

AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE MILLENNIALS' SENSE OF SELF IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT ROLES

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By  
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ABSTRACT

Historical and cultural images may influence younger African American women's sense of self in higher education (HE) support roles. However, Black women's spirits of survival and resiliency have passed from generation to generation. This study utilized heuristic, grounded theory to generate theory regarding sense of self for African American female millennials within HE support roles. The study extended current research on younger Black women and their self-concept by examining multiple data, including an online mixed questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and a job-profile document review. With the social media hashtags #BlackGirlMagic #MelaninPoppin, and evolved images in the media of Black womanhood, such as, awkward Black girl, Black women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), among other areas—they are telling their own stories.

The core categories of Black Titles Matter, Black Self Matters, Black Work Matters, and Black Support Matters generated the **Same, but Different Identity Theory**, inspired by the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements. These movements are examples of how Black women can lead a generation by 'talking back' (hooks, 1989, 2015) and liberating their voices. Implications of findings for transforming HE environments and cultures to support their growth and development include enhancing hiring practices/job postings, creating inclusive environments, millennial career advancement programs, affinity group/networking opportunities, mentorship programming, and supervisor cultural diversity training.

## APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies, have examined a dissertation titled “African American Female Millennials’ Sense of Self in Higher Education Support Roles” presented by Breann L. Branch, candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## PREFACE

I have fond memories growing up in the early 1990's, in a middle class, two-parent, African American household in Southern California. I was surrounded by family, neighbors, teachers, friends, community, and church members who looked like me and celebrated our Black culture. Even so, at an early age, it was instilled in me that I was a Black child. I understood this meant I was a descendant of African people who are of a rich culture; knowing this fact was a source of pride and confidence. The first poem I memorized, was *Hey Black Child* (1980) by Useni Eugene Perkins. The poet asks a Black child 'do you know who you are?' And goes on to tell a Black child how smart and how strong they are and encouraging them to be anything they wanted to be. However, I was too young, at the time, to understand that this positive message about my intelligence and Blackness was intended to combat socio-historical and sociocultural negative messages about my identity as a Black female child. Years later, as I entered my first predominately White environment, in the U.S. workforce, I encountered racial and gendered discrimination. For this reason, having a strong sense of self is vital to the success and advancement of younger Black women in the workplace. I owe this strength to my Heavenly Father, my cultural community base, and strong social supports.

Meeting and exceeding my parents' expectations, I earned a bachelor's degree from Howard University and a master's degree from Avila University. Not until I began to work in higher education (HE) and entering the doctoral program, did I begin to take my learning, growth, and development personally. My educational pursuits were a way out of a controlling marriage and a way to provide a better life for my son. While the coursework and challenges of this rigorous academic track were high, the most challenging part of this

educational journey involved combating my own negative thoughts of self; worrying am I enough and persevering through difficult situations. My educational and life experiences have led me to this inquiry of the African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles. This research is not only a degree requirement; but also, a self-affirming commission on my path towards healing.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my son, **Blair W.E.B. Branch**. Blair you are my pride and joy. Thank you for sitting on my lap while I wrote the very first chapters. Thank you for looking at me with such love and hope in your baby brown eyes. Thank you for walking in the room, and saying, “Mommy, what you doing? You a doctor, yet?” Thank you for your encouraging words saying, “Mommy, I am proud of you” and “Mommy, you can do it.” Thank you for surviving with me and allowing me to become a better Mother each day. Son, I dedicate this dissertation to you. Mommy LOVES YOU.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

We wear the mask that grins and lies, It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, This debt we pay to human guile; With torn and bleeding hearts we smile, And mouth with myriad subtleties.

