We had a White woman, Jewish woman. I was Black American, one lady was Puerto Rican, Spanish, another one was Cuban, another one was Asian. We were like

literally like all women. And then after that, Dr. V., [a] Black woman, she was the one

who encouraged me to go back for my PhD.

In similar respects, Jane talked about her mentor and how that relationship was made explicit.

These relationships appeared to have been nurturing as she explained:

So, it seems like it's always just been the Black women in those positions of power who

have naturally become sort of my mentors and helping me you know, advocate for myself

and make some of those career decisions, which is really great. And I think even just

seeing them would have been so inspirational, but to have them kind of explain and help

me through these things has been amazing.

Harmony, in reflecting on her mentors, who were White women stated, "just to even hear how

some things turned out for other people. I think without mentorship, I probably wouldn't have

been able to go on some of the adventures, to take some of the risks that I've taken." Engage, a

male Librarian, shared one of his first experiences with having a mentor. "One of my first

mentors as a professional Librarian was a White guy. He gave me my first job, we became

close." Engage, in understanding the perception of a White mentor with a Black mentee, reflects

on his interaction with both White and Black individuals, stating, "the dichotomy of okay, yeah,

there was some White people out here who were like [bad], but there some White people out

here like the other [good]." Engage was suggesting that there were good and bad in all people.

He also recalled how the reverse of society's stereotype worked for him. "The Black woman who

told me nobody would ever hire me, right. In the law library, I got the job because of a White

professor who recommended me for the job." For Engage and some other participants, they were

able to look at individuals at the human level before inserting the intersection of their race or

gender. However, some participants' unique experiences may have fostered stronger affinity to either a specific gender or specific race.

Lack of access to mentorship

The undeniable influence on the participants' success was linked to mentorship; however, many participants discussed how access to mentors was an issue for themselves and for other BFP's on a much broader perspective in the Black community. Ebony shared this sentiment when she stated:

> One of the big problems I think about accessibility of mentorship in our community is that when we do identify somebody who could be a mentor, in my experience, they already mentor and like ten, fifteen other people. So, you can't get close to them because they have so many other people that they are mentoring.

Ebony brought up another angle to accessing mentorship when she referred to it [mentorship] as being 'hidden.' "In our community, mentorship - for right or wrong - sometimes seems that it's still hidden, even though you're actively being mentored." Ebony, in her reflection, spoke to the nature of how some mentors will operate, silently, helping out young Black professionals who may have little support in these spaces. In expanding on these sentiments related to operating in a hidden modality, she stated:

> I think sometimes based on the culture that some of our individuals are coming from, like I came from us like myself. So sometimes there needs to be some polishing in order to help our colleagues assimilate to certain situations more gracefully.

Ebony described a degree of assimilation in order to 'fit-in.' However, some participants had an opposing view in terms of being comfortable with representing themselves. Rashad-McKay, in reflecting on his time during college, discussed his drive to be a great mentor:

> I guess that's what makes me go hard at being a mentor for other young Black
>
> professionals, especially first generational, first generation Black professionals in this
>
> environment [PWI]. Because I didn't really have you know, when I was a student here,
>
> there weren't a lot of Black administrators on campus. Some of the people who kind of
>
> discouraged me were people who would have looked like me.

In discussing his current role at a PWI, he mentioned forming his own network of support among other Black individuals. "Now it's like, coaches, faculty members, administrators, all coming together, bunch of us as Black men saying, how do we support each other, what's going on your side of things?"

Roni, in his experience, had no formal process of accessing mentors, "I kind of stumbled upon it like it was like, I guess early on you didn't really have like a mentor." For Roni, he described a more organic nature of finding a mentor:

> It was like alright, well, you helped me with this. And then we got talking about this and
>
> the next thing, you know, like, we're like, we're interacting on a more, you know, regular
>
> basis and you helped me, you know, do whatever in terms of you know, being successful.

He described his experience as 'unspoken mentorship' and saw these interactions as individuals who simply wanted to help and served as a resource. Mikayla described a situation that was very selective from a mentor's perspective. Speaking about a high level [many years of experience] mentor in her career field, she stated, "like she wanted to mentor people who already knew what they wanted to do and they just needed like that small little time." In this sense, if you did not have clear directions on what you wanted, there was almost no possibility of forming or accessing that level of mentorship. Mikayla also emphasized the need to be clear is something that she felt we need to develop further in our community:

Some people don't have that and I do think that in the Black community, um everyone is

not necessarily clear on what they're supposed to be doing, what they want to do to get

that serendipitous. I have to be very clear, you have to be extremely, like almost not even

outgoing, what's the word, but you have to be able to speak up about what it is you want

to do and what it is you, how you see yourself for that serendipity to happen.

Mikayla and Roni shared similar experiences in forming organic or serendipitous mentorship

relationships. Mikayla stated, "It's always been a situation where I've been randomly working

with this person who all of a sudden see something in me and starts to take me under her wing,

there has never been a conversation about it." For Roni and Mikayla, their frequent interactions

with other experienced Black professionals eventually turned into mentorship, and elevated their

relationship. In making a comparison about access to mentorship in the Black community vs.

White communities, John and Mikayla shared similar sentiments. Mikayla stated, "I think for our

White counterparts, their father, their mother has really strong networks of people from their

birth to say okay, talk to my friend, so and so he's the president of this company, he can help

you." John echoed a similar sentiment and explains how the same process or relationship labeled

'mentorship' in Black communities are not labeled as anything, per se, in White communities:

They don't have to go out and seek, they're just telling them this is what you do, this is

who you follow, this is the path you're on. But that's the pathway to success, period. And

you ask them "what made you want to do this or how did you do that", and they use

mentorship very seldomly, but that's exactly what is happening. My dad, my uncle,

introduced me to the CEO of this company who said study at this college and we'll have a

job for you waiting. That has been happening for years and that's why they're so far and

advanced. It is necessary for it to be pronounced in the Black community because we're

behind.

Mikayla provided a similar feeling in looking at this dichotomy of mentorship in Black and

White communities:

We can give you your first internship. They have it already built in as an understanding

within their culture, that their parents' network is going to be there to help the kids. It's an

understanding from them. They know it, the kids know it. When you see them in school,

they know it. They're like, I don't have to worry about my grades. Mom, my dad, knows

the president of, oh, Microsoft.

Both John and Mikayla indicated that mentorship appears to be readily accessible in some

aspects of White communities, whereas it is more difficult to access and maintain in areas of the

Black community. Rashad-McKay discussed being intentional about seeking out mentors when

in spaces where he is the minority:

So, having to learn in this environment that your social capital can look different or be in

different spaces. It doesn't have to be people who are all directors, but you can find these

people and so you're having to look a little bit more as opposed to just being readily

available to you. And so, you know, that's where I am now, like in this journey of, you

know, being very intentional about seeking out community and support and developing

and growing those bonds with people.

The lack of clear access to mentors may have negative implications for how far and how

quick one's career progresses. Aida and Wisdom shared a similar sentiment of operating at a

deficit. Aida, in reflecting on her career thus far, stated, "everything was on kind of like trial and

error, me figuring that out for myself, type of thing. I feel like if I had a direct career mentor,

then I may not have gone the route that I've gone." She further mentioned that the implication for

her was not maximizing her financial ceiling, "I think that was probably the biggest financial loss

for me. Somebody who was probably doing what I'm doing and has been doing it for a lot longer

would be seeing a lot more financial gains." A career mentor, for Aida, could have provided

more guidance in her career decisions resulting in potentially increased financial gains. Wisdom

articulated a similar sentiment and discussed where the Black community is as opposed to where

they should be:

> Many of us are still operating in trial and error and we really should be beyond that at this
>
> point. Like we should no longer be in survival mode. There should be a point of 'this is
>
> the blueprint, access, go beyond.' We're still in a space of trial and error and so
>
> mentorship would actually give us access to the thriving piece.

For Wisdom and Aida, operating in 'trial and error' has been an observation they have seen

within their experience. They share the sentiment that a lack of access to mentors results in

operating blindly in career mobility and in predominantly White spaces. "Mentorship comes in

with showing how you can be culturally responsive and how you can be affirming or this is just

how you get to be you and they can be them." The sentiments espoused speak to a lack of

guidance for many BFPs who are entering unfamiliar spaces. The importance had implications in

terms of their growth professionally and financially.

Threat of Mentee

Another theme that participants discussed was this notion or idea that there was not

enough space for multiple Black individuals. Whether intentional or unintentional, there was this

idea that, numerically, there should or could not be a huge representation in predominantly White

spaces. Wisdom stated, "we've been taught that there's not enough room for all of us. And so, I

think it's sometimes you know, the mentee becomes competition for the mentor." Wisdom highlighted a common experience for her and other participants in the workplace, "There is a 'feel' or view that there can only be one representation of the Black community. She elaborated further stating, "like there's one Oprah, there's one Beyoncé, and so that's a real thing. That's a real space knowing that and so as you're developing folk, with the notion of I could potentially be developing my replacement." Engage, in describing his perception of how he was received by another Black colleague, reflected, "I thought like, I did think, for a while, like, oh, you know, maybe too many Black people [are] here and now here you come." This was further echoed by Wisdom as she described how Black individuals who are already in these spaces might be thinking, "Perhaps your interpretation may be [that] I'm bumping you out." Marie had a similar experience when seeking out Black female mentors:

> I don't know if it's because I grew up in predominantly White communities and they [Black mentors] looked at me like 'who is she?' It was like, oh, 'she a little too bubbly for us, you talk like a White person, you have access to all these things, are you coming here to take my position?' And I was like, no, I want a mentor. But like this lack of willingness to provide guidance or access to opportunities, is what I found.

Marie, Wisdom, and Engage revealed that they felt as if they were imposing on a space that was accounted for or already occupied. Rashad-McKay, in his reflection, brought up an interesting analogy of how Blacks on slave plantations had been trained to behave for centuries.

> When you think about a slave plantation, right, you had those slaves who were in the field and you had those slaves who were in the house and for the 'house slaves,' they felt very gracious, in some instances, to be able to have the luxuries that those in the field didn't have, even though they were still under the same system. And you would have

those very same individuals also being willing to work with the masters, to tell on other

slaves, to make sure that they secured their position to stay in the house, to not allow

anybody else to threaten that because it's not like they allowed 25 house slaves to kind of

have this type of privilege, it would be a very small number. So, I think that's just how we

have been indoctrinated and raised whether we're conscious of it or not, it's just

something that is passed down and carried down. And so, once you get into that space,

you do what you need to do to keep it and again, even if the challenge to that spot is

somebody that looks like you, your goal is to eliminate that challenge or to give that

person the same type of access that you had. So, you know, I mean, it's something that

has historical roots, and I don't even think we sometimes think about why that is, but I

think that's a huge part of it.

Rashad-MacKay brings up his perception of the 'why' behind how some Black individuals may

operate and behave in certain spaces. Understanding that the ecological environment can have a

profound impact on how we develop, our identities, and how we behave, Rashad-McKay was

able to make that connection to history from the point of slavery in the United States. All

participants did recognize that numerically, Black individuals in the professional space might be

sparse based on the proportion of Blacks in the United States. However, the access to get into

those spaces and the reception by other Black individuals in those spaces gave reason to question

those perceived attitudes.

Passing the Baton

Mentorship is seen as a path to success, both as a specific process and a symbolic

meaning of upliftment and support for individuals in the Black community. All participants,

irrespective of having or not having a mentor, see value in what it can do for young BFPs. Its

significance and impact can be profound not only for the individual and their trajectory, but for

the community as a whole. Ebony recognized that creating a pipeline is critical to continued

success in her community:

> So, I have a group of amazing young individuals, men and women, that I know
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> honestly, we're not going to be here forever and you let them know early on, you
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> know, we expect a lot of you and we expect a lot from those who we mentor, our
>
> mentees. So, if you are blessed enough to be in this situation, one of the things
>
> that you know you must do is to bring others along.

Ebony was very clear in her message to her mentees and expects that they [mentees] will

continue to groom others once they are in a position to do so. Lina also recognized this need to

'pass the baton' and help other young up and coming BFPs, "I'm a Black woman in a certain

role, in a certain department, I value that, I honor that, that's a gift so I want to give back. When

people reach out to me and ask me to mentor, absolutely." For Jane, she felt drawn to help others

and stated, "it's almost like in our nature to want to nurture the ones that are coming after us like

I'm doing, I do that." She further stated her sentiments:

> I definitely know that, I feel that, if not for those women, kind of encouraging me and
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> even seeing them in those roles, things probably would be different for me. Just because
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> I'm not, [it's not that] I can't advocate for myself, but it's, I think they put me on to some
>
> things I wouldn't even consider asking for or going for.

Christopher, in his reflection went as far as mentioning the perception and stereotypes that are

sometimes attached to young Black individuals. He stated:

I'll make space for that, I will pave the way for folks. I will clear the way for folks as

much as I can, because at the end of the day, I want everybody to get that chance to show

that, hey they have so much more to offer than what their image communicates.

Marie shared a similar sentiment stating:

And it also plays a role as a resource for other people that they know. So, like, if they

know someone else who's interested in, you know, the social sciences, you know, talk to

her, she can help you out, she knows, you know, that path. So, like playing that mentor

role for other people that are just trying to figure it out.

Ebony, Lina, Jane, Christopher, and Marie all felt strongly about paying it forward as it

relates to mentorship and its ability to help others succeed. Mentorship was viewed from two

distinct lenses: one addressing the person, in the form of being a cheerleader and providing

emotional support or addressing the individual's past experiences based on their upbringing; the

other addressing the professional development by connecting the individual to career networks,

assisting with internships, providing opportunities to learn about a particular career industry, or

providing career advice. For some participants, their decision to address both personal and

professional issues within the realm of being mentored, was subjective and varied among

participants.

Theme 3: Identity is nuanced

The interviews revealed that identity for Black individuals is a complex and nuanced

issue. The discussions revealed the different experiences for Black people in the Western

hemisphere as relates to identity development and racial socialization. By exploring early

experiences surrounding race, culture, and ethnicity, participants were able to describe how their

personal identities were formed and viewed in professional spaces and society on a whole. To

understand the aforementioned factors, the following were important considerations: 1) early and formative experiences, 2) diasporic similarities and differences; and 3) identity development at various stages in life. This section explores how participants were first introduced to the concept of race and their recognition of being made to feel different among others; their identities based on families' place of origin and historical events; and how a sense of agency has been adopted in lieu of assimilation.

First experiences with racial awareness and socialization

Within the study, participants discussed how they were introduced to the concept of race. The concept or idea of race and how they made meaning of it was, for some, an experience or event occurring very early in their lives; for others, their experience surrounding race did not occur until much later. Throughout the interviews, it was evident that racial awareness and socialization was relative to their upbringing, considering past familial experiences, their community settings, and school environment. Participants' identities were also impacted based on a combination of historical time periods, group exclusion and/or inclusion. For instance, Jane, who grew up in a predominantly White, suburban community, never had the influence of seeing other Black teachers or individuals until early adulthood. Jane stated:

> I never had, I never had a Black teacher till college. There was one Black teacher in my high school, but I didn't have him. He was my advisor because he was a Black guy, but I didn't have his class. So, I think that would have been really powerful for me growing up if I'd had that to see like, oh, here's this Black woman and she's working at this great school when she's got this great education like maybe it's not so bad, like I can do that too.

For her, she discussed the missed opportunity of having a Black individual to aspire to, to connect with, and to learn from. In essence, her development and understanding of her Black identity was impacted. The opposite experience happened with Rashad-McKay, who spoke about his secondary education during the late 1980's to the mid 1990's. He stated:

> We definitely were raised to be proud to be Black. All of my teachers were Black teachers who had gone to Historically Black Colleges and Universities, who were part of Black Greek letter organizations and so like even in the classroom, you know, I would have teachers and who [would] be talking about Black history outside of February so it wasn't just like we waited for Black history month to talk about Black people.

As seen in the case of Jane and Rashad-McKay, they both had different experiences in their learning environments as it relates to being around Black teachers during their earlier years. Jane was raised in and around a predominantly White environment and Rashad-McKay was raised in an all-Black environment. Harmony, whose earliest recollection of race occurred in a classroom setting reflected, "I think the race piece kind of became more salient in high school around Junior year when I started to get 'pushed' because I was one of the 'good' performing Black kids." She emphasized being 'pushed' or encouraged more than others when compared to her Black peers who were not receiving the same level of attention. Harmony believes that the access to opportunities and assistance received in and outside of the classroom was not only connected to her being Black, but was a direct result of her academic proficiency. In this sense, Harmony felt tokenized and felt disheartened that her peers were not receiving equal attention. She further explained that not getting pregnant up until that point in high school, coupled with her academic achievements, was seen by administrators as a milestone and an achievement. She provided an example of feeling ostracized in the classroom by peers years later while in college:

> I remember sometimes feeling a little bit ostracized in the classroom until I got
>
> recognition from the professor. So, you know, sometimes it would be groups, or people
>
> would talk to each other because it was a small school, but I know in my English class, I
>
> felt undermined by my peers sometimes, until the professor started to read some of my
>
> writing and encouraged me publicly.