(Dunbar, 1913, as cited in Gray White, (1999, p. 24)

Since the establishment of the United States, along with African American men, African American women have had to exist in a White, male-dominated society (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014; Bush, 2010; Collins, 1990; Cooper, 2018; Davis, 1981, 2011; Fordham, 2010; hooks, 1989; Wyatt, 1997). Hundreds of years of systematic, cultural, and institutional oppression, and pre- and post-enslavement have disenfranchised and fragmented Black women and their families (Abrams et al., 2014). Nevertheless, overcoming the oppression from slavery where they were abused, sold, and separated from their children, Black women possess the same resilient spirit of survival and resiliency that has been passed down from generation to generation. Historical and cultural images of the “Mammy,” “Jezebel,” and “Sapphire” have positioned Black women as caretaking laborers; sexual objects to bear and nurse children; and to be considered as emasculating, aggressive beings (Abrams et al., 2014; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016; West, 1995). This process began in the American Slave Trade. Mammy is an image of a full-figured, dark-skinned Black woman caring for White families. The image is symbolic of the antebellum South, and for the White authority over the enslaved Blacks (Radu, 2013). Phil Patton (1994) explained Mammy as, “[c]aring for the White children and mediat[ing] between the Whites and the Blacks, forgetting about her own persona, suppressing her identity inside the weight of heartiness, her sexuality inside her role as surrogate mother, teacher, and cook” (p. 5).

Jezebel is another image constructed during a period of slavery, portraying female slaves as hypersexual and seductive; forcing the slave owner to engage in sexual relations with her (Jewell 1993, 2012). However, the Jezebel image was created to explain the sexual relationship between a female slave and her master and to mask the truth of sexual violence and abuse he inflicted upon her (Jewell 1993, 2012). Sapphire is an image of an aggressive Black woman who emasculates her Black male counterpart. Jewell (1993) expounded, “Sapphire as [n]oted for telling people off, and spouting her opinion in an animated loud manner ... hands-on-hips, finger pointing style .... Sapphire is viewed as comedic and is never taken seriously” (p. 45). Together, these historical images portray Black women negatively, and diminish their *real* lived experiences, and lead to the dehumanization of their bodies. Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014) explained that lived experiences are, “the result of any transaction between people and the world, emphasizing the subjective significance of the situation on the person....the subjective side of culture – mediates and organizes behaviors” (p. 33).

During enslavement, Black women were treated less than human, dehumanized, with no consideration given to their thoughts, feelings, desires, wants, or needs. In *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Deborah Gray White (1999) relied on the Work Project Administration interviews with female, ex-slaves to describe sentiments of their existences, as noted above. She expounded on this existence: “We wear the mask that grins and lies, It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, This debt we pay to human guile; With torn and bleeding hearts we smile, And mouth with myriad subtleties” ((Dunbar, 1913, as cited in Gray White, (1999, p. 24)). The notion of silence and masking pain was rooted in female slaves’ lived experiences, which was subsequently passed down through generations

and entered the mindsets of young Black women of today (Davis 1981, 2011; Harris-Perry, 2011; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016). Not only was pain and silence passed down through the generations, but also their rich African culture. To preserve their history, customs, and traditions, enslaved Africans used the tradition of storytelling to transmit their culture to younger generations (Fulop & Raboteau, 2013; Sorrentino, 2017). Transmission of culture was a survival mechanism used by enslaved Africans who were violently displaced, separated from their homeland, and found themselves in a new world.

Slaves brought the oral tradition of storytelling to their new environment (Sorrentino, 2017). Oral tradition is the vehicle that transmits culture, preserving memories to make sense of the world (Fulop, & Raboteau, 2013; Sorrentino, 2017). Fulop and Raboteau (2013) explained the importance of transmission of culture:

West African cultures from which the slaves came... shared a fundamental outlook toward past, present, and future and common means of cultural expression, which could well have constituted the basis of sense of community and identity capable of surviving the impact of slavery. (p. 80)

Oral tradition in the forms of storytelling, spirituals, music, and dance was a means of survival for slaves, passing on their experiences, hopes and fears to the next generation (Fulop, & Raboteau, 2013; Sorrentino, 2017).

For African American women, transmission of culture takes place everywhere, even in the workplace. Early Black feminist scholar, Anna Julia Cooper (1988) remarked, “Only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me’” (p. xxix). In other words, Black women stand at the intersection of race and gender; therefore, with our presence alone, enters our culture. Thus, in this study, I examined African American, female, millennials and how these past images

and memories shape their sense of self in the modern-day, HE workplace. I specifically analyzed younger Black women who serve in higher education support roles, an institution historically reserved for elite White men.

For this inquiry, I use the terms African American and Black interchangeably; defined as a cultural ethnic group who are descendants from enslaved Africans brought to the United States and include people who indicate their race as Black, African American, (Census.gov, 2020). Dumas (2016) explained Black as a “self-determined name of a racialized social group that shares a specific set of histories, cultural processes, and imagined and performed kinship” (p. 12-13). He contends that Black is a synonym of African American and replaced “Negro” and “Colored” after years of struggle for Black people to be seen as a political group within society (Dumas, 2016). These previous terms used to label Black people, Colored and Negro, were accepted by White people; but Black was a term that descendants of Africa used as a rejection of the status quo. Smith (1992) noted, “Black also connoted strength and power, a connection that was capitalized on by the slogan ‘Black power’” (p. 501). Thus, Black is used as a political term in this study.

However, in 1988, Civil Rights leaders developed the term African American for the purpose of creating a positive cultural connection to their homeland (Smith, 1992). The changing language to identify and redefine Black people was an attempt to gain respect in a society that viewed Blacks as inferior. Despite this controversy, Hall, Phillips, and Townsend (2015) viewed the terms Black and African American as associated with a lower socioeconomic status and negative stereotypes and suggested using Americans of African descendants to identify Black people as a racial group. For this study, African American will

be used as a racial identifier, as a socially constructed group of people, with Black as a political term to communicate social context.

There is substantial research on African American women's sense of self (Brown, White-Johnson, & Griffin-Fennell, 2013; Brown & Valk, 2010; Buckley, & Carter, 2005; Collins, 1998; Finnegan, 2018; Griffiths, 2010; Harris-Perry, 2011; Hatcher, 2007; Thompson, 2017; Walker, 1983); sufficient research on tensions between academics and non-academics in HE (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Bonk, Crouch, Kilian, & Lowell, 2006; Dobson, 2000; Sebalj, Holbrook, & Bourke, 2012; Szekeres, 2004; Whitchurch, 2009); and literature on the student experience of the millennial generation in higher education institutions (HEI's) (Apugo, 2017; Nyachae, 2016; Oblinger, 2003; Singleton, 2018; Strauss, & Howe, 2000; Tulgan, 2009). However, there is limited literature regarding sense of self amongst African American millennial women in (HE) support roles.

Hatcher (2007) defined sense of self as a person's evaluation of their own individual worth. Collier (2018) expressed sense of self as "the raw materials of personal culture, history, and experience, which directly influence an individual's core values and beliefs about themselves and their relationship to others" (p. 6). For this study, I define sense of self as one's personal self-worth; knowing your true self, grounded in beliefs, values, and experiences (Collier, 2018; Hatcher 2007). HE support roles will be defined as staff members who are not employed as academics and support the academic professionals in an administrative role (Dobson, 2000; Sebalj, Holbrook, & Bourke, 2012; Szekeres, 2011; Whitchurch, 2010). Millennials are a cohort group of children born between 1982 and 2005 (Singleton, 2018; Strauss, & Howe, 2000; Tulgan, 2009). For this diverse population of women, research is extremely limited. This grounded, heuristic inquiry bridged the research

gap related to sense of self for this younger group of Black women and enhanced the body of knowledge on millennial women in the HE workplace. Understanding self-concept is critical for African American millennial women in higher education institutions (HEI's), initially formed as institutions, traditionally reserved for White men (Gregory, 2001; Guillory, 2001; Harley, 2008; Johnson, 2016; Robinson, 2012).

Additionally, since the enslavement period, historical and cultural images of Black womanhood have been a part of the dominant society (Abrams et al., 2014; Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993, 2012). To combat the internalization of these negative stereotypes, a strong sense of self is vital for Black women to combat internalization of these negative stereotypes (DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter 2000; Patterson, 2004). As a qualitative researcher, I found it important to lift the voices of this class of women and workers whose voices may be silenced due to their racial and gendered identities (Harris, 2007; Settles, 2006; Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011). I closely identify with individuals who serve in a support role at an HEI. My goal was to give voice to African American women in these roles, who are at the intersection of multiple-oppressed identities (Crenshaw, 1989).