In reflecting on Harmony's first experiences surrounding racial awareness, the sentiments communicated in college made her feel 'different,' and began her understanding, to a certain degree, about being Black and different from her peers. Not only were racial awareness and socialization made clear in class, but there were experiences outside of the classroom that reaffirmed society's stereotype for Black individuals. In discussing her on campus job of washing pots in a cafeteria, she recalled how Black and Brown students were only offered campus jobs in the cafeteria serving mainly her peers:

> So, by washing pots you're essentially in service to your other peers. They have to eat and
>
> whose dishes are you washing, whose pots are you washing? And so, there was a
>
> dynamic there. I didn't know that I was poor and that experience magnified the disparities
>
> for myself and my peers. Because you might not, if you were in any kind of position of
>
> privilege to not take that job, you wouldn't take it that first year. But I was like, I need the
>
> money and so I'm gonna go and wash the pots the best that I could and wash these dishes.

Though Harmony's job was a necessity in terms of taking care of herself, it also highlighted the fact that her only option provided by the university for work-study students was to work in the cafeteria washing pots. For Harmony, she believed that this action by the university only reaffirmed how Black people were viewed by society and how subliminal messages about their

worth were communicated. While Jane and Harmony experienced racial awareness and

socialization at much later stages in their lives, it was different for others.

Roni shared his experience which occurred at some point during his elementary school

years. In his discussion, a friend's grandfather refused to let him enter their apartment and called

him a racial slur.

I went to his grandfather's house, his apartment one day, and his grandfather loved Pepsi.

And he [friend] was like, you know, can Roni have a Pepsi? "I'm not gonna let the N-

word in the house." I don't think I knew what that word was then, but the way he said it

in the tone, I knew it wasn't something good. I don't think I ever told my mother. I might

have told him [friend] as I got older, but I guess [I was] shocked. I thought he liked me.

That was my first experience with knowing that I was different in a sense to a White

person and that there was some difference in terms of our upbringing and you know, our

color.

Roni mentioned that he never spoke to his mom about the incident until much later. Instead, he

kept it to himself and as he got older, similar events would confirm his understanding of race and

specifically, the dichotomy of Black and White in America. Christopher vividly described his

first encounter as he stated, "when I was six, I was giving the Black talk. The first time I was

called the N-word was when I was eight by some dude named Billy. I beat him up, and got in

trouble." For Christopher, who was raised by twelve Black females, his introduction to the

construct of race and what it meant to be a Black male in America, was seen as a necessity. He

stated:

I grew up in a household with twelve Black women, specifically twelve Black creole

women from New Orleans, Louisiana. Most of them grew up in a time when they still

had colored water fountains. My grandmother was born in 1932, passed away in 2001.

My mom was born in 1963, so she was five years old when MLK was assassinated, she

actually saw the news, you know, coverage live. She was there when Malcolm X was

assassinated. She was there when JFK was assassinated. She saw all of these things. My

mother and my grandmother migrated from New Orleans to Las Vegas by car because

southern folk don't fly, that's their mindset. And then on top of that, they were actually

traveling to Nevada with an actual Green Book. And at that time, they had to drive all the

way around the state of Texas because they couldn't find any stops in Texas that were

safe for Black folks, specifically Black women.

The Green Book referenced by Christopher was a travel book created for Black people by Victor

H. Green during the 1940's, 50's, and 60's. This book had listings of travel lodges, gas stations,

and other services that were safe and provided services to Black people. Christopher recalls in a

vivid description, the experiences of his grandmother and mother as they navigated traveling in

the Jim Crow era. For Christopher, his racial awareness and socialization was understood by the

experiences of their family members. In explaining why his family gave him the 'Black talk' at

such an early stage, Christopher reflects the response a family member gave him, "Frankly, we're

trying to prepare you for war. You might get called the N-word with the Hard 'ER'. So, it was a

very interesting dynamic to navigate. I'm still trying to be a kid." Rashad-McKay recalled how

formative seeing and learning about the rich history of Black people and what that meant for

him:

I remember being a Black history champion for my grade, being ten years old, already

knowing who all these historical Black key figures in Black history were and knowing all

these things at ten. [It] definitely had a huge impact on how I saw myself because I

always knew, hey, I come from greatness. Let's do it in the home. It was encouraged in

school, it was encouraged and so I just always had that type of understanding of who I am

as a Black man in the home and in school.

Beyond the experiences in school, Rashad-McKay also recalled the influence he received from

his grandmother in affirming him as a Black person:

I believe in Christ, but Christ looks like you and me, not like that picture that they have

on that wall. So, I was always that kid where it was like, oh, yeah, I believe in Jesus but

not that White guy with long brown hair, I know that's not what it looks like.

Other participants had their first experiences with racial awareness and socialization

based on the environment or external experiences of their immediate family. Engage grew up in

a very diverse community with multiple ethnicities in his neighborhood. As an impressionable

teenager living in Newark, NJ during the sixties, Engage felt that he was heavily influenced by

the ideologies of the Black nationalist movement. In reflecting on how this shaped his views on

race, Engage stated:

I was really influenced by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King when I was fourteen. It

was funny because I think even in my behavior, I was kind of torn between both of them.

Sometimes, you know, it was kind of like a rebel but then again, I kind of want to be like

a peacemaker. I grew up in Newark and at the time, with a heavy Black nationalist

[movement] to it. I was kind of involved in that, you know, so, I was kind of torn

between those two worlds.

Similarly, Lina reflects on how she understood race and what it meant to be Black in America

through her father's challenges. Lina stated, "as long as I remember, my dad would tell us that

being Black is hard, being Black in America is difficult." For Lina, external societal factors that

affected her father filtered down to her exposure of being Black in America. She further reflected

on her father's experience of growing up in the South and what experiences came with being

Black during those periods:

> Being oppressed in his desire to start a business, he was not successful because he was a
>
> Black man. He was not afforded housing opportunities. He wasn't afforded a place to rent
>
> to run his store. We had to be creative in selling meat out of his van because nobody
>
> would rent to him in the 1970s, in the Philadelphia area. So, what my dad did, he created
>
> this business called 'Let's *meat* at your door'.

In Lina's story, it was evident that her experiences were indirectly understood through the

experiences of her father, "There's so many limitations of Black people, especially Black men.

So, my identity as a Black woman, more specifically a Black person, has been a part of me since

a very young age." Mikayla shared that her full understanding of race was towards the end of

high school. She explains that her mother would make very vague, but suggestive statements

throughout her childhood, never fully stating her true meaning:

> I used to run track, and I used to play the violin, and when I used to either practice
>
> running or practice playing my mom would say things like, "you know, you have to go
>
> above and beyond." And I would say, "why?" She would always reinforce, [to do] extra,
>
> be more [others] and I'm like, why, what is it, what is that about? She would say, "Well,
>
> you know, when you get out into the real world, you'll understand." But I get what she
>
> was saying. It was because of who you are [Black] we want you to be confident in who
>
> you are, but because of who you are, you are going to have to show up in kind of like this
>
> extra ability, because of who else is out there.

For Mikayla, her introduction to race was viewed as what she had to do as an individual and less about societal structures or inequality. She shared, "that was kind of my first introduction to race, my introduction to differences, like systemic differences in race was about the extra work I had to do, it was never about solving systemic inequalities." This 'extra' work that Mikayla discussed was a means of overcoming any inequities in society due to structural barriers faced by Black people.

Broad range of identities, ethnicity, and cultural awareness

The study included participants who were born in the United States, but of immigrant parents from the Caribbean or continental Africa; individuals born in the Caribbean who migrated to America at a very young age; and those who were born here and were descendants of enslaved Africans. Wisdom shared, "growing up I identified as Black, African American. It's of recent that I've been really exploring what does it mean to be Black, African American, and to identify as such, and so um, I haven't arrived anywhere yet." For Wisdom, who was born and raised in America, she has become more aware of the construct surrounding race and has begun to question its meaning for her. "I do know that, I'm understanding from education, that race is a social construct, and so I'm learning and exploring how to self-determine, how to identify who I am without somebody telling me who I am." Harmony, who was born in America to Haitian parents, reflected on her identity:

> I think Black comes to mind, because I do feel like it is a unifying term in my mind. But also, because I don't identify it, you know, I'm okay with like, I'm not offended by being called African American, but I don't really identify as African American.

Harmony's sentiment captured how difficult it is for people within various diasporic communities. Though she was born in America, her experience of growing up in and around a

tight-knit Haitian community has shaped her identity. Additionally, being excluded from one group forced her to identify with another.

> The Haitian American piece, if I were asked for that cultural piece, I would say that first, but I'm okay if someone said Caribbean American or something like that. But because I've lived in Haiti and America, I think the Americans make it very clear that you're not American when you have any other cultural context or background.

For Harmony, being excluded from the "American" identity resulted in her adopting the Haitian identity more often than not. For others, how they identify is dynamic and situational. Christopher shared his experience stating:

> For me, it depends on the circumstance. So, like, when I'm filling out a job application, and it's asking for all those like, identifying questions, I don't even answer because I'm like, why do we still have to answer these questions? You know, for a job. If it doesn't matter, then why do you ask? So, those questions I don't I just don't even answer but now if it's somebody asking us those questions, and I have to fill it out, I put Black. I'll just put Black because at the end of the day the first thing that people will see when they look at me, [is that] I am Black.

Mikayla shared a similar sentiment to Christopher in how she identifies, "The why for me behind Black is I may not always have time to explain to someone the roots, so I identify what they see me as right away without me having to open my mouth." For Engage, his identity has changed over the years based on the historical period and his own growth. He explained how he identified during the period when he was heavily influenced by the Black nationalist movement:

> I went through these phases because of the things I was into politically. When I was in college I was a heavy Black nationalist and hanging out with people from the Nation of

Islam and at that time I was probably an African American, then I became a Black

American, but as I've gotten older, I'm like, my people have made significant

contributions to this nation. I speak English, everything I do is American, you know, in

terms of my outlook, the things that I value are American, I have an American flag sitting

behind my desk. If you would have met me twenty years ago, there's no way I would

have had an American flag.

Engage provided examples of how outside influences can shape your ideology and effectively,

how one identifies. Engage described his evolution and how his knowledge of his ancestors and

current Black individuals contribute to American society. Engage is, in a sense, reclaiming his

right to be an American and not a hyphenated American, i.e. Black-American or African-

American. He explained why he identified as Black American at one period:

Identifying as a Black American, it's just really recognizing my historical and cultural

roots in America. When I say I'm a Black American, I'm not rejecting the African

American part, the African part of me, Africanism. But when I say Black American, I

think for me, I have a specific definition for that. So, for me, a Black American is a

person who has southern roots, right. You know, their family comes from the south, they

migrated north, and they're Black, then you could be a Jamaican person or a Nigerian

person and still do that. But I mean, traditionally, like, my grandparents were slaves, you

know, and that's the other component to it. For me, it means that I'm a descendant from

American slaves.

In explaining his use of both Black American and African American, he shared:

I think they're the same or interchangeable. I think a person could be an African

American and a Black American as well. You know, I mean, so for example, my

daughter you know, she identifies as an African American. You know, I think because it's

a much more popular nuanced term, and I think Black has such a negative connotation. I

think African American has a better connotation in some people's minds than a Black

American. And for me, you know, I'm saying, well, you know, I am an African

descended person, but the Black American part is I'm an American. Now, I see myself as

just an American. Just happen to be a Black person descended from Africa.

In his current view, Engage identifies as American. He explained, "when people say I'm not an

American, I think you're giving other people fodder to, you know, to view you as not an

American, to say you don't belong. I belong in America." Engage described the complex and

evolving identity that he and others may share. Roni also went through phases of his identity

based on historical climate, "I never really liked the term Black because my skin is not Black,

I'm not actually Black. To me Black is a color and to me that doesn't seem like a race. Black is

not a race to me." Roni also felt conflicted about being forced to identify as 'Black' on

applications, while identifying with 'African American'. He discussed this view:

I always felt like African American was the politically correct term. I always interchange

the two of them but then as you grow up and you learn that you know, there is little bit of

a difference between the two and everything. So, I guess I identify more with African

American, but obviously, you know, applications and things you always see like those are

interchangeable, which, to me, they're not but you know you have Black or you have

African American.

Although Roni prefers to be called African American, recent events within society have shifted

his view:

> I think with everything that's been going on in the last few years, it's been more prevalent,
>
> I guess, to gravitate towards being Black and considered Black. So, then I felt like I
>
> started identifying more with that as opposed to making it more politically correct in
>
> saying African American. So, I've been in a weird space around in terms of what I should
>
> identify as.

Jane, who identifies as African American, has parents who immigrated from Ghana. For her, she

did recognize how individuals who identify with their country of origin, mainly immigrants, are

lumped into one category in mainstream society. She explained an interaction with a roommate

who is from Trinidad and Tobago:

> I didn't always pick up on it until maybe high school. I had a roommate who was from
>
> Trinidad and Tobago, and I was like, wait, but she's, she isn't African American. Like
>
> people would call her African American just based on how she looks but she's not
>
> African. I realized that that's kind of a messed up term, but like, why do they [White
>
> people] call all of us African American when a lot of us are not and don't identify that
>
> way?

For her, Jane, she acknowledged being able to connect her roots to Africa directly through her

parents as a privilege in comparison to descendants of enslaved Africans in America who are not

able to do so, "So even just being able to be like, oh, yeah, this box [African American] is what I

am, was almost like a privilege as I am actually African. I very much associate with that part of

my identity."

The classification challenge is not new. It has been an issue that has faced many Black

individuals in their personal and professional lives and even more so in contemporary America.

As described by participants, the manner in which they ascribe to an identity is dynamic and

changes based on context. Lina described how her husband identifies, "He identifies as Black, but as West Indian. He does not identify as African American. He doesn't identify as American, even though he's an American citizen."

Though the experiences of the participants have unequivocally shaped how they self-identify, there are shared experiences. Mikayla in making that point, shared:

If a cop stops me, he doesn't care where I was born, he doesn't care where mom and dad were born. He doesn't care where the diaspora dropped us off. A Nigerian man, a Ghanaian man, somebody from Sierra-Leone, somebody from Jamaica and Trinidad, could all have the same experiences, and we cannot then come back to our community and say, oh, no, yours was different. We [diasporic communities] might look at them differently because of our upbringing, because where we were born, but we're having a very similar experience in this country.

Christopher, in his explanation for understanding Black people stated:

Blackness is so broad and nebulous so you cannot confine it to six or seven different terms. It's gonna be different everywhere you go and that's part of the reality, it is part of the challenge that other folks have when trying to understand Blackness and Black identity.

In addition to the complexity of identity, is the concept of identifying as one's nationality as opposed to race. Christopher stated, "depending on where you do go overseas, they will look at your nationality before race as opposed to the United States where we look at race before nationality." Christopher provides a memory of a friend who he identifies as being Black, whereas she identifies as German: "I'm German. I was like, girl, you are Black. She was just like Christopher, this might be an American thing, but I'm German. If you come to my home country,

they're going to say Shantae is German." Christopher shared the sentiment that each individual

may have a different preference:

> I like to tell people like you can say Black, you can say African American. At the end of
> the day, everyone's gonna have a different preference. But just also understand that this is
> why we have to be understanding of the nuances of race, ethnicity, and also national
> nationality.

For Christopher, such nuances can play out in not only how he is seen by colleagues, but how

they approach solving situations related to individuals who look, visibly, Black, but have other

intersecting identities. Christopher explained his frustration with being asked to speak to 'Black'

students vs. speaking to students who have a completely different identity beyond the Black or

African American vernacular used in many institutions and organizations:

> I'm not gonna go talk to my 'Black' students, because you want to talk to specific folks
> and just like if you have an issue or concerns about you know, things going on in Ghana,
> I need to go talk to my students that are Ghanaian. They don't see themselves as Black.
> They see themselves as Ghanaian or Nigerian, or, you know, Jamaican, or Trinidadian.

Aida, born in America to Jamaican parents commented, "they would say oh, 'you nuh born a

Jamaica, ya yankee, yankee, (you're not born in Jamaica, you're American), you're a Yankee.' I'll

get that. Yeah, yankee, yankee, like, honestly, I had to prove myself to the Jamaican

community." Marie, born in America to Haitian parents reflected, "I've always only identified as

Haitian. I don't even identify as Haitian American. I will say Black woman when I'm discussing,

like my intersection of identities, but I make it very clear, I'm Haitian." Marie pointedly

addressed how her Caribbean identity is being dismissed, "I'm Haitian, but born in America,

Haitian but born in New Jersey, but it's hard for me to like even, when I have to use African

American I feel like it dismisses my identity with being Caribbean descent." Nubie, who was

born in America to Ghanaian parents stated, "I identify as African I think because my African

tradition and culture is what I feel I identify with the most." In reflecting on his cultural identity

as derived from the homeland of his parents, Nubie shared his view:

> It doesn't, doesn't negate me growing up as an African American because I also identify
>
> with that. The community values [of] families, that's one of the driving forces for me in
>
> the western culture. We're very, very individualistic here [America], and I recognize that,
>
> but I don't identify with that. And that's very problematic. When I took a step back and
>
> reflected on it, it was my African traditional values [that I identify with].

Nubie and other participants recognized how their cultural upbringing and values differed from

the traditional American experiences. For instance, he shared, "food wise, you know, what we

consider African cuisines as opposed to American burgers and fries, are frowned upon, like

McDonald's." Marie shares her version of not wanting her mom to cook certain foods as a way

of avoiding having to explain her cultural side recalled:

> When I think about the food part, like, you know, preparing my mom in advance, like,
>
> you know Kimberly's coming over [so] just put some chips out, nothing else because
>
> they're like, what is that smell when they walk in your house.

Some of the other cultural differences had to do with behavior displayed and interaction with

parents. Jon, whose mom immigrated from Jamaica, shares his experience with rules enforced

that were the complete opposite for friends. Describing the rule of 'not being allowed in into his

mother's room he reflected, "And I watched some of my Black American friends. Oh, 'you don't

have to take your shoes off? Or I'm just going to my mom's room to grab this real quick', and I

just would shriek." Nubie shared a similar experience in observing how different his friends behaved with their parents:

> In our culture disrespect is really big. I can never understand how I see some of my friends, you know, calling their parents out of their first name or calling them a name. Like I just, I can never think about, like, you guys are still alive? I wouldn't be here to tell a story.

> Participants discussed a range of experiences that were formative in how their identities were developed, understood, and at times, excluded. While they understood that their identity was important to be recognized, they also realized that the American system they operate in is not truly educated on how best to acknowledge each person in terms of their identity. Participants appeared to accept a both/and situation as opposed to an either/or in the general sense. Participants all appeared to accept and sometimes grapple with the phenomena of 'two-ness' exposed by Du Bois in the early twentieth century. Two-ness refers to how Black people in America saw themselves--in one sense, an African American, and in another sense an American.

Authentic self, name and image

Some responses from participants demonstrated the significance of a name, their self-image and expression, and being authentically themselves. In this section, participants discussed experiences that made them very conscious of their self-image as a Black person. Some spoke about being discriminated against based on their appearance, how their name affected their interactions within society and how they rejected, at times, the need to assimilate. These experiences had a profound impact on participants, shaping how they made meaning of their self-image or perception others may hold about them.

For instance, Harmony described how hair has been and continues to be a point of contention and focus. She discussed her experience in the workplace based on having hair that is locked, referred to as locks, "I'm conscious of the fact that I am Black, and that the world does not really favor me as a Black woman and I think that, you know, there's little acts of resistance that I decided to take." For Harmony, having locks is embracing who she is as a Black person and individual. She further stated, "that's something that, you know, to me is very tied to my Black identity. Aida, who also has locks, describes showing up to an apartment she had verbally agreed to rent before she began her college tenure:

> We went to the woman's house that we were supposed to be renting from and, [being a] young kid, dreadlocks and a time when no one had locks, it was socially unacceptable. And I pulled up and you know, my dad's a Rastafari, so he had locks as well. We pull up at the door and I go to the door and I ring the doorbell and the woman doesn't answer the door. And then a little girl comes downstairs that could not have been more than five and says, 'I'm sorry my mom's not home and the apartment has already been rented.'

In that example, Aida's sentiment is that her identity - of being Black with dreadlocks - was the basis for the sudden change. She contemplated and pondered as to why the owner would not explain herself, or explain what had suddenly changed. This reflection by Aida is illustrative of early experiences with BFPs' identity in predominantly White spaces. Aida's understanding of how she was treated in society was also based on direct sentiments shared by teachers while in college. She stated, "I remember taking, like a Career Achievement class and I had to argue a grade that I got, because I did all the work." According to Aida, both teachers, one African American and the other Caucasian explained the reason for her grade, "They said because of how I *appeared* when I came to class." Aida eventually got her grade changed after advocating for

herself and making the point that her White counterparts came to class in relaxed clothing, no different from hers. In this experience, the message was being sent that her appearance, locks in particular, was a problem. Rashad-McKay, in reflecting on his decision to lock his hair placed the issue back on others:

> I was always aware, even in those moments, that image is going to be something I have to deal with. So when it came time to graduate and start looking for a job there were times when people wanted me to cut my hair and it's like no, because at the end of the day, my understanding of things is, if who I am, in terms of what I look like, is something that is 'too Black' for you, or 'too ethnic' for you, that means that you have an issue, an underlying issue with Black people.

Rashad-McKay had another experience in terms of his image and how casual the stereotypes that are held by others are revealed. He reflected on a teacher who openly states his dislike for individuals with tattoos. He recalled the teacher commenting, "I have my biases for people who have tattoos. Take Rashad-McKay, for example, he has his tattoos on his hand so when he came in I thought, like oh gosh, what is he going to contribute to the class." Such stories were constant throughout his career and for many others who experience explicit and implicit biases, microaggressions, and various forms of discriminatory behaviors. For Wisdom, she added to this discussion by speaking about being a full figured woman. "So, it's not just me being a Black woman and how I show up with my hair and my clothing, but it's also my stature. Like, I'm a full figured woman." For her, how she presents in total, is a part of her identity. "I'm not shy, I'm vocal, I have boundaries, I'm expressive around those boundaries, and so that pushes people back, like because really, I should be quiet. Oh, I'm a big woman taking up too much space literally and figuratively."

Beyond hair, a few participants commented on their names and the impact that can have on how they are viewed in society and their places of work. Ebony, whose name is based on a country on the continent of Africa stated, "I know that my name always introduces my race before I enter the room. There is no denying." For her, finding a sense of agency while embracing her name and its perception is powerful for her. "I have learned to find power in it. When you walk into that space and then you speak there are some myths that others may have had about you just because [of] what they assumed your name would bring with it." Aida, whose name is Muslim-based expressed how the events of September 11, 2001, shaped her experiences. "It was hard. I mean, my name is Aida X. if you hear anything like that, and my first name was Muslim, [then] 911 happens and like nobody even looks at my resume. That's how I felt at least." While she admits that these were just her feelings, it was hard to ignore her collective experiences that compound time after time.

Christopher, in his opinion, has the opposite experience based on having a name that is easy to pronounce and does not fit any negative stereotype. He explained, "I know for a fact I've gotten certain jobs over certain people that are way more qualified because I have a name that was easier to say. I haven't had as many struggles as some who have experienced microaggressions." As revealed by Christopher, a name can have significant implications for those who identify as Black and how they navigate their careers. "My real name, it's a culturally ambiguous name, one could even say that my name is very White-centric, to times where people have assumed that I was White, just from looking at the name and my email signature. Christopher questions this lack of acceptance for the full meaning of being Black and Black identity. He stated, "why aren't we being more receptive and inclusive to people that have locks or have braids, and have Afrocentric names? At the end of the day, it's a part of the culture."

Roni, in his experience, describes changing his clothes and vernacular at times to avoid

stereotypes faced by Black males. He reflected, "so I think that changed the dynamic on how I

would act or be so I wouldn't be perceived as that typical stereotypical Black guy who's like,

ghetto in their eyes." For Roni, his behavior appears to be from a place of avoidance, one where

he needed to adjust as a means of not standing out or fitting the 'stereotype' held for young

Black males in his view.

 Beyond the issues and experiences connected to a name and how one physically appears,

there was a sentiment of being one's authentic self. This authenticity for participants, meant

being true to oneself, being comfortable with yourself as is, and seemed to be more about

showing up and presenting as yourself coupled with a complete rejection of needing to

assimilate. Harmony shared this sentiment, explaining:

> The reality of being Black in America sometimes feels like you should conform to what
>
> the standard of beauty is, you know, and I'm not sure that even if I tried, I could, but I
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> don't want to either, and so I think that's where I've arrived, you know, it's not even trying
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> to.

Rashad-McKay described his feeling of being himself as he stated, "I just got to remain true to

who I am, so even for me to get to where I am professionally like, I do take pride in that I got to

this place and being a director being myself." Rashad-McKay confidently stated, "I love my

dreads and do I want to keep them? Yes. Do I wear sneakers with my suits? Yes. Is this tattoo

stain on my hand? Yes". For Rashad-McKay, his thought process for those who are focused on

his physical image and identity is:

> If you're willing to ignore what I can bring to the table, because of a tattoo on my hand,
>
> that's your loss. If you're willing for your students to miss out on having great leadership

and what causes great leadership because all you can focus on is my dreads, that's your

loss. Once you have discovered who you are and who you are not, now you have to

operate in that authenticity, and not be afraid to do it.

Mikayla discussed the questions that may come from being one's authentic self. However, she

believes that the message being sent to others is worth it in the end:

If you don't want to deal with those questions, you assimilate. You're like, okay, let me

just wear my hair like this so that there won't be any questions. Because I'm an outspoken

person, and I kind of just answer things in a way that nobody will ask me again. I'm just

like, okay, the goal of being authentically myself, and liking the hairstyle that I have and

going to work every day and being a representation to other Black women who want to

be authentically themselves, that goal and the good of that goal outweighs the questions.

The participants were able to reflect on specific experiences and day-to-day lived experiences

that encompass their identities. They reflected and discussed how name, image, being

themselves, and at times, vernacular, affect how they may *show up* in their daily work lives.

Important for them all, was being or getting to a place where they could be their authentic self

and representative for those following behind. Given that self-identity for Black people has been

imposed upon them since being taken against their will and brought across the Atlantic Ocean;

thus, having autonomy over that process appeared to be significant for participants.

Theme 4: Upward mobility

Family relationships: disenfranchised feelings and experiences

For these participants, the changes related to upward mobility began with college and

shaped relationships from that point on. They described how their educational journey had an

inverse cost attached with disenfranchised feelings. These feelings were unacknowledged or

unrecognized by family members and society in general. While they were able to articulate these experiences, they were oftentimes hidden or not revealed to family members or friends within their networks. Any changes in their relationship with family and friends that occurred, beginning mainly during the college years, carried on into their current professional lives.

In describing feeling like an outsider in her family, Ebony stated, "sometimes it makes you feel like an outsider, you come home and then you do begin to feel like you're out of place, like you don't fit in your home country." For Ebony, she had the intuition very early that there would be a separation within her family. She reflected on what her aunt would say, "Our entire growing up she would tell us you, your leaving, you're going to school at eighteen, but it felt like a separation from our family." In describing the change in relationship with her family since college and thereafter, Ebony reflected, "I lost a part of my core nuclear family and there's some of that you just can't get back. And when I say loss, they're still there, but that relational bond that was there, can't get that back." Christopher shared a story of how his college years exposed him to different ways of doing things and how that caused a tension between him and his mother. "I went to Outback Steakhouse with my mom, and she's like, we'll have two steaks. Well done, I'm just like actually, can I get medium. She's like, who the fuck is you, I thought I taught you better than that." Christopher in reflecting on his relationship with his mother stated, "It was not simple for her at all. I started realizing like there's, there's a lot of dissonance and resistance and tension between my mother and I." In this story, Christopher stated that simple or subtle changes in his behavior, things he ascribed to or his way of thinking, began this shift in the relationship with his mother. In describing the relationship with his sister at that point in time, he recalls her saying, "Christopher, when I talk to you. I'm not talking to my brother." This statement by his sister was a result of him having new responsibilities that were foreign to his sister and what she

was accustomed to. Since that period however, Christopher stated that his relationship with his

family has gotten much better as furthered his professional career, and the person who he has

grown into, is now fully accepted and understood.

> The relationship is much better and I think it was so strained in the past because there
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> was growing pains. They were trying to really get used to this paradigm shift, right? They
>
> were trying to get used to me saying shit like paradigm shift. So, yeah, you know, but
>
> nowadays, it's, it's been normalized, you know, to the point where it's now part of our
>
> family dynamic.

Christopher further stated that it took well over a year for his family to adjust to his new lifestyle,

his work responsibilities, and how he had developed into the person they were now seeing.

Ebony mentions that her husband has a terminal degree and that his family was very

explicit in sharing their feelings about how he has changed. "They also come from the same

impoverished neighborhood and have just flat out told him that he's changed. He's no longer the

same person and I answer yes. You don't go through a PhD journey and not change." For her, she

says that attaining a terminal degree comes at a cost. "But they come with a true cost, really, they

do. There is an inverse cost there." The feeling that is described by Ebony is shared by other

participants. Lina stated, "I kind of internalized that, like I don't talk about my accomplishments

around my family. I don't do that because I feel like they think I'm better. And I'm not. You

know, I think they think that I'm better." Wisdom shared her perception of how her family reacts

to her educational attainment. "Be educated with the world, not with me, okay. So, they actually

want you to come back, like in a disjointed way." Wisdom is describing how the new parts of her

would need to be hidden or shut off when around family. She further stated, "it's pretty much, it's

a love-hate. They're excited that they can see they have a cousin that has a doctorate, but just

don't bring all your education to me." John shared how he adjusts himself and is fully aware of

how his accomplishments may cause tension. "I've never switched up and it almost dumbed

down who I am around my family to make sure they feel comfortable." For Roni, he shared:

> I think I always felt there was like, a tension there in terms of like the larger family group
>
> in terms of, you know, what are you doing, how well are you doing? So, I kind of always
>
> felt that so I don't know if that was something internally or it was actually, you know,
>
> relevant there. But I always kind of felt that guilt a little bit in terms of doing so well.

Ebony shared another sentiment of beginning to feel disconnected from her family:

> You have this dichotomy of who you are and these different facets. And one [choice] you
>
> clearly see will lead you down one path and the other is fun, and great and amazing, this
>
> is where your family and friends are living. But you see that that's not your journey.
>
> That's not your trajectory and you become stronger, but it can be conflicting as you start
>
> to separate.

Roni, John, Ebony, Christopher, and Wisdom all shared a similar sentiment in that their

trajectories have been different from their families. This has resulted in their outlook and

perspectives also being different from that of their family members. For these participants, this

resulted in a variety of unaccounted or hidden feelings.

Loss and changes in personal relationships

In discussing things that they considered losses, participants shared examples of family

relationships that are no longer close. It should be noted that some participants discussed *friends*

under the umbrella of family - confirming the concept of fictive kin in African culture. Fictive

kin are individuals who are not biologically related, but are viewed and treated as family

members. Wisdom reflected, "So, I would say in terms of the loss, I lost in the sense of human

capital because I was no longer understood by my family." Nubie stated, "when I describe loss, it's one of those things where you know, if things were in a perfect world, you'd want to still have those relationships, but unfortunately, or fortunately, you no longer have those relationships." Engage added a similar feeling when he stated, "it was kind of a loss when I started to see, like, the direction in my closest friends, the direction their lives went into and the direction my life went into." For Engage, his discussion of loss was not exclusive to biological family members, but was inclusive of *friends* -- fictive kin -- and demonstrated the extended nature of family in Black communities. Lina shared a similar sentiment, "My brothers, specifically because of where they are in their own world. Me going after my education, on some level, may have been divisive, or may have been like a reason why we separated." Jane discussed her trajectory being different and defines it as missed opportunities. "When I left, we just took, very different, different routes in life. So, I think some of those earlier relationships I count as kind of missed opportunities." Wisdom shared a similar sentiment in trying to make meaning of why there was a change in the relationship with some family members. She stated:

> There was a push back in terms of relationships. Like 'you think you know everything'. And so, when people put that on you it's hard to relate, it's hard to connect, right? And because they know that you come from the same space they come from, it begins to put a mirror -- could they have done more? 'How did you get to go into that?' It's a reflection of them, but it's also a loss. It's a loss because it was a relationship that once existed and you're no longer like that.