I began this study with the observation that younger Black women may have lower sense of selves than previous generations (Brown et al., 2013) due to the influx of negative images of Black women which have persisted overtime. Overall, the findings from this study generated new theory for African American female millennials' sense of self for HE support roles. The Same, but Different Identity Theory revealed that many younger Black women confront similar racial and gender oppression as the older generation from the larger society; however, this cohort of diverse women respond to these inequities differently. With the social media hashtags, #BlackGirlMagic #MelaninPoppin, and evolved images in the media

of Black womanhood, such as, awkward Black girl, Black women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), among other areas—they are telling their own stories. They have also been inspired by Black Lives Matter (About Black Lives Matter, n.d.) and #MeToo (About ‘me too’: History and Vision, n.d.) movements. These movements are examples of how Black women can lead a generation by “talking back” (hooks, 1989, 2015) and liberating their voices.

The subsequent background of the study situates the importance of having an awareness of the history of higher education and the formation of support roles that influenced the experiences of African American women in higher education institutions. I highlight significant events in these institutions that came to employ Black women and other marginalized groups. As higher education institutions became more complex, the need for professional staff with increased expertise and specializations evolved to support academic faculty and administrators.

### **Study Background**

As previously outlined, African American women have a past shaped by socio-historical and sociocultural images and stereotypes (Abrams et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2013; Collins, 1986; Harris-Perry, 2011; James, Foster, & Guy-Sheftall, 2009; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016, White, 1990, 1985; Wyatt, 1997). There is significant research on Black women in HE regarding their leadership roles and experiences as faculty and students (Aguirre, 2000; Collier, 2018; Davis, 2009; Guiffrida, & Douthit, 2010; Harley, 2008; Henry & Glenn, 2009; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Jones, Dawkins, McClinton, & Glover, 2012; Manley, 2015; Robinson, 2012). However,

there is limited research on younger African American female experiences in HE support roles (Brown et al., 2013; Johnson, 2016).

I began the illumination of their roles through an overview of historical information about the formation of support roles and the experiences of African American women and other marginalized groups in HEI's with an introduction of significant events in their development overtime. This discussion is followed by the formation of support roles for understanding how millennials, also known as Generation Y, fit within the larger institutional environment of HE.

### **Brief History of Higher Education**

The foundation of HE in the United States began around the colonial era (1607-1733) (Thelin, 2011). The purpose of the institution was to “identify and ratify colonial elite” (p. 25). As a result, prestige and high social status became affiliated with college education, leaving most American families, similar to today's society, unable to afford the high cost of a college education. Thus, during the colonial era, class distinction and social order were of high importance. From the outset, HE was formed as an institution that exhibited the intertwine of classism, sexism, and racism; certainly leaving women and people of color out of its design.

As a pioneer in HE, Dr. Mary Jane McLeod Bethune founded Daytona Literary and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls in 1904, which later merged with Cookman College for Men in 1923 and became Bethune-Cookman University, a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). From 1923 to 1942 and from 1946 to 1947, Dr. Bethune served as college president, leading the college to grow and develop into an accredited HE institution. Dr. Bethune was known as “The First Lady of The Struggle” (Kentake, July,

2015, para, 1) with a commitment to garnering better lives for African American women (Bethune, 1938; Flemming, 1995; About Bethune-Cookman University., n.d; Kentake, July, 2015).

Another HE pioneer was Dr. Sarah Jane Woodson, who in 1858, became the first American African woman to teach English and Latin courses at Wilberforce University. In addition, she was the first Black person to teach at a HBCU and the only HBCU Black professor to teach before the Civil War (Smith, 1992). These examples of early African American educational leaders established the legacy of Black women in HE.

Moreover, twenty-first century HEI's have evolved to include women, people of varying socioeconomic backgrounds, individuals who belong to the LGBTQ+ communities, and many culturally diverse, underrepresented groups which include African American people (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016; Evans, 2007; Ward & Tierney, 2017). Yet, retention of African American students remains an issue within academia. Banks and Dohy (2019) claimed that African American students have lower retention and graduation rates due to the achievement gaps that emanate from pk-12 schools (Carter & Welner, 2013), as evident by measured scores on standardized tests, the most contested, highly debated, and misunderstood issue today (Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2013; Tatum, 2005; Valencia, 2015). This barrier, in conjunction with opportunity gaps in terms of health, housing, nutrition, safety, and enriching experiences, may prevent African American students from succeeding academically (Carter & Welner, 2013). Together, achievement and opportunity gaps are likely to have negative effects on retention and graduation rates of Black college students. Retention and graduation rates for students of underrepresented

groups may be increased through strength-based advocacy and mentoring programs (Banks & Dohy, 2019).