The sentiment that relationships changed or evolved was a theme for many participants. Mikayla recalled, "my circle has gotten a lot smaller. My circle has gotten a lot smaller. I think there's been an evolution in terms of where I spent, how I spend my time." In this sense, Mikayla's

sentiments include two viewpoints: one about the act of separation and *letting go* of relationships that no longer served her well; the other concerned with continued investment in oneself, equating to less time with family members or friends from childhood. The latter point highlights one of the outcomes based on the path taken by participants --an indefinite status where the individual may have an attitude or disposition of continued improvement. For Christopher, the reason for some of those circles changing was attributed to a lack of growth. He stated:

> There are some people that you know, I love them to death and I surely do wish them well. It's just that when I see them, all I see is the same person that was in the same thing fifteen years ago. You know, where's the growth with maturity? Where's the development?

Rashad-McKay had a similar view when he stated, "I had to learn to let go of relationships that were not going to suit me and be impactful." Wisdom added to the sentiment of being separated, disconnected or different from family members, "I'm talking about separation, and so now I'm an expert and now I'm separate from my people as opposed to being more connected, as opposed to bringing more people in, like I'm deemed as [being] on a pedestal."

> For Wisdom, the inverse cost of education can be the loss or separation from family members. She also discussed the opportunity cost for her as a Black woman:

> As a Black woman, I'm experiencing the ladder of education, and education being pushed, we're not taught that we can have it all. We're not taught that you can be highly educated and be married and have children. We're not taught the both/and, we're taught the either/or.

Aida discussed how her education journey contributed to her divorce. She shared, "we have been married for about five years and it caused a big wreck when I decided to go back to school."

Additionally, she shared that there may have been some financial insecurity in her relationship. "Well, it was always a thing and because I was making probably twice his salary that also became a big issue. If you bring it in on a relationship level, people are intimidated."

For participants, learning to let go of certain relationships was a necessity; for others, learning to be comfortable with their new relationship role has been helpful. All participants recognized how their relationship with family has changed and evolved with time. Beyond the various forms of loss and changes in family relationships for participants, there were recognizable and tangible gains as a result of their upward mobility.

Gains due to educational attainment

It was clear that participants' education attainment was an important journey that disrupted their individual and family lives. All participants described some of their noticeable gains related to educational and career success. Many reflected on the journey and how it helped them become the person who they always felt they were; some reflected on the financial benefits, some spoke about being a resource for others in their family and communities; and some discussed how education and their careers were used as tools for creating and sustaining change in their communities.

For Lina, her education and career journey reflect and affirms herself as an individual. In reflection on what she has gained from her education and career thus far, she shared, "oh gosh, my whole life. Who I am today is a product of me going to college. I'm worldly, right I am beyond the parameters of where I was born and blessed to have traveled all over the world." For her, she connected her earlier years to where she is currently. "I've always known to be curious and asking questions and seeking clarification. When I got to the doc level, it affirmed who I was. I found my identity at that level. I found [out] like, who I am is okay." Engage shared a

similar sentiment in becoming who is today. He stated, "the biggest gain for me is that I think I

became the person that I always wanted to be. If I hadn't gone through the struggles or received

the education that I did, I wouldn't be the same person." Both Lina and Engage described how

their education and career journeys have fulfilled their need to self-actualize. For Harmony, she

had a personal goal, an innate desire to accomplish something that had never before been

accomplished in her family. She stated:

> I think it's like a reawakening. I wanted to do it for me, like I wanted to, to learn
>
> something new. I wanted to be able to do research that I think needed to be done. If it
>
> leads to professional advancement, that's great. But that wasn't my primary objective.

Beyond the personal, intrinsic meaning that educational attainment had on their lives,

there were stories about being a resource for their families and communities. Aida stated, "I

gained the ability to be the sounding board of my family. I think that if I didn't have this

education, or you had you know, this level of schooling or I wouldn't be able to help my

community." Roni shared, "family members may reach out to me and ask me like, oh, well, you

know, so and so's going to college. What should they do? What are the steps?" Roni feels that he

can be a resource now as opposed to the one who is 'different' in the family. During his college

years and earlier in his career, Roni felt more tension with family than he does currently. "I'm a

resource as opposed to well, you know, we won't go to him because like, you know, he's going to

show off or whatever, let's go to him because he's the only one that's done it."

Most participants also mentioned the financial gains or freedom that came with

educational attainment and career success. John stated, "I gained my own independence, my own

sense of financial freedom. The older I get the more I understand the importance of strong,

strong values." Ebony echoed a similar sentiment relating to financial gains, "Financial

independence, a different lifestyle, a different bracket, a different you know, all of these things."

Nubie compared his financial gains compared to his parents, "So the economic situation is, you

know, three times better than what my parents was." Mikayla stated, "I am able to kind of decide

what I want to do with my money, you know, take risks right now, make big investments if I

want, travel, it's kind of led me to a place where I am not struggling with money. I'm

comfortable." Rashad-McKay highlighted the dichotomy of two varied worlds; the route he took

vs. the one he could have taken based on his environment. He reflected on his financial gains

stating:

> Financial gains. You know, to make money legally without ever having to look over your
>
> shoulder or ever go to jail. Knowing that I don't ever have to worry about being taken
>
> away from my kids for giving them this lifestyle. So, for me, there's comfort, peace and
>
> security.

Marie talked about not being a burden or worry for her family. "I think that gain is like, you

know, my family not having to worry about me, not having to rely on them financially, like

being able to do things on my own." Mikayla, while acknowledging the financial gains,

discussed expansion of her network. "The education I think, really contributed to not only my

network and who's around me, who I can go to ask questions, who's supportive of me, who can

help me find other roles, board appointments, all of those things." Similarly, Christopher stated,

"I definitely have gained a lot of connections and I've gained an extensive network and I gained a

better sense of reality in terms of who was meant to have access to me who was not." Rashad-

McKay shared his gains in terms of human or social capital. "The people I met in college, that

are still my friends, are still my support system. We're in each other's weddings, we're godparents

to each other's kids, we're starting businesses and ventures together." For most participants, their

family's economic situation was vastly different during their upbringing compared to their

present financial status.

One of the other main sentiments shared by a few participants was the idea of being able

to use their academic and career success as a tool. Mikayla talked about holding individuals

accountable and the agency she has enacted due to her role:

> I think the PhD has shifted. Basically, it shifted purpose over time, right. In the
>
> beginning, I needed it for what I wanted. Yeah, I can work at Merck or Pfizer doing drug
>
> research without a PhD, but as I grew and as my career priorities changed, I'm not using
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> it so much as a 'need', now I'm using it as a tool or mechanism to create accountability of
>
> some assumptions.

Lina shared a similar sentiment as she reflects on her role in a predominantly White space

requiring her to also hold individuals accountable for their actions. She stated, "this doctorate is

bigger than me, I needed to have it to do the work that I'm doing." This sense of using their

credentials and career success was further echoed by Wisdom. She reflected:

> And so, for me, it means that I get to go back to the community that I came from and be a
>
> person at the table. It means that I get to say, not just from an expert from the books, but
>
> experientially, I've journeyed with you, in terms of experience and academic wise, and
>
> marrying the two and coming at the table where, you can perceive me as the expert
>
> through the experience, and the expert through the academic, and I can sit at the table.

For all participants, what they have gained as a result of their academic and career

endeavors far outweigh any losses or sacrifices that were experienced along the way. They are in

a very different situation compared to their upbringing and with that, there are some changes in

relationships. The gains described involved the more tangible outcomes, such as finances;

however, there were intangible experiences, described as losses or feelings that were unaccounted for or disenfranchised. There was certainly an understanding or acknowledgement of an *opportunity cost* for their achievement of upward mobility; however, participants did not indicate or suggest that their decision was wrong. Rather, it was seen as a necessity for themselves, and in some cases, for the greater good of their community.

Theme 5: Motivating factors for success

While the definition and meaning of success can be relative to the individual, there were some similarities and consistencies with participants. For some, stability and being able to live harmoniously, financially stable, and without certain restrictions, were discussed as part of the definition of success. As discussed by the participants, the drive to be successful began at home, with family members setting expectations. Outside of the home, there were events or experiences that influenced their trajectories for academic and career success. These are discussed in the following sections.

Fulfilling family expectations, desires, and dreams

Participants' early impressions of success were linked to educational expectations received from family members. The environment and family culture were discussed as factors that contributed to the kinds of messaging received. Participants grew up in three kinds of environments: urban, suburban, or rural - Nine from urban, three from suburban, two from both urban and suburban, and one from rural environments. Throughout the interviews, it was observed that environment type, i.e. urban vs. suburban/rural, affected the messaging provided by parents or caregivers. For instance, those in urban areas received specific and clear guidance related to options beyond high school; conversely, those who grew up in suburban or rural areas

had less emphasis placed on pathways beyond high school and into careers or self-sustaining occupations. A few participants explained some of those messages. Wisdom stated:

> Education in my family equated to success. And so, if you wanted to access success, then you will get educated. I wasn't really given the option. The option was college bound. So, there was really no other no other alternative. I was going to college. I understood it, it was accepted.

Wisdom grew up in both urban and suburban environments. Her family had moved from a predominantly Black and urban area to a predominantly White and more suburban area. In reflecting on the messages communicated to her and her sibling she stated, "I understood it as a standard of excellence. And so, like we could not come in, I cannot come, my sister and I could not come in the house with anything less than a B." For Wisdom, leaving the urban area equated to less violence, drugs, or any potentially negative experiences occurring within that environment; however, moving to the suburban environment meant a different kind of experience - one that presented new issues surrounding race. Jane shared her sentiments of expectations from her parents who left Ghana for America:

> Growing up that was always like, number one, number one for my parents. Most likely as a result of them, you know, pretty much sacrificing their higher education coming here with the intent of making sure that you know, we could do better and to them, an education was kind of the main way to get ahead.

For Jane, 'getting ahead' as she described, was part of being successful and education was the route to that success. She described her parents' reasons or sacrifices in some of the decisions they made during her childhood:

> They were very aware that you know, as a Black person you're gonna have to do a lot
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> more to have those doors open for you, which I think is why the tradeoff sending us to
>
> boarding school was worth it.

She believed that her parents' decisions were directly connected to the outcomes and

expectations they had for her and her siblings. "I think that's absolutely where that comes from,

just the perception that this is how things are here. Like that's what you really need for like, true

success and stability." For other participants, there were very explicit expectations

communicated throughout their upbringing. Aida reflected on her parents' expectations as she

stated, "they wanted more for us from the gate. We knew that they wanted more than they have

for themselves. They were very strict in saying no school, no work, no housing." John shared a

similar memory of his mom's expectations when he stated, "school, trade, job, military, and she

gave you these early on. I've been hearing those since I was ten." Rashad-McKay knew from an

early age what he was allowed to participate in and what he was forbidden from doing. He

reflected, "it was always drilled in me that I can't do what I see people in my environment do."

Ebony shared her experience with her aunt's expectations. "At eighteen, you had three options,

you can go to college, you can go to work, or you can get a cardboard box, but either way you're

getting out of our house." In understanding the context of the environment they lived in, her aunt

said, "The Projects is where you live, it's a state of mind, but not where you'll end up. And we

fought, we fought to get up tooth and nail and education was our way out." Ebony, John, Aida,

and Rashad-McKay all described these expectations that were laid out at a very young age.

These options were vocalized and did not have room for negotiation. For Rashad-McKay and the

other participants, their parents and caregivers were seemingly trying to protect them from the

environment by which they were surrounded; in this case, urban areas that had less access to

higher income, increased violence and drugs. Moreover, families of participants seemed to have understood what was required to be successful in America; as a result, certain sacrifices were made, i.e., moving from environments perceived to be negative or having clear expectations through ongoing conversations, to ensure that participants would follow a predetermined set of pathways.

Lina, whose family moved from an urban to suburban neighborhood, had a mother who worked a blue-collar civil-servant job. While her mother did not provide any limitations on what she could do beyond high school, Lina believed that her mother wished for her to follow in her footsteps by obtaining a civil servant job. She reflected on messages received from her mother. "I don't expect you to go to college, or you can get a job, but whatever you need to do, you can't sit in my house and not do something, whatever it is that you do, I'll support you." Even though John was provided a set of expectations, it was clear that his mom wanted to him to do well for himself:

> Whatever you choose, you can go as far as you want, right? If you choose the military, you can become the secretary of defense in the country and you know, you can choose trade, you can have your own company, you know, so she never looked at it, as you know, college will take you the furthest. So, this will take you the furthest. She just looked at it as these four options can take you as far as you want to go.

Both Lina and John expressed that the expectations were not limiting and recognized the sacrifices that their parents made during their upbringing. Ebony recalled how clear expectations created two separate paths for her and her cousins. One path included post-secondary education and exposure to opportunities; the other path resulted in limited opportunities and remaining in

roles that precluded upward mobility. Ebony reflected on the opportunities provided to her in comparison to her cousins:

> I look at myself and I look at my first cousins who were from another aunt, and we all were raised around the same time and we have totally polar opposite paths, just because of the options that we were given and what was expected of us and so it's almost disheartening to see what my, my family members are doing, when they could have had different options also.

For Rashad-McKay and Lina, there was a need to fulfill a generational wish. In other words, for ancestors (parents or grandparents) who were not able to access or achieve academic success and upward mobility, that desire has been 'passed down' to the current generation. Rashad-McKay stated:

> Because my mom was the child that they were expecting to go to like law school. She was always like an honor student. Then when she got pregnant with me at 17, all of that got put on hold. And so, I think because there was this expectation for her to be the one to kind of break the cycles and go on and do these things that then became drilled into me so like, my mom was no nonsense when it came to education. Like I couldn't bring home C's I would get in trouble if I brought home C's like everything had to be A or B.

Lina shared her version of being identified as the one who would fulfill her ancestors wishes. She discussed the fact that her grandparents' siblings were educated; however, the opportunity was not afforded to them. In reference to her parents, she shared that one of her parents had a high school diploma and the other had finished 8th grade. She stated:

My family down in South Carolina, that piece of my family are educated folks, but they

believe in the power of education, but it kind of skipped my father and mother, they

worked and then it kind of fell on me and my sisters.

For Lina, this concept was articulated by her aunt in discussing her academic accomplishments:

All of my grandmother's brothers and sisters were college educated, but not my

grandmother and not my dad. She was the oldest. She helped them all go to college. So,

she had to take the 'L'(loss) for the family to send them to college. But my aunt was

telling me like you should be so proud and your grandmother would be proud of you.

because all she ever wanted was for us to go to college.

Marie described how her father would constantly fill up their home with books. "There were

books everywhere around the house around any and every topic. So, at a young age, I knew

already, I'm going to go to college." Roni reflected on the fact that he never had a conversation

about going to college with his mom. He recalled, "I think it was an expectation, but it wasn't

one that was talked about, which is interesting, because I just assumed that's what you do after

12th grade, you go to college." Mikayla, in her reflection, shared that her parents, who were from

Trinidad, believed that in order to be a successful Black person in America, you were required to

know more than your counterparts. "They just knew up here in America in order for you to kind

of advance especially as a Black man or woman you need to be maybe a little bit more well

learned." While Mikayla's parents' messages were never specific, they did set parameters that

created a pathway to follow:

I used to have homework in that class and you know, did pretty well, but she used to

supplement that and say, okay, read this article from USA Today or you know, the Wall

Street Journal and then tell me the definition of all the words you don't know. They

believed in going the extra mile to like, learn something and they believe that the school

system didn't necessarily prepare us well.

For participants, their family's expectations or dreams deferred, equated in various

messages being shared with them throughout their upbringing. Some expectations were based on

the prior generation's unfulfilled goals and were consequently placed on the shoulders of

participants. Additionally, as a result of family members' understanding of structural barriers due

to race, messages to not only do well, but to do better than average, were communicated.

Triggering and sequence of motivating events

A few participants described specific experiences or sequences of events that were

pivotal in their trajectories and desire to achieve success, academically and in terms of career

mobility. Some events were one-time occurrences while others were multiple events that all

impacted the trajectory for the participant. For instance, Harmony describes an incident with her

brother's friends ranking of all the sister's in terms of beauty. She reflected on this experience:

They had a ranking, and I got last in terms of look of the sisters because I was dark, the

darkest one. So, you know, you become aware of these things and you're like, okay, well,

that's a wash because everyone's telling me that's negative for me. So, I'm gonna work on

what's a positive, what's the positive is that education piece.

Harmony described a situation that could be misconstrued as innocent, yet, it left an indelible

mark on her drive to be successful academically. Even though this situation may not have been

the single most important factor in her drive for success, it was clearly an experience that gave

her reason to excel. Lina described an experience that drove her to complete her doctoral degree:

> After eight months, I was deemed not doctoral level material. I was dismissed from the
>
> program. They told me you're not good enough, you'll never have a terminal degree. And
>
> I was like, really? So, I believed it for like, like two days. And then I bounced back.

Lina described a very simple, yet powerful experience that remained with her continually. Being
made to feel as if 'you don't belong' has been an unspoken sentiment for Lina and other
participants. Such feelings appeared to fuel participants' unyielding drive for success. Both Lina
and Harmony shared a one-time experience that has remained vivid in their memory and
continues to consciously--or unconsciously--be a reminder of reasons behind their constant drive
for success. For others, there was a sequence of events that were pivotal in their trajectories.
Rashad-McKay shared how his experiences during his upbringing, coupled with being at a PWI
had prepared him for his experiences and ability to overcome challenges during his career.

> I think who I am today is a direct result of how I was raised, where I was raised, and so I
>
> would never change any of those experiences because for me it was nothing but being
>
> able to be a Black man at a PWI, the resilience that it took to get through being a Black
>
> person at PWI is only a result of having to be resilient first in my own community and my
>
> own family, in my own neighborhood. So, for me, I always looked at it like if I could
>
> survive Uptown, New Jersey, being Black at PWI institution is nothing.

Reflecting on how his college years prepared him for his future environment, he stated:

> Undergrad and grad school my friends and I, we fought for the things that we needed. We
>
> were used to having people count us out or have preconceived notions about us. Having
>
> that experience for seven years between undergrad and grad school definitely prepared
>
> me for the work environment where it was like, alright, I've navigated this quite well for
>
> seven years. So now I know I can navigate this professionally.

Another participant, John, reflected on his mom's illness, his stepdad leaving the family at that point in time, and the home instability, as a sequence of events affecting his trajectory. He reflected, "my mom's sickness was the most influential thing, because it helped me understand the sacrifices she made and the struggles that came with that. We lost the house. We had to move into my brother's apartment." For John, having to move into his brother's apartment helped crystallize the family's situation and began to affect his drive to do well academically and career wise. He shared this experience stating, "it was about eight of us and my mom, and it was like a one bedroom apartment. So, it just opened my eyes to certain things." In having to move, he recalled that moment and how it affected his train of thought moving forward:

> And I remember I was playing basketball in high school at that time and I had to leave at halftime to go home and help pack up the house because we had to move out by that morning. I made a decision in that moment. I said okay, from a financial standpoint, you can't play -it was my junior year - you can't play basketball next year. You got to work. You got to take care of yourself. You got to do this. And then you have to start thinking about your future.

Such instability forced him to assess his living situation and triggered his thought process and subsequently how he would approach changing his situation. In reflecting he recalled saying to himself, "I gotta figure this out. So that was the motivation to see like, well, what's next? What options do I have?" Additionally, being able to compare his home situation with his lifestyle on campus introduced him to another way of living. In reflecting on some amount of guilt he felt for not wanting to remain at home, he reflected:

> Another thing was I wanted to and this is hard to admit, but I want to get out of here because I was spoiled. You know on campus I didn't, you ain't worrying about heat. You

know, you worry about all these things, these basic necessities. And I remember feeling

bad that I felt that way that I wanna go back to campus. You know what I mean? Because

it's like how bad it was at home.

Engage shared his sequence of events that were pivotal in the path his life went. The sequence of

events included his parents getting a divorce, his sister getting pregnant at a very young age and

him being shot and spending a few hours being detained. He discussed his sister being pregnant:

I have a sister who had a child at fourteen years old and I was about sixteen. And this is

when I kind of realized what situation we were in. When this happened, it changed the

whole dynamic of my family and it literally changed the course I think my family life

probably up into this day, you know, because not only was my mother taking care of my,

you know, the three of us and my fourteen year old sister who was pregnant, now she was

taking care of the newborn child.

After being detained for an incident involving a family member, Engage recalled, "I only spent

like fifteen hours in jail. And I remember thinking, there was no way in hell this is going to be

my life." For Engage, he described these experiences akin to straddling--living--in two worlds. "I

was always living in these sort of dual worlds". For Engage, living in an urban area riddled with

crime, poverty and drugs, while trying to avoid succumbing to these same elements presented

two worlds for him. He further shared how people within his family or community were the ones

being negative about his path chosen. "People would say, 'oh, he ain't gonna finish or he ain't

gonna this or, you know, whatever, you know, that kind of stuff, like behind my back and stuff.

So, I even felt that even some of my own siblings, you know, didn't really support me." When

Engage dropped out of college and decided to return, he received negative comments for each

level of accomplishment. "Oh, he's never going to go back. When I started going it was like, he's

never going to finish. When I graduated, oh, he's never gonna find a job. I guess it just stopped

because when I found a job."

Beyond the sequence of events that Engage experienced, he also spent some time

working in a blue collar job that required physical labor. For Engage, having that experience also

solidified the path he would select and why:

I knew I didn't want to be a factory worker. I remember one time when I was sixteen I

worked at a carwash and it was terrible. It was just like I knew I just couldn't do anything

that was kind of like physical labor. I remember thinking to myself, whatever I'm going

to do, it has to be something I'm going to do that's with my mind. I was only a kid then

and I knew like, I'm not going to be working myself to death like this.

For Harmony, Lina, Rashad-McKay, John and Engage, motivating factors that affected how they

approached decisions to attend and complete college or to be driven in succeeding in their

careers were discussed. All participants reflected on either a specific moment in time or a

sequence of events that were triggering. Triggering, as used in this study, refers to specific events

that gave rise to a shift in attitude or perception by participants.

This theme focused on family expectations from parents or caregivers as well as

motivating factors for success. Two main sub-themes were found to be salient; dreams deferred

by parents or grandparents and subsequently passed down to participants; and triggering events

that were foundational in why they went on to achieve not only academic success, but also

success in their careers.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

"Nepantla" - Living between cultures results in 'seeing' double, first from the perspective of one

culture, then from the perspective of another. Seeing from two or more perspectives

simultaneously renders those cultures transparent. Removed from that culture's center you

glimpse the sea in which you've been immersed but to which you were oblivious, no longer

seeing the world the way you were enculturated to see it. —Gloria E. Anzaldúa

Introduction

This study sought to understand the lived experiences of Black First Generation

Professionals (BFPs). For the purposes of this study, BFPs are individuals who identify as Black,

First Generation College Students (FGS), who have earned a master's or doctoral degree, and

hold professional roles in White-collar spaces. While this exploration provided insight into the

complexities faced by BFPs in the workplace, it also exposed considerations related to their

identities and family relationships. Findings from this study revealed a variety of experiences

that allowed for understanding what it meant to be a BFP. Specifically, reflections and

descriptions provided by participants revealed the following: work experiences were mixed--

some positive, some negative--and changed over time based on context and situation; mentorship

served as both a contributing and protective factor in their success; positive self-identity and self-

awareness were seen as important factors in their career development and growth; current family

relationships were described as being different in comparison to college years and early career

stages; and unfulfilled family expectations or desires were attached to BFPs throughout their

upbringing. Unfulfilled family expectations in this sense were desires of family members --

parents, grandparents -- to achieve upward mobility that have now been *passed down* to

participants. The question that guided this study was: What are the lived experiences of Black

First-Generation Professionals as they pursue their work lives? In exploring what this meant for

participants, the following questions were also explored to have a sense of other important facets

and how those shaped their lives: 1) What was family life like growing up and how was

education viewed by participants' families? 2) What were things that were lost and gained as a

result of participants' educational attainment? 3) What does it mean to be the first in their

families to enter into White-collar professional spaces? What were participants' experiences with

race and identity growing up? 4) How did participants' identity of being Black impact their

experiences in the workplace? 5) How did mentorship impact a participant's career success?

Analysis of the data collected revealed five themes and several sub-themes. These main

themes were: 1) Tripartite workplace: stressful, powerful, and triggering; 2) Mentorship: critical

element for success; 3) Identity is nuanced; 4) Upward mobility: hidden experiences and

feelings; and 5) Motivating factors for success. This chapter will synthesize the theoretical

connections to findings in the study. That section will be followed with overall findings allowing

the reader to understand the complexities and nuances of the lives of participants. Next, a

discussion of findings not found in existing literature will be followed. Finally, limitations and

implications for future research will be discussed before the conclusion of this study.

Theoretical Connections

The study utilized both Ambiguous Loss and Black Identity Development theories as

guiding frameworks for understanding the lived experiences of BFPs. This section will review

both theories, connecting their relevance and purpose in understanding and elucidating the lives

of BFPs. A review of the tenets of ambiguous loss theory and Black identity development theory

will help in conceptualizing BFPs at various stages of their identity.

Although Ambiguous Loss theory is rooted in traditional counseling fields, it is also helpful in understanding and explaining forms of family functioning. Issues related to Ambiguous Loss were particularly salient for participants in this study. Ambiguous loss theory has been applied to a variety of populations such as individuals who leave their homelands (Mitchell, 2016); individuals that experience gender transitions (McGuire et al., 2016) and individuals in the foster care system (Perez, & Arnold-Berkovits, 2018) and also resonated with BFPs. For BFPs, the recognition of tangible success compared to the intangible feelings of changed family relationships results in a form of unacknowledged loss. Unlike an experience such as death or the loss of someone, an ambiguous loss does not allow for closure or any finality (Agllias, 2011; Coolhart et al, 2017). Rather, ambiguous loss--as used in this context--describes how changes in family relationships, occurring as a result of upward mobility, are hidden and in some cases remain unnamed for participants. Such changes for participants included tension, dissonance, or unresolved feelings that existed between them and family members. Interestingly, prior to learning about the term ambiguous loss during the interview, although participants had experiences of ambiguous loss, they were not able to articulate or attach a specific name to their ongoing feelings.

When participants discussed losing part of their core family or losing a relational bond, those feelings aligned with the core assumption that ambiguous loss is a relational and not an individual condition, thus making it difficult to address any tension that may be present (McGuire, Catalpa, Lacey, & Kuvalanka, 2016). Relational bond refers to the experiences and interactions between participants and their family members -- roles, responsibilities, traditions, norms, values -- that helped to define the nature of the relationship. As such, an ambiguous loss framework operates from the premise that some losses may be unclear or remain unnamed

(Perez, 2016; Perez, & Arnold-Berkovits, 2018). Boss (2007) states that families describe this

type of ambiguous loss as 'leaving-without saying goodbye'. Of the core assumptions that define

Ambiguous Loss theory, two help to elucidate experiences and feelings that have been

unacknowledged, disenfranchised, or unnamed by the individual, their family or society. These

two assumptions state that: 1) truth remains subjective to the individual, relative, and

unattainable; and 2) ambiguous loss is a relational phenomenon and not an individual condition,

thus making it hard for families to address any tension that may exist (Boss, 2016). This was an

appropriate theory for this study as participants discussed losses, experiences they no longer had,

or changes in their family relationships as a result of their academic and career paths. These

experiences often played an important role in their development and were reflective of their

upbringing and identity. Participants shared stories depicting the status of their relationships with

families. In doing so, there were feelings that were unaccounted for and disenfranchised as they

were never addressed. Doka (1999) first used the term disenfranchised to describe a form of grief

that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged. At

first, their academic pursuits and eventually, the career path taken, heavily affected the tension

between having achieved measurable success while having the intangible loss of important

relationships between participants and their family and friends. These sentiments were discussed

by participants in terms of losses and unacknowledged experiences. Since these feelings were

never ever explicitly discussed, they became disenfranchised. Ambiguous loss theory describes

how absence and presence are not absolutes and that family members, i.e. loved ones, may fade

away psychologically. For participants, there was a consensus of having different ideological

views, beliefs, interests, and habits compared to their upbringing. This change may represent a

'fading away' psychologically as described by Boss (2007), whereby all family members are still

physically present, but the individual is perceived to have changed and is no longer the

individual who the family is used to or remembers based on their upbringing. This 'change' was

perceived on both the individual and family ends and aligns with Boss' concept of leaving-

without saying goodbye.

While there was no direct situation or event that severed family relationships between

BFPs and some of their family members, there was a sense of ambiguity when trying to make

sense of the current status. This ambiguity emanated from the different paths taken resulting in

disenfranchised feelings; these feelings affected the individual and how they felt about their

relationship with family. For participants in this study, their culminating gains were outcomes

that were mostly clear to all; however, the hidden feelings--sometimes unacknowledged by

society or unnamed by participants -- highlights the unclear nature of how ambiguous loss

occurs.

Black identity development (BID) was the second theoretical framework used to

understand participant's daily lived experiences. BID as a theoretical framework is a process by

which an individual 'becomes Black,' focusing on the psychological meaning of Blackness as

opposed to the color of one's skin (Belgrave & Allison, 2010; Burrell-Craft & Eugene, 2021;

Cross, 1971). When discussing how each person identified and why, participants discussed their

identity based on cultural upbringing and connection to their parents' home country. Specifically,

there were two points of focus: one looking at the experiences that informed their racial

socialization and the other looking at their understanding of their Black identity and the

approximate age at which experiences occurred. Given that participants' ancestral lineage varied,

it was important to first understand any underlying ethnic or cultural connections and how those

experiences may have shaped their identity. In addition to understanding ethnic or cultural

identities, participants discussed race and racism as experienced throughout their childhood and

adult years. These discussions allowed for a reflective process in thinking about their Black

identity and its development. For some participants, the discussions facilitated some amount of

self-reflection and further understanding of their Black identity as experienced in the workplace

and in society on a whole.

BID is a transformative process involving four stages that Black individuals experience -

pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization (Burrell-Craft & Eugene,

2021). Although all stages were present for participants, their experiences focused on the

encounter and immersion-emersion stages. For some participants, the historical period and

context of their immediate environments affected how they experienced a specific stage. Many

participants spoke about specific events that initiated their understanding of what it meant to be a

Black person in America and its impact on how they operated thereafter. These sentiments

aligned with the encounter stage, characterized by an event or moment surrounding race,

impacting how one views the world. For some participants, the immersion-emersion stage was

experienced at a very young age based on pro-Black messages received at home, school and/or

community spaces. Interestingly, as suggested in a modification of the BID model by Parham

(1992), individuals may return to the completed stage based on different phases of their lives. In

relation to this study, some participants may have had to revisit an immersion-emersion stage as

they progressed through their careers in predominantly White spaces. Participants referenced

adopting a new way of thinking by being 'authentically themselves' or being able to 'stand in

their own glory'-- reflective of the immersion-emersion stage. For participants, while the

immersion-emersion stage may have occurred during earlier phases of their lives, their

experiences in professional settings required a new understanding of what it meant to be Black.

While being in a particular space or environment does not equate to an automatic entrance at one stage in the model, it was a recurring theme based on participants' stories. Moreover, the experiences of 'finding' or connecting with other Black people within an organization appear to be linked to the Black/White dichotomy that exists in many institutions. Thus, during the immersion-emersion stage, a new context for 'being and becoming Black' appeared to have occurred for participants.

Interpretation of Findings

Elements of the workplace dynamic

One of the focal points of the study centered around participants' daily experiences in the workplace and the meaning they attached to those feelings. Participants discussed the workplace and how high levels of race-based feelings and use of power resulted in a variety of personal emotions -- from being anxious to angry to triumphant, in a variety of situations. Triggering refers to a provocation of sorts, giving rise to a shift in attitude or perception. All participants worked in white-collar professional careers and described the stressors that came with often being the only Black or one of a few Black individuals operating in predominantly White spaces. These professional careers required advanced education or training and involved supervision of others. There was a shared feeling among participants of the need *and* expectation to represent the entire Black community despite their varied identities. Previous research revealed that as groups were uprooted from Africa or moved to the western hemisphere, different identities were formed despite any common connection to the ancestral land (Sutherland, 2011; Palmer 2018). It was further noted by Palmer (2018), that despite location, members of the diaspora do share commonalities such as emotional attachment to their ancestral land, alienation as an oppressed group in the countries where they reside, and similarities in cultural identity. Thus, it was

conceivable that participants with various diasporic identities would be considered a single group in places of work, if non-diasporic co-workers fail to recognize or acknowledge those differences. Participants felt that their identities and experiences were homogenized under the umbrella of African American. This is congruent with Helms (1990), who suggests that BID theories tend to focus on the similarities of psychological development based on race rather than ethnicity. In other words, an individual's ethnic differences were generally overlooked in predominantly White spaces and their racial identification became the main factor of recognition.