Likewise, as students, Black women have experienced discrimination, intimidation, and rejection while trying to gain access to HE (Purwar, 2004; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Williams, 2001). To the same extent, as faculty of color, Black women have overcome many challenges and barriers including discrimination based on the double jeopardy of racism and sexism (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Stanley, 2006; Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008); microaggressions within the HEI environment (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003); lower pay wages than their White female and male counterparts (Gregory, 2001; Johnson, 2016; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003); and higher workload assignments (Harley, 2008). As noted earlier, less is known about Black women who occupy support roles within HEI's (Johnson, 2016), specifically those of the millennial generation.

### **Support Roles in Higher Education**

Higher education support staff are vital to the success of the university. Whether assisting students and faculty, preparing reports, tracking student enrollment data, maintaining student records, or keeping track of department expenditures; this class of workers plays a key role in higher education institutions (Bonk, Crouch, Kilian, & Lowell, 2006). As HEI's become more complex in their institutional vision and mission, they will need to be supported by professional staff with increased expertise and specializations. HE consultant, Judy Szekeres, described the role of administrative staff as "supporting the work of academic staff, dealing with students on non-academic matters or working in an administrative function such as finance, human resources, marketing, public relations,

business development, student administration, academic administration, library, information technology, capital or property” ( 2004, p. 8).

Johnson (2016) conducted a groundbreaking study on African American women staff at Predominately White Institutions (PWI's) and discovered that “staff in support positions are typically not given the opportunity to have their voices heard, tend to be less influential, and hold the least political power within the academy” (p. 3). Johnson (2016) is one of the few empirical studies cited regarding support staff roles in HE, specifically, at PWI's. I call on this study most frequently, throughout my dissertation, to explain sense of self for African American women in support roles. Henry and Glenn (2009) suggested in order to combat oppression and the disenfranchisement of African American women, Black women employed in the academy should continue to participate in mentorship relationships, recognize the value of professional development to empower themselves to network with one another, and negotiate these opportunities with their employers. Hence, one of the greatest challenges faced by women in administrative staff roles are negative perceptions of the occupation as a group in the ever-changing professional work environment of the American university. These negative perceptions often include doing mundane tasks or work that is demeaning (Allen-Collinson, 2009; McInnis, 1998; Sebalj, Holbrook, & Bourke, 2012). For Black women in these roles, many carry the dual burden of being Black and female within the HE workplace (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989); thus, the support role may well relate to a historical image of the Mammy as docile, obedient, and silent, constructed within a White male dominated institution. I maintained that these historical images could negatively influence female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles (Brown et al., 2013; Harris-Perry, 2011; King, 2016; Manley, 2015; Nyachae, 2016; Shavers & Moore III, 2014; St. Jean

& Feagin, 2015). This qualitative study is focused on younger Black women in HE support roles who are a part of the millennial generation.

### **Millennial Generation**

Generation Y or the millennial generation was born after the Civil Rights Movement and legislation put in place to erode a history of discrimination and oppression (Strauss & Howe, 2000; Tulgan, 2009). Their attitudes, values, and beliefs are shaped by cultural and historical events they experienced as a collective: 911 terrorist attacks, AIDS, Iraq War, school shootings, 2008 economic downturn, natural disasters, acceptance of diversity, the election, and re-election of the first Black president (Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Singleton, 2018; Strauss & Howe, 2000). Protests related to the Black Lives Matter that spurred the #MeToo movement also influence their lives. Despite tragic experiences, millennials are often characterized as confident, optimistic, and full of high self-esteem (Singleton, 2018). Millennials were born to the most child-centric parents, the Baby Boomers (Strauss & Howe, 2000; Tulgan, 2009), who gave them continual praise, protection, and nurturing (Singleton, 2008). As a result of such nurturing, millennials may be secure and maintain close relationships with their family and friends (Crumpacker & Crumpaker, 2007). In addition, for the first time in history, millennials are the most diverse generational cohort (Crumpaker, 2007; Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Strauss, & Howe, 2000). Singleton (2018) stated that millennials are “not only diverse ethnically and racially, but also by sexual orientation, language, ability/disability, geographic origins, and every other ways of categorizing people” (pp. 39-40).