While participants accepted that it was challenging to be recognized by their chosen identity, their experiences in the workplace highlighted how little to no attempt was made to be cognizant of those intersecting identities -- e.g., having a Black or African American identity being imposed upon them while identifying as Ghanaian or Trinidadian or Haitian -- based on the individual's place of birth or ancestral connection. Intersectionality is the study of multiple, interlocking, group identities, affecting the development of an individual (Crenshaw, 1989). Although intersectionality has been commonly used when looking at race, gender, or class, this study extended this principle to ethnicity. Using an intersectional lens would recognize the importance of understanding the meaning associated with multiple social identities. Conversely, *intersectional invisibility* -- the general failure to fully recognize people with intersecting identities as members of their constituent groups -- is experienced (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008, p. 381). This is congruent with previous research that posited the difficulty for people of African descent to have one singular identity (Hanchard, 1980). It is important to recognize that other countries tend to focus on one's nationality as the point of identification; however, the United States utilizes race as the first or main point of identification (Anderson, 2008). It should be noted that participants who were born in the United States of immigrant parents all identified

with the home country of their parents. As it relates to the United States, the ability or inability of self-identification (to self-identify) is important in the larger societal context, but equally important in the context of workspaces when trying to solve or address complex group issues. Although participants' racial identity may have created common and shared experiences, their varied ethnic or self-identities may also have created different experiences. Self-identity, as used in this study, refers to the individual's awareness of themselves within a social, national or cultural context. For example, some participants described being tasked with addressing issues in the workplace without having the requisite cultural or ethnic knowledge. For example, a person who identifies as Caribbean or from an African nation who is asked to join an African American affinity group. In this sense, that person is assumed to have the prerequisite knowledge or experience to act in that capacity. Adding to this complexity were participants, born in the United States, who explained how difficult it was for them to settle on their identity as they struggled between the vernaculars of African American, Black American, Black or simply American. This shifting identity is supported in previous research which states that the term 'African American' is misleading and exclusive to American descendants of enslaved Africans, omitting many others who have immigrated to America or whose upbringing is not based on traditions derived in the United States (Hanchard, 1990; McPherson & Shelby, 2004; Thomas, 2002). For example, the intersection of being a person of African ancestry and who is born in the Caribbean was an important factor in the experiences -- positive or negative -- faced in these predominantly White spaces in America.

In situations where these identities have been categorized based on race -- intentional or not -- the individual is juxtaposed between accepting this identity to fit within the established norm vs. rejecting such an identity. While these types of events are occurring in the workplace,

their effect on the individual's identity development is ongoing. This is congruent with stage 2 of BID theory -- encounter or dissonance -- which includes transitioning from one environment to another. At this stage, individuals who are Black, but not born in the United States, may be experiencing tenets of dissonance as they begin to wonder what it means to be African American. Dissonance, in this sense, refers to the thought processes or feelings associated with moving from one state of mind to another (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). In such situations, feelings of anxiety or being hypervigilant may begin to occur as they learn about this ascribed identity. The feelings described by participants -- stressful, triggering, powerful -- are generally not experienced in public; rather they are hidden and processed at the individual, personal level. Moreover, if such experiences are constantly occurring for an extended period, that individual's mental and/or physical health could be negatively impacted. This is congruent with previous research that revealed how Black people did not enjoy the same level of health benefits as Whites over an extended period as they experienced higher levels of socioeconomic status (Farmer & Ferraro, 2005). Previous studies have even demonstrated that living in a race-conscious society may adversely affect the mental and physical health of Blacks (Geronimus et al., 2006; Rewak et al, 2014). To further emphasize this point, Geronimus et al. (2006) used the term "weathering" in their study to demonstrate racial inequalities in health for Blacks that were not explained by racial differences in poverty. Weathering, as used in that study, refers to the "disproportionate physiological deterioration, such that a Black individual may show the morbidity and mortality typical of a White individual who is significantly older." (Geronimus et al., 2006, p. 826). They concluded that "progress in understanding and eliminating racial health inequality may require paying attention to the ways that American public sentiment on race, including its gendered aspects, exacts a physi-cal price across multiple biological systems from

Blacks who engage in and cope with the stressful conditions presented to them" (p. 832). Thus, as Parham's (1992) modification of BID theory had suggested, over the course of one's life a recycling occurs in relation to identity and how it is shaped. This modification also recognized that significant changes occurring at later stages of a person's life can cause a shift in racial attitudes. More specifically for BFPs in the workplace, such experiences may result in a reevaluation of self and become a catalyst for new attitudes and feelings; however, negative health outcomes, as a result of constantly living and functioning in a race-conscious manner at work, are prevailing.

Another complexity and stressor discussed by participants was the isolation encountered in the workplaces. Participants discussed how they would not reveal or discuss certain aspects of their lives as those aspects were not relatable to their White counterparts. Such spaces were consistent with White culture and resulted in some participants' reticence in revealing elements of their Black culture in fear of not disrupting the White cultural normativity (Wiececk & Hamilton (2014). Thus, unbeknownst to others in workplace settings, there is an ongoing feeling of isolation. Dickens and Chavez (2018) found that Black professionals were oftentimes having unique experiences not akin to other racial groups, resulting in a straddling of two worlds. Though this idea of operating in two worlds was not explicitly stated by participants, their discussion about guiding conversations to suit the other person or not being relatable implies this sentiment. Although past research has discussed this 'two-ness' in relation to college-aged individuals (Brannon, Markus, & Taylor, 2015) and to individuals with careers (Lubrano, 2004), the literature does not adequately capture the stress and intricacies embedded within the experience of BFP's. Previous research has shown that individuals may alter their behavior and/or the content of their conversation, inherently suppressing their voice for that of their

colleagues (Jackson, 2002). Harper et al. (2011) described this as "onlyness" and defined it as "the psychoemotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one's same racial or ethnic group" (p. 190). Although Harper et al. were describing Black male students on a college campus, a perpetuated cycle continues into White-collar professional spaces.

The study also revealed that participants experienced an undermining of their leadership abilities in professional spaces. They articulated how their leadership ability was often questioned, challenged or scrutinized by colleagues, some of whom were supervised by participants. This is congruent with past research indicating that individuals with multiple subordinate identities, i.e. Black females or Black males, face inequities and disparities in their leadership roles (Crenshaw, 1989; Rosette et al., 2016; Turner & Grauerholz, 2017). To further extrapolate this notion, one study by McDonald et al. (2018) found that White males experienced a diminished sense of *organizational identity* following the appointment of a female or racial minority; as a result, less support was extended as the organization may have been deemed as *less prestigious* than before. Organizational identity as used in that study, is the extent to which individuals will positively self-identify with an organization (McDonald et al., 2018). Thus, for Black females in leadership roles, the support from White males was not only decreased based on their gender, but also based on their racial identity. It should be noted that while Black males possessed gender privilege, they felt marginalized based on their Black identity; this was further compounded for Black females who felt marginalized based on those two intersecting identities. The compounding effect of these intersecting identities have been reflected in the literature as a matrix of domination (Anderson & Collins, 2013). Participants made explicit reference to being treated differently based on their intersecting identities.

Structural barriers were discussed as being part of the experience in the workplace. Having the need to work twice as hard or having to consider other factors during their daily work experience is indicative of structural barriers at play. Participants discussed experiences in the workplaces that were embedded in structural racism and discrimination. For example, participants discussed their leadership role and authority being constantly undermined by those who they supervise and reveal the perceptions associated with individuals who were being supervised. As described by Wiececk & Hamilton (2014), structural racism in the workplace manifests in a variety of ways. The six core components are: 1) Intent vs. effect, 2) Notion of individualism in American culture, 3) Structural neutrality, 4) White advantage and normativity, 5) Colorblindness, and 6) Invisibility. In the context of the workplace, this may include: selective dissemination of job opportunities; stereotypes of group attributes affecting perceptions of applicants during hiring process or in day-to-day interactions; differential application of policies in the workplace; and seniority rules that support reconstruction of a mainly White workforce during layoffs (connected to the last hired-first fired rule). When discussing job promotions and who received opportunities, it was evident that structural barriers were in play for some participants. Moreover, one of the core components of structural racism, i.e. individualism, suggests that the individual is responsible for his or her outcome and assigns blame to that person for their inability to achieve similar gains as other groups. One participant, in describing the negative connotation ascribed to Black people as being lazy or incompetent, is aligned with the literature that discusses racial disparities at an individual level - which assumes that control is maintained by that person. This is congruent with past research that demonstrates the pervasive and hidden nature of these systems (Weicek & Hamilton, 2014). For most participants, there was an acceptance that while race may impact how they experience the workplace, it did not, and

would not, define their outcome. This is somewhat contradictory to findings from a study

conducted by Parker et al., (2016), who found that young Black males felt a sense of false pride

making them feel as if race does not inherently affect their ability for success. Rather, there was

an acknowledgment of the role race plays as opposed to an underlying notion that structural

barriers do not exist.

Participants also discussed being authentic and *showing up* as themselves as opposed to

assimilating to fit a dominant culture narrative. This was evident with all participants who were

in professional spaces for an extended period; the majority of participants had over ten years of

professional experience and all participants had at least six or more years in professional spaces.

For some participants, their authentic self, their names, their physical image, and their vernacular

were used to enact agency against discriminations perpetuated in their workspaces. It should be

noted that participants were on a continuum of their Black identity development -- with some in

the early stages and others in the later stages. Agency refers to the capacity or ability to challenge

any power structure while maintaining control of one's actions. Contrary to one of the earliest

studies focusing on Black individuals operating in White spaces (Frazier, 1957), this study

revealed that participants did not have low self-esteem nor did they feel the need to conform as a

means of being accepted. Rather than assimilation and suppression of their identity, they opted to

do the opposite -- recognizing, embracing and celebrating it. Contextually, it may be posited that

the current generation of BFPs in these spaces have observed and learned from their

predecessors; as such, their views on race and enacting agency enables them to recognize and

accept differences across race which provides room for them to be authentically themselves and

less assimilative. It is important to note however, that though participants were able to express

themselves *authentically*, research suggests that tenets of racism and discrimination remain

active in contemporary America (Cooke, 2003; Parker C. et al., 2022; Yearby 2018). For

participants, being able to enact agency is simultaneously an act of resistance, but more

importantly, represents them reclaiming their identities that were previously suppressed or

oppressed.

Mentorship: Critical element for success

Mentorship served as a critical and protective factor in the lives of BFPs seeking

knowledge, wisdom, and guidance in their personal and career journeys. This study revealed that

mentorship acted as an unsung, but vital support system for participants. As a protective factor,

mentorship moderated some of the negative influences from their peers, communities in which

they grew up or spaces where they were the minority group (Brady, 2020; Gordon, 2021). In the

context of their careers, mentorship meant personal and/or professional support from those that

have attained career success. Mentors, as discussed in this study, included individuals who had

achieved career success in similar fields to those of the participants; the term mentee was used to

describe participants' role in relation to their mentorship experiences. Mentors held leadership

roles in their respective organizations and provided support to the Black professionals who were

also occupying leadership roles. In many cases, the mentor/mentee relationship began at one

place of work, but remained long after the mentee moved into other occupations. Participants

attributed a great deal of their career success to the influence their mentors had on them. Such

influence ranged from knowledge shared about a particular industry, encouragement during

difficult situations encountered, or advice related to career advancement.

With a focus on Black individuals, previous literature has shown that mentorship is a

critical element for their career development and mobility (Henry-Brown, 2005; Iheduru-

Anderson, 2020). As discussed by participants, obtaining a role within a specific career field was

a feat within itself; the other element to success was directly linked to continued guidance and support from mentors. Making decisions, gaining insight and being motivated to be one's best self, is just as important as gaining the job in the first place. Such influences are usually embedded within a mentorship framework and is congruent with previous research (Henry-Brown, 2005). On a broader, macro-level, the experiences of Black people since the trans-Atlantic slave trade period has seen an evolvement from overt to more covert structural oppression functions that perpetuate inequities within society; on a smaller micro-level, the experiences shared by participants reflect that they still are addressing some of those experiences in their everyday lives. The tools gained from mentorship have the ability to help navigate those past and present experiences or feelings and any structural barriers that are in place. For participants, being able to approach mentorship from a 'both/and' as opposed to an 'either/or' lens, allows for the personal and professional sides of the individual to be heard, validated, and assisted. Thus, the mentorship relationship for Black individuals should seek to understand and provide any social or emotional support while simultaneously assisting with instrumental or tangible support needed.

While the influence of a mentor was discussed as critical to success for participants, gaining access to mentorship was a sub-theme that emerged as equally significant. A lack of Black mentors in similar careers was identified as a challenge by and for participants. Participants described situations where mentors were hard to identify and when they did identify a mentor, that individual was often overtaxed from mentoring multiple individuals. Both issues highlight what past research has shown in that a lack of access to mentors in the Black community results in structural barriers to career advancement (Walkington, 2017). In order for BFPs to access and climb the career ladder, mentorship stands not only as a prerequisite, but as a

corequisite for that journey. This is congruent with previous research which highlights how privilege creates pathways for upward mobility in White communities, whereas in Black communities those pathways are more difficult to locate (Liu, 2017). As a result of past and present structural racism, Black mentors may genuinely not have access to as much of the same resources readily available for their White counterparts. As described in research by Liu (2017, p. 356), "marginalized peoples are distinctly limited in their privileged spaces and simultaneously live on the outside waiting to enter." Being in those spaces that should grant access could be more a veil over the reality occurring. As such, a focus on the social and emotional pieces of the mentor-mentee relationship may become more salient or pronounced in Black communities. Some participants also described the mentorship relationship as 'hidden'. In this sense, due to the environments from which young BFPs may be coming from, mentors may need to assist with acclimation into and throughout their professional tenure. Such assistance is rarely formalized as mentorship; rather, it matures into a bond with clear tenets held within a mentorship relationship. Of importance in this discussion is the distinction between social/emotional support and instrumental support as it occurs in Black and White communities.

In relation to both forms of mentorship, participants described their view on mentorship in the Black community vs. other communities. In their experiences, there was more of an emphasis to provide social or emotional support for young BFPs as opposed to working on instrumental outcomes in their mentoring relationship. Social or emotional support meant addressing any past experiences or issues that could hinder or interfere with the individual's current goals or trajectory. Instrumental outcomes focused on getting the individual connected to other individuals with similar experiences in their chosen career, providing career guidance at each career milestone, giving critical feedback about navigating structural barriers, helping with

career mobility or other professional development opportunities. Previous research has suggested that daily stressors such as microaggressions, discrimination, tokenism or similar experiences are often not addressed in the mentor/mentee relationship (Somani and Tyree, 2020). While those acts were discussed in terms of various experiences in the workplace, the focus on mentorship in this study unearthed a need to address personal issues outside the scope of work before or while addressing those experiences and equally important, their career development. Research on navigating both forms of mentorship was not found in the literature.

Another interesting finding from this study was the perceived threat of a mentee as experienced by some participants. While recent research would suggest that mentorship serves as a protective factor in the Black community (Iheduru-Anderson, 2020; Somani & Tyree, 2020; Walkington, 2017), there have been no studies on society's influence on Black individuals' perceptions of Black presence in these spaces. These participants discussed being 'taught' or made to believe that Black presence must be limited in most spaces that are predominantly White and reflected on how they were received by other senior Black individuals. While this was not described in the literature reviewed, it was a salient point. Participants described their experiences which spoke of a perceived resistance, hesitancy, or tension in how they were received by other Black individuals. While there was no definitive reason for this interaction, multiple participants shared this sentiment. One participant explained that it was imparted or taught that there was simply not enough room for all Black individuals in these professional spaces. In other words, the perception was held that in these white-collar professional spaces, there was only room for one or few Black individuals. This perception can be connected to historical experiences of Black people in America.