Millennials were the largest generation to enter the workforce (Crumpacker & Crumpaker, 2007; Martin & Tulgan, 2006). According to 2018 U.S. Census Bureau, 79% of

millennials were employed in the workforce. In 2018, 75% of Black millennials (ages 25-34), occupied the current African American workforce (U.S. Bureau Labor of Statistics (BLS, 2018). In addition, 73% of the African American workforce was occupied by Black women, ages 25-34 (BLS, 2018). However, the majority of these young Black women are employed as domestic, clerical, and healthcare service workers (BLS, 2018). Thus, this study on African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles is significant to bridge the gap in Black female millennial research.

### **Problem Statement**

In general, African American women's sense of self is often constructed by the historical and sociocultural milieu, communicated through negative images related to the history of slavery in America, e.g. the aforementioned images of African American women as applicable Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel (Abrams et al., 2014; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Owen, 2018; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016). For years, various types of oppression have disenfranchised and fragmented Black women (Abrams et al., 2014; Davis, 1981, 2011). Historical and cultural images have positioned Black women as caretakers, sexual objects, genderless, angry, and aggressive. Unfortunately, these persistent historical stereotypes have transformed overtime to new forms of the same images (Owen, 2018; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016).

Recently, Anderson, Holland, Heldreth, and Johnson, (2018) conducted a study using eye-tracking technology (G-Power Version 3.1.9.2.) to explore whether Black women are sexually objectified to a greater extent than White women. The researchers recruited 38 White college women, ages 18-23, in the Southwestern part of the U.S. to review images of women and rate their impressions of them. The purpose of the study addressed the extent to

which Black women were objectified by others in association with the Jezebel stereotype. Findings confirmed that individuals tend to gaze more often and for longer duration at the sexual body parts of Black women compared to White women. The researchers suggested that a history of sexualization and subjugation portrays objectification of Black women. The more removed from the idealize images of Black women, the greater the objectification (Anderson et al., 2018). Although the Jezebel stereotype was created during slavery, the objectification of Black women and their bodies remain prevalent two centuries later.

Much of the research related to sense of self for African American women exists for older women in HE (Collier, 2018; Harris, 2007; Hatcher, 2007; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Patterson, 2004) with various studies concluding that sense of self is based on a strong, support system. Conversely, less is known about sense of self for a new generation of African American women in HE support roles (Brown et al., 2013; Henry & Glenn, 2009; Johnson, 2016; Robinson, 2012). Literature reveals how younger Black women have a positive sense of self, identifying with emerging stereotypes, such as the “Strong Black Women” (SBW) and embracing their positive attributes (Abrams et al., 2014; DeFrancisco, & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000; Patterson, 2004). Yet, these images have a strong impact on Black women sustaining who they are within contemporary society, especially transcending barriers they encounter in the workplace, including the HE community (Collier, 2018; Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Collier (2018) interviewed six women about maintaining a sense of self while navigating the expectations, challenges, and barriers as African American educational leaders in the Midwest. Drawing from theoretical frameworks of Black feminist (womanist) theory, critical race theory, intersectionality, and spirituality, Collier’s (2018) case study research

drew on the work of Collins (2002) to describe how the historical sociocultural images influence the identities of contemporary Black women:

Collins (2002) illustrates how women have been labeled and oppressed by the images of ‘Mammies, Jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemima on pancake mix boxes, to ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and...welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture’ (p. 6). How does our identity or sense of self affect how we work, live, and lead? As we approach our profession and everyday tasks, we inevitably bring ‘ourselves’ to the work. ‘Ourselves’ implies our substance, emotions, beliefs, ideas, and attitudes. (p. 40)

Furthermore, Collier noted traditions, culture, and intersectional identities are carried into our workspaces and shape Black females’ professional identities. There is a connection of self and identified burgeoning effects on daily living; the double-standards and many burdens involving sexist and racial stereotypes, misconceptions, as well as the silence and absence of Black women in leadership roles.