Previous studies have documented the transgenerational trauma and effects of slavery for Black people (Cross, 1998; Graff, 2004). What is not found in the literature is the extent to which these types of interaction among Black individuals can be deemed contemporary permutations of past trauma, connected to past experiences during slavery. Another participant reflected on the context of how Black individuals operated on slave plantations. In this context, there were individuals who were considered 'house slaves' - those permitted to live in the plantation owners' home - and were afforded a 'different' experience, when compared to other enslaved individuals who lived outside of the plantation owner's home. For the 'house slave', maintaining her/his position in the home meant resisting other enslaved individuals to maintain the existing role of being a 'house slave'. In reflecting on how participants felt they were received by other Black individuals at times, it could be posited that the actions observed in the present day, mirror certain actions of the past. While this notion is not unequivocal or absolute, it does bring into focus generational trauma that may have been passed down from one generation to the next. This is important to understand as the history of Black people today is directly connected to elements of the past. The resultant effect of such perceptions may lead to conflict, divisive behaviors, trepidation, or uncertainty when interacting with other Black individuals in these spaces. While this did not appear to impact the mentor/mentee relationships as described, it is a point of focus that is worth mentioning. If our perceptions are a window into how we see and experience the world, it is perhaps indicative of larger, macro-level issues related to equity and access.

In respects to the idea and importance of mentorship, participants all recognized the importance of serving as mentors for young BFPs. To continue moving the needle of success and in order to promote upward mobility for BFPs, mentorship is a critical element for sustainability. Understanding that BFPs are variegated in how they show up, adopting a both/and situation as

opposed to either/or is preferred. Specifically, addressing both the personal and professional

sides to mentorship is needed for BFPs.

Upward mobility: Hidden experiences with family and identity

The study sought to understand what it meant to be a Black First-Generation

Professional. Connected to that journey was the experience of upward mobility (Canham &

Williams, 2016; McAdoo, 1978). Upward mobility in the Black community can be viewed from

two opposing ends of a gains-loss spectrum. On one end, there are significant gains that are

attached to one's academic and career success; on the other end, there are losses or experiences

that are often unseen, unrecognized or unnamed. Upward mobility, as described by participants

in this study, had two interconnected elements. Both elements -- family dynamics and work life -

- affected their perceptions of finding balance when navigating either space. Undergirding both

elements were issues related to racial and cultural identity. The journey of upward mobility as

described by participants involved a constant navigating and negotiating of the existing

relationship between themselves and their families.

Participants described how their relationship with family members changed over time

based on the different sets of experiences or paths they had taken. There was a clear

acknowledgement that the current lives of participants was very different from that of their

upbringing. Differences were described as being very simple -- to very complex in nature. For

example, some participants described how interactions such as food choice at dinner, spending

time with family or sharing intellectual or financial resources, would be overly scrutinized,

becoming a point of contention; similarly, more complex issues, such as one's political beliefs,

philosophical views on life or adopted ideologies, were also highlighted and critiqued by family.

Such interactions, and constant need to highlight any deviation from family expectations,

resulted in a tension between the individual and the family member (Ross, 1995). In most cases,

the tension remained salient, dominant, and constant in the relationship. Consequently, these

feelings may manifest in the form of loss; specifically, the individual may feel as if they have

lost parts of who they were in certain relationships with family -- *past self,* when comparing or

considering who they are currently in those same relationships -- *present self*. Past and present

self refers to a view of the individual at a given time throughout their lives.

In some sense, there appeared to be a penalty for following and accepting this new path.

Canham & Williams (2016) found in their study that Black middle-class people in South Africa

were not only viewed differently, but were *disciplined* through discourse of 'sell-out' or 'race-

traitor.' As the first to *break-away* from blue-collar work in their family, participants began to

experience a lifestyle not known -- or in some cases -- not understood by their families of origin.

Such experiences can be compared to the Black middle-class in South Africa who ascended to

middle-class status during the post-apartheid era (Canham & Williams, 2016). For this group,

views and expectations were based on *White standards* while simultaneously being observed and

held to views and expectations based on *Black standard*s. Continuing with the concept of

breaking-away from one's family of origin, Fanon (1986), as discussed by Canham & Williams

(2016), described how Black people who left a Caribbean island to study in Europe were

immediately judged, scrutinized, and critically examined upon their return. It can therefore be

posited that participants in this study who have undertaken a path of upward mobility, are

simultaneously building a new bridge -- *gains* -- at the expense of damaging the existing bridge -

- *loss*. Some participants described the need to balance responsibilities with their immediate

family of origin against their family of procreation (McAdoo, 1978). Family of origin refers to

the family from which one was born into; on the other hand, family of procreation refers to the

family one creates. This sense of balancing responsibilities for both groups is reflected in past research focusing on the responsibility of Black individuals who have experienced upward mobility in contrast to their families of origin (McAdoo, 1978; Stewart, 2015). Although the accomplishments of participants are to be applauded, many felt reticent about sharing their achievements when in the presence of family members. Thus, it was demonstrated that as individuals *gained* upward mobility -- equating to status, financial stability and flexibility -- they also experienced some form of *loss* -- connection to family and a changed relational bond. A change in relational bond was indicative of the strength and closeness of relationships among participants and their networks of friends. These *losses* can be viewed in terms of human or cultural capital (Aziz, 2015; Kamphuis et al., 2015). Human capital generally refers to the value assigned to the skill possessed by an individual within a population or organization (Aziz, 2015); cultural capital refers to the shared experiences, values and symbolic items acquired through interaction among family members, community or institutions one engages with (Kamphuis et al., 2015). Thus, as participants experienced upward mobility, there may have been a diminishing or complete removal of specific human or cultural capital in their lives. It is worthwhile to mention that the diminishing or complete removal of human or cultural capital, as described in the study, is not a physical removal -- since the individuals referenced are still present in participants' lives -- but rather a psychological one. Being physically present, but psychologically absent -- as viewed by participants or their family -- is congruent with the premise of ambiguous loss theory. Feelings espoused by participants are connected to Boss' ambiguous loss theoretical framework, which describes loss experienced, as unclear. For participants, being both past and present self, but in one body, presents a unique form of loss, one that may be ambiguous and unaccounted for (Boss, 2007).

Being viewed as an outsider within the family network caused tension and resulted in some form of guilt for their accomplishments. These feelings were often hidden and not discussed openly with family members. Previous research describes these feelings as disenfranchised or as tension (Doka, 1999; Ross, 1995; Stewart, 2015). For the majority of participants, their family relationships went through a period of reconstruction or paradigm shift, and looks different today than it did before participants went to college and subsequently began careers. However, it was important to understand the importance of family from the perspective of participants. From a Eurocentric viewpoint, the accomplishments of participants would be lauded as a success based on the individualistic tendencies embraced by American standards; however, an Afrocentric viewpoint would acknowledge the communalistic nature of people of African descent and how these accomplishments may promote a deviation from one's family norms. Family relationships in the Black community can be viewed as part of -- and not separate from -- the identities held by its members. Thus, the association of family with one's identity often precludes its members from fully *breaking-away* and following a more individualistic path -- as the dominant culture in American society espouses. The dichotomy of how Eurocentric vs. Afrocentric positionalities affect family functioning has been highlighted in previous research (see Wynter-Hoyte & Boutte, 2018). In that study, an exploration of the double-conscious nature of church and school for Black youth was conducted; a comparison was made between the literacies learned and understood by young Black children in church and the contrasting literacies constructed in school. The study concluded that the ability to be *one* individual in church and in school had pedagogical implications for Black students. For White students, they could operate in *one skin -- themselves;* however, for Black students, the messages received from adults were mixed, precluding them from operating in *one skin* as their White counterparts did,

and may have resulted in negative outcomes. For example, in church, talking and the opportunity for movement - through dance -- was common and expected; conversely, talking too much in school and not sitting quietly was problematic. Though this example is applied in a different context, the principles are relevant to this discussion, i.e., family norms and functions within the Black community will be juxtaposed and monitored in a society that uses Eurocentric values and views as the standard. This is pertinent in making sense of the challenges BFPs face as they experience upward mobility, permeated by Eurocentric culture, values and norms.

Thus, the result of upward mobility and becoming successful may come at the cost of family relationships, and may result in less active participation in family functions. However, related to their identity development is a constant renegotiating of who they *are* at various life milestones -- at home, in community, at school, during college, or in predominantly White spaces. Connected to this *renegotiating* with oneself may have provided a concurrent opportunity to *find their fit* with family. In this sense, *finding their fit* involves an understood and agreed upon set of roles, expectations and boundaries within their family of origin and at times, with their family of procreation. Currently, for some participants, the relationships are viewed as *different* and in a better state than during the adjustment period, i.e. during college and early career years. For others, there have been permanent severances in the family relationship. As articulated by a few participants, in a utopian world, they would maintain those relationships; however, the paths taken by them in comparison to some of their family members are starkly different, inherently resulting in total separation. Some participants were initially unclear about how they were received by family members, but eventually had redefined roles; in some cases, while participants understood their current lifestyle and what it meant, they found it difficult to articulate what occurred from the point of their college days and into their careers. For BFPs,

there was an *opportunity cost* attached to the success gained from their academic pursuits. Such a cost involves the relationship that existed between themselves and family members. While other groups may experience some form of trade-off or cost for pursuing academic success and upward mobility, the implications are different. For members of the African diaspora, family is an important part of their identity. Thus, the opportunity cost may have significant implications in healthy family functioning for a group that has had their family system, over a long period of time, disrupted and dismantled.

Of importance, was a differentiation in outcome across gender lines. While male participants did not describe nor suggest the need to sacrifice the idea of family formation (marriage and children), some female participants had the opposite view, suggesting that they incurred an opportunity cost in pursuit of upward mobility. This is congruent with a review conducted by Council (2021) on Black middle-class women as it relates to work and family life. In her review, it was posited that sacrifices for education and career goals must be in line with family and marriage; otherwise, there may be some guilt -- since marriage and family in the Black community are forms of resistance to structural racism and White supremacy. Beyond the complexities of redefined family relationships, but certainly connected to it, were the experiences connected to their careers.

As referenced in previous research, Black mobility was directly connected to policy designed to create equitable spaces during and after the civil rights era (Collins, 1983). For participants, they recognized their role and its ability to impact future lives within their communities. Having a 'seat at the table', as described by participants, underpins and highlights how they view their role in these professional spaces. Each day, showing up physically, appears to be half the battle; the mental weight of unsaid expectations can be a personal and hidden strain

as they represent, not only for themselves, but for those who may follow in their footsteps. Being

able to be a resource and pave the way for others in their family gives a huge sense of joy and

pride that the sacrifices were well worth it. Some participants described their presence and role in

their respective careers as being more than having an accomplished career. Rather, their presence

means that they can now use their roles and knowledge to impact policies, hold others

accountable and create equitable environments. Unlike what Frazier (1957) found in his review

of the Black middle-class, participants in this study, who identified as being of middle, upper-

middle or upper-class socioeconomic status, demonstrated less conformity to White standards

and more authenticity to their Black identity. It is quite plausible, when considering the civil

rights era and race relations in America, that Frazier's review of the Black middle-class at that

historical period, was less vocal, less demanding, less assertive. In present day America, the

needle for Black upward mobility and agency has shifted. With each passing generation, history

shows a constant push for equity and reciprocity at the table of fairness. Past research has shown

that a significant shift in Black mobility occurred following a historical, societal issue, i.e. World

War II (Cole & Omari, 2003; Collins, 1983; Landry & Marsh, 2011), or Apartheid in South

Africa (Canham & Williams, 2016). At the time of this research, there were two overarching

societal events that shun a light on pieces of the Black experience: The Black Lives Matter

(BLM) movement -- heightened following the killing of George Floyd -- and the global

pandemic of 2020, which heightened disparities and inequities within the Black community.

Between both situations, institutions and organizations were confronted with looking deeply at

the status of how Black people were treated and what structural systems continually perpetuated

the disparities for Black people. For participants, they are positioned to be change agents in their

roles, to drive the agenda of equity and fairness forward, and to change the trajectories for their

future generations. However, their ability to advocate for an entire group of Black people when considering the variations within the diasporic communities, presents complexities related to identity.

The definition of what it means to be Black was fluid, dynamic, and changed over time for participants. Previous research has shown the complexities underlying the terminology and vernacular related to Black people (Agyemang, 2005; Hanchard, 1990; McPherson & Shelby, 2004). The uprooting of Blacks from the continent of Africa brings into focus the complex nature of race and ethnicity. While the concept of race is related to one's biological make-up and phenotypical features, ethnicity has an amalgamation of experiences -- shared and distinct culture, traditions, and social behaviors -- leading to formation of individual and group identity (Agyemang, 2005). The difficulty in having a singular identity for people of African descent was made clear throughout discussions and affirmed sentiments from previous studies (Hanchard, 1980). The identities of participants are important as they represent specific meanings and experiences; specifically, a sense of agency has become embedded in how they begin to view themselves. Ignoring one's identity, whether intentional or unintentional, may invalidate people's lived experiences.

Since both race and ethnicity are used interchangeably, it creates difficulty in understanding the similarities and differences in how people of African descent identify and make sense of their lives. One participant described how his identity shifted over time -- going from Black American to African American to American -- as a result of experiences he had encountered. His thought process of aligning with simply being 'American' was a resistance to any narrative about his worth or Black individuals' worth in America. This sentiment aligns with previous research that speaks about the conjoining of African as a prefix to American and what

that means in terms of Black identity and the associated complexity (Agyemang, 2005; Asante, 2016; Hanchard, 1980). In a review by Agyemang (2005), the implications for labeling people of African descent was discussed from a health perspective. It was suggested that moving beyond a Black/White dichotomy by researchers and practitioners, which dominated the common approach until the end of the 20th century, can aid in a better understanding of the complexities attached to identity and minimize oversimplification of issues (Agyemang, 2005). A comparison was made of South Asian groups -- Indian, Pakistan and Bangladeshi -- that helped in delineating various health differences. It was posited that the same approach could be applied to people of African descent in an effort to understand and acknowledge the huge diversity. It was clear for participants in this study, that being able to choose their identity that best aligned with their values and beliefs were important. This is also congruent with past research that shows how the imposition of identity on Black people in America can be impactful of their own self-determination (Hanchard, 1980).

Identity was shown to be an important factor in understanding how participants viewed themselves and how they were viewed by others. The sentiments shared revealed that identity is a complex and nuanced issue for participants. Identity was discussed on three fronts: firstly, looking at the racial socialization and how those experiences impacted participants' understanding of race and racism in the United States; secondly, looking at within-group cultural and ethnic differences related to the home country of participants parents - i.e., those with parents from Africa, the Caribbean, or the United States; and thirdly, looking at how one's physical image, name, vernacular, and self-perception collectively formed the core of their identity.

Participants discussed how their earliest experiences with race impacted their identity development (Belgrave & Allison, 2010; Cross, 1971), with incidents occurring as early as elementary school years. For some, exposure to race and forms of racism did not occur until much later in their lives, well into young adulthood. Participants discussed how specific incidents with racist undertones were explicit enough to give pause for reflection. These provoking events or experiences are described as dissonance within the framework of Black Identity Development (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). At this stage of development, the individual has an experience that shifts how they perceive themselves or other Black individuals, resulting in deeper questioning about their identity. For participants who were at this stage of dissonance or *encounter,* it was characterized by a pivotal moment affecting the individual and shaping their view on race; for others, the experience was positive and aligned with the *immersion-emersion* stage - where individuals enter the portal of Black culture, giving light to their history and experiences, as well as learning and understanding what it means to be Black (Cross, 1971).

What was clear in discussing the issue of identity, is that there were varied experiences within their respective geographical locations. While there were differences in upbringing based on cultural habits and practices, there was a sense that Black people in America do share similar experiences based on the color of their skins. These shared experiences, though unfortunate, do bring together the various diasporic groups. While past research illustrates how difficult it may be for Black people to have a singular national identity (Agyemang et al., 2005; Hanchard, 1980), there appears to be a kindred spirit shared by all Black people based on their collective experiences connected to their ancestral lineage, the trans-Atlantic slave period, and its after effects. While the blending and common experiences shared by all Black people across the diaspora is important, so are the experiences with institutions. This is significant in moving

beyond the Black/White dichotomy -- underscoring much of the discourse in the twentieth

century and beginning stages of the twenty-first century -- to a place where the different

diasporic identities are extrapolated based on context and situation (Agyemang et al., 2005). In

other words, acknowledging the different identities within the diaspora needs to shift from

convenience -- blending -- to one that acknowledges diasporic variations. Beyond group identity,

the issue of individual and personal identity was salient for participants.

With respect to identity, self-awareness, self-image, and the perceptions held by others

was extremely important. Name and image were two points of focus for participants. For some,

their name announced who they were before being seen; for others, their image in terms of

hairstyle or attire (Jones, 2020; Sims et al., 2019), brought with it some experiences that affirmed

who they were as individuals. For participants, being authentic in every aspect of themselves was

important. While this was not found in the literature review, it was clear that being comfortable

in how they *present* acted as a form of resistance to assimilation into a dominant White culture.

While not all participants shared those sentiments, this was a very important factor in breaking

any psychological barriers. Psychological barriers, in this sense, meant operating from a place of

fear or feeling the need to assimilate, thereby, losing or shedding pieces of their own identity.

For participants, being authentically themselves in their professional spaces also meant

representation for up and coming BFPs. Thus, the significance of how they were viewed was

twofold: on one hand, it meant liberation and freedom for the individual and on the other hand

meant that they would be able to be an example for others who looked like them.

Limitations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the lived experiences of Black

First-Generation Professionals as they pursue their work lives. One limitation of the study was

the sample size. The study consisted of fifteen participants and limits its applicability to larger

groups or populations. As a qualitative study, the social constructs are fluid, dynamic, and not

static, a result of context and time (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The study will include a small

sample of participants rendering the data, possibly transferable, but not generalizable.

Additionally, since participants identified as being African American, Black American, Black or

Caribbean, findings may only be transferable to those who share similar identities. Another

limitation was the geographical region where the majority of participants resided. With the

exception of one participant, all lived in the north-eastern region of America. Thus, experiences

may be different in other regions of the country. The context and time period when the study

occurred should also be considered. Over the last two years when this study was conducted, there

has been more attention on the experiences of Black people in America -- enhanced by a

pandemic and a rise in social justice issues. Thus, how participants responded during the

interviews may be different than if the study were conducted prior to that period. Since there was

little to no previous research around BFPs, the study was exploratory rather than explanatory,

suggesting that more research is needed to understand this particular group. As a result of

participants having varied understandings of the term Black First Generation Professionals,

participants' description of the term was not as insightful as originally anticipated. Additionally,

some participants did not complete the question, precluding me from analyzing their

interpretation, as originally planned.

        Another limitation was based on the format of data collection. As a result of the global

pandemic, a zoom platform was used for most interviews; two interviews occurred in-person.

While this was a convenient format, it resulted in some participants multi-tasking while being

interviewed. For example, one participant had to attend to a child during the interview, which

may have disrupted how that person would have answered in another setting. Another participant was driving and may have had different responses in a different, structured setting. Finally, my positionality as an insider-outsider, who has similar experiences as participants, may have impacted my interpretation of their responses.

Future Implications

This is the first study to explore the intersections of individuals who identify as Black, First-Generation college students, who currently work in White-collar professional spaces. Since this study focused on individuals who identified as Black, future research may apply similar research to other minoritized groups (Hispanic, Latin-X, Native American Pacific Islander, or Asian) to understand their experiences in professional workspaces that are predominantly White and may espouse practices from the dominant cultures' perspective. Additionally, future research may consider looking at second-generation college professionals to determine if elements of the gains-loss spectrum remain constant or if they have changed -- and if so, to what degree.

As it relates to the experiences of BFPs in the workplace, human resource administrators, diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging officers, and policy makers should consider incorporating not only access, but formalized support for BFPs. Considering the fact that participants described their continued success as connected to mentorship, human resource administrators should integrate mentorship as part of staff development. In doing so, the responsibility and time that mentors spend as *extra duty* can be accounted for in their daily work and in performance evaluations; for mentees, recognition and support of their intersecting identities can be of benefit to their career growth and development. When looking at mentorship, it was evident that upward mobility had different effects for different groups (Liu, 2017). In comparison to White non-Hispanic groups, the cost of upward mobility includes issues--

emotional, social, physical--for Black individuals that are often unaccounted for and can hinder

their career growth. Additionally, administrators and policy makers could incorporate the

function of restorative practices and spaces in order to create meaningful dialogue about staff

members who identify as Black. Creating spaces within the hiring framework can create

competency, further understanding of Black identity and how to support those individuals, in

those settings. Moreover, human resource administrators should contemplate not only how to

provide access to career opportunities for Black individuals, but they must also create an

environment that supports their sense of belonging in those spaces if they are to be retained and

have access to career advancement. Additionally, as the study revealed the stress felt by some

participants, it is important for individuals outside the Black community to be cognizant of the

experiences, present and past, that are attached to the Black experience. The study sought to

understand what were those experiences that encompassed BFPs. Some of those experiences are

very complex and attached to the experiences of being the first in their families to be in those

spaces. Future research may consider institutional practices within professional spaces, that are

predominantly White, and how they account for, or even strive to understand, those experiences

and its effect on one's equity and belonging for BFPs. Such work should be directly connected

to, but independent of a human resource function. Individuals working in such capacities should

be able to promote conversations and practices that acknowledge the challenges illuminated in

this study. Furthermore, administrators should consider incorporating learning modules and

opportunities for all employees--as done for other mandatory training--related to being more

equity-minded (McNair et al., 2020). Given that daily interactions in these professional settings--

meetings, committees, assigned roles, conversations with members from the dominant culture--

appear innocent and harmless, administrators should consider how to further integrate cultural

competence for all while simultaneously providing necessary support in the form of mentorship

for BFPs.

Another important component of the study had to do with losses or experiences that were

unaccounted for as it relates to family relationships. Findings from this study may help

practitioners in the counseling field who may be working with similar populations having

difficulty striking a healthy balance between their current life and past experiences involving

their family of origin. This study demonstrated that there is a period of redefining family

functioning, i.e., roles, responsibilities, and boundaries, for participants. Thereafter, a new

construct of BFPs role and function with family seemed to surface, allowing for healthier

relationships with family members. For organizations or groups seeking to enact mentorship

groups or initiatives, understanding the two paths within that framework is important. Being able

to delineate and view mentorship from two angles - personal and professional - may help

establish better mentor/mentee match and practices. Given this unexpected, but significant

finding, future research should look closely at those two paths and its effect on the long-term

outcome for the mentee. Additionally, institutions of higher education that have equal

opportunity programs, Trio programs or similar should consider using the findings as it relates to

mentorship to better inform how they develop these programs to serve Black youth with similar

backgrounds and experiences. Finally, the study revealed that Black identity and affinity is not

infused sufficiently, nor effectively, in the general curriculum in the secondary education system.

Some participants, mainly those who were in predominantly White spaces, revealed their late

exposure to Black culture and identity, thereby impacting their sense of belonging to that

experience. Additionally, feelings of being 'othered' or the need to fit into the dominant culture

reveals a deeper gap within our secondary education system. Such gaps may be connected to the

larger structural system and remnants of the enslavement of Black people in the western hemisphere. This study reaffirms the need to revisit and examine how Black culture and identity is introduced, not only to Black youth, but all during formative stages of their development.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of Black First Generation Professionals (BFPs) as they pursued their work lives. The study revealed that the Black experience in the western hemisphere is complex, nuanced, varied, dynamic, and rich in success stories. The challenges faced by BFPs involved their daily work experiences, their family relationships, their identities, their mentors, and their home environment. Understanding that the experience of BFPs is directly connected to the experience of oppression, marginalization, discrimination, and subjugation to a lower caste system -- participants found ways to move beyond any perceived or experienced psychological barriers. The *moving beyond* is not a definitive, nor conclusive, expression of their realities; rather, the vast majority of the participants were *constantly aware and attached* to their identity as a Black person in America. The access and opportunities depicted in this study are analogous to *flood gates* being opened for participants; the desire, drive and perseverance to pursue self-actualization for themselves while creating new pathways for those that may follow in their footsteps, should not be understated. The stories of BFPs are symbolic and representative of overcoming obstacles, breaking barriers, sacrifice, turbulence, but importantly, one of redemption. Black experiences in the western hemisphere have been traumatic and oppressive for the majority. However, with each generation, there is a passing of the torch with the expectation of continually moving the needle of equity and access in the right direction. For participants in the study, their ability to enact agency was demonstrative of the movement.

The success stories for all participants equated to some form of *opportunity cost* -- a burden, a toll, or some sacrifice for a greater good of themselves and their communities. The work environment was a place that encapsulated various feelings, but represented a change for them and future generations. For participants, their home communities and experiences remain with them and are embedded in who they are and representative of the challenges faced. The identities of participants are an amalgamation of the diasporic communities in the west -- one with both common and different experiences. Though there are clear differences in cultural and traditional experiences, there is a commonality and centrality of being from African descent. The origins of participants' ancestors and their geographical location may be clear for some and a mystery for others. However, their common experience as a Black person in America is significant for continued improvement and upliftment as a group. The negative experiences tied to the transatlantic slave period are being reconciled within the fabric of America. Such reconciliations equate to more BFPs in spaces that were previously exclusive.

The stories uncovered a new form of Black evolution and experience since the civil rights era and the Black power movement; one that meant occupying spaces that were exclusive and unfamiliar. BFPs of this period were less concerned about assimilating to fit a dominant culture or narrative; rather, they entered these spaces being authentically themselves and were unapologetic and proud in all arenas. The study captured a unique time in history-- the global pandemic of 2020 and racial unrest due the killing of a Black man, George Floyd-- and allowed participants to self-reflect on what their experiences had been based on their Black identity in America. Being able to determine how one identifies and enacting self-determination for oneself has been a liberating experience for the participants in this study. Their paths were at times lonely, but in most cases, there was a path necessary to embark upon; one that involved others

who had etched away at creating a path to self-actualization. This path is representative of

mentorship and undergirds the success of BFPs. Mentorship is important, but yet, often

overlooked in terms of how it is used for both personal and professional development of Black

youth and professionals. The upward mobility of BFPs in this study was directly connected to

mentorship experiences and guidance. However, the framework of mentorship is arbitrary in

most cases, often lacking a clear understanding of how it can and has addressed issues of past

personal experiences and future professional growth. BFPs have arrived and showed up in

brilliant fashion. The movement towards equity for their community is being nurtured, groomed

and developed for the next generation. BFPs are, in the words of reggae artist Chronixx,

"Legends that you never heard of before."

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Research question:

What are the lived experiences of Black First-Generation Professionals as they enter and pursue their work lives?

General questions providing focus for study:

1. How were family relationships viewed or constructed during earlier and later stages of their careers and what was family support like during these different periods?

2. What were things that were lost or gained as a result of their educational attainment? Does psychological well-being come as a cost for attaining middle or upper-class status?

3. What does it mean to be the first in their families to enter into White-collar professional spaces?

4. How did their identity of being Black impact their experience in the workplace?

Background:

1. Can you describe where you grew up and what it was like?

2. Can you talk a little bit about your family and the members of your immediate and extended household?

3. What types of jobs did your family members hold when you were growing up?

College:

4. How was education viewed/valued in your family?

5. When did you decide that college was an option and how did you come to that decision?

6. What were some of the influences that pushed you to attend college?

7. As a FGS, what were some of the challenges you faced?

8. As a FGS, what was your relationship like with family and friends?

Family relationships:

1. How would you describe your role in your family? Does your role look different during your upbringing compared to present time? If so, can you describe both scenarios?

2. Please describe what kinds of family support you received before you began your career vs. after you began your career, if any.

3. Can you describe any experiences that include your family as relates to your career? If none, please explain why?

4. As a result of your educational accomplishments, what were some things that you *gained* and what were some things that you *lost* as it relates to family relationships?

5. How would you describe the attitudes of your family toward the profession you have chosen?

Identity:

1. What were some of your experiences surrounding race growing up?

2. In terms of racial identity, how do you identify and why?

3. Has your view on your identity changed over time? If so, can you describe how it has changed?

4. How has your racial identity impacted your career path and experiences thus far?

5. As began your career, what was your experience with being Black in a White-collar professional space?

6. What were some of the challenges of being Black in White-collar spaces and how did you overcome these challenges?

Mentorship and Support:

1. Did you have mentors who supported you as you began your career and if so, who were they and how did they support you?

2. How has mentorship affected your experience in White-collar spaces?

3. Do you belong to any groups or organizations and if so, can you describe your reasons for joining and what role(s) you occupy?

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INVITATION EMAIL

Greetings:

My name is Duane A. Williams and I am a doctoral candidate at Montclair State University in the Ph.D. Family Science and Human Development program. I am working with Dr. Pearl Stewart on a study of Black First Generation Professionals. Black First Generation Professionals are individuals who identify as Black (any subset of people of African descent), as First Generation College Students (FGS), have earned a master's or doctoral degree, and work in White-collar professional spaces.

I am particularly interested in understanding what it means to be a Black person in a professional setting when considering complex family relationships and one's racial identity and experiences. I am also interested in understanding what are some of the gains and losses experienced for attaining academic success. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the lived experiences of these individuals. In order to participate in this study, you must meet the following criteria:

> 1) Have earned at least a master's degree or doctoral degree
> 2) Must have worked in a White-collar profession full-time for at least 5 years
> 3) Must identify as Black and be born in America, Africa or the Caribbean
> 4) Must have identified as having been a First Generation college student

Participants would complete a brief survey and take part in 1-2 interviews in-person or via Zoom lasting approximately 45 - 60 minutes. Please respond if you are interested in participating in this project and if yes, complete the following tasks below. This study has been approved by the Montclair State University Institutional Review Board. IRB #001010".

- Sign the attached consent form and return to me - If you are unable to complete the consent form prior to the interview, a verbal agreement will suffice and I will review the consent of the project with you at that time.
- Complete this screener form
- Complete this reflective question before we conduct our 1st interview

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT SCREENER FORM

1. **Screening**

Highest degree earned:

Your current occupation:

Total amount of years working professionally:

Do you have a career mentor(s)? If yes, how many?

2. **Parent Information**

Parent(s) occupation:

Parents highest level of education completed:

Parent(s) place of birth:

Perceived socio-economic status when growing up:

3. **Demographics**

Age:

Gender:

Race/ethnicity:

City/State/location where you grew up:

Current place or residence:

Total # of siblings:

Your place in birth order:

Current socio-economic status:

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Please read below to understand details of this study. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you fill in this form.

Who am I? My name is Duane A. Williams. I am a doctoral candidate at Montclair State University in the Family Science and Human Development department.

Why is this study being done? I want to learn about the lived experiences of Black First Generation Professionals.

What will happen while you are in the study? I will conduct one or two interviews with you. Interviews will be either in-person or via Zoom. I will ask questions about your experiences of being a Black individual in White-collar professional spaces. I will also ask questions related to your upbringing and past/present family relationships. The interview will be recorded and then transcribed. I may confer with you at times to confirm my thoughts, findings, and interpretation of information you shared.

Time: Your interview will take about 1 hour.

Risks: You may feel mixed emotions (happy, sad, ambivalent, angry, etc.) while discussing your family upbringing and experiences related to your career. You may request to stop the interview at any time.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits for participating. However, this study may give a voice to your experiences or others with similar experiences as Black First Generation Professionals. You may help others understand experiences that may often go unacknowledged or misunderstood.

Compensation: You will receive a $20 gift card for participation.

Confidentiality: Your privacy is important. Prior to beginning the recording, I will ask you to create a pseudonym; this will protect your identity. Only you and I will know of your participation in this study.

Do you have any questions about this study? If you have any questions about this study, please contact Dr. Pearl Stewart at 973-655-6884 or email her at stewartp@montclair.edu.

Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant? Call or email the IRB Chair, Dr. Dana Levitt, at 973-655-2097 or reviewboard@montclair.edu.

It is okay to use my data in other studies:
Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

It is okay to (audiotape, videotape, or photograph) me while I am in this study:

Please initial: Yes   _____ No

_____   _____   _____

Print Your Name   Signature   Date

Duane A. Williams_____   _____   _____

Name of Principal Investigator   Signature   Date

Dr. Pearl Stewart_____   _____   _____

Dissertation Chair   Signature   Date

APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT INVITATION FLYER

Share Your Story!
I am conducting research on individuals who identify as Black First Generation Professionals

What is the study about?

Black First Generation Professionals (BFPs) in this study are individuals who identify as Black (any subset of people of African descent), as First Generation College Students (FGS), have earned a master's or doctoral degree, and work in white-collar professional spaces. This study will look at what it means to be a BFP in white-collar professional settings when considering complex family relationships and one's racial identity and experiences. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the lived experiences of these individuals.

To particpate, you must meet the following requirements:

- Have earned at least a master's degree or doctoral degree
- Must have been the first in your family to work in a white-collar profession and have worked for at least 5 years
- Must identify as Black and be born in America, Africa or the Caribbean
- Must have identified as having been a First Generation college student

Participants would complete a brief survey and take part in 1-2 interviews in-person or via Zoom lasting approximately 45 - 60 minutes. Participants will receive a $20 Gift card.

Interested indivuals may contact Duane Williams at: williamsdu@montclair.edu