Collier’s findings indicated the resilience of these women in educational leadership was rooted in their faith and perseverance. Other scholars have found that Black women use social support systems to overcome adversity in workplace environments (Brown & Valk, 2010; Brown et al., 2013; Finnegan, 2018; Griffiths, 2010; Johnson, 2016; Patterson, 2004). Catalyst (2004) reported on 923 survey responses and 23 focus groups of African American women concerning their advancement in Fortune 500 companies. According to the Catalyst (2004) report: “White women frequently reference the ‘glass ceiling’ as blocking their advancement up the career ladder,” while “women of color often characterize the barriers they encounter as comprising a ‘concrete ceiling’ – one that is more dense and less easily shattered” (p. 3).

Collier’s (2018) and Catalyst’s (2004) findings both suggested mentoring as a support to overcome difficulties in a predominately White work environment. As a result, sense of

self for African American women must be explored within multiple causations embedded in historical and sociocultural contexts; hence, a brief examination of the influences of slavery in the lives of African American women is warranted.

Slavery was a profoundly sexual institution (Hine, 1993). Signitha Fordham (2010) asserted that all slaves carried a stigma of Blackness due to the sexual violation of Black women imposed by White male masters. Fordham (2010) recalled her ancestral memory: “What I see is my female ancestors’ pain: their naked bodies at auctions violently inspected by prospective buyers, their bloated breast leaking the milk intended for the children they birthed or recently nursed.” (p. 6). Throughout the course of slavery, the offspring of enslaved females did not belong to their mothers, but to the White slave masters, owned and disowned by them (Bush, 2010; Fordham, 2010; Wyatt, 1997). Enslaved Black women experienced the pain of being abandoned and orphaned, belonging to no one. Black women have come to rely on each other by creating a sense of community as a means of survival. This coping mechanism shapes Black women’s sense of self (Patterson, 2004).

While racialized in a history of chattel slavery, the persistent stereotypes of Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire influence young Black women in contemporary society. These three prevalent images, evolved over the years, have become a rationalization for racial and economic discrimination towards African American women (Pilgrim, 2012; Royal, 2017). For example, Bennett (2016) examined 126 Black undergraduate women about their experiences with ethnic identity, sex roles, and gender stereotypes within the context of media exposure at a northeastern university. The researcher evaluated their perceptions of the four prominent stereotyped images of Black women: Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and “Superwoman.” For younger Black women, findings showed a high media endorsement of

the Mammy and Superwoman stereotypes used to influence their social identity. Bennett (2016) offered empirical data linking the evidence of these historical images to the ways in which young Black women see themselves.

Likewise, the socialization of African American girls often forces them to deal with historical images of slavery from the nurturing, Mammy to the hypersexualized, Jezebel to the angry Sapphire. Thomas and King (2007) studied socialization messages of 36 African American mother-daughter dyads from the Midwest and their relationships between gendered racial socialization and communication. Their findings revealed that Black Mothers socialized their daughters to combat these negative images through religion, self-determination, and pride. Results suggested communication between mothers and daughters positively correlates to their daughters' self-esteem.

Overall, Black women have a past rooted in resiliency, survival, and the struggle of overcoming the challenging and perpetual negative images of Black womanhood that persist and transform overtime (Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993, 2012). Within the HE workplace, due to their racialized and gendered identities, in addition to, occupational status, young Black women often experience discrimination (Collier, 2018). These factors are likely to influence their sense of self in HE support roles. Similar to Collier's study, this inquiry examined sense of self for African American women, however, I focused on a younger generation of Black women in office support roles within Midwestern colleges and universities as communicated in the purpose of the study and its research questions.

### **Study Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this heuristic grounded theory study was to generate theory related to sense of self for African American female millennials in HE in support roles. Patton (2015)

states that the unit of analysis is the “primary focus of data collection on what is happening to individuals in a setting and how individuals are affected by the setting” (p. 261). The units of analyses for this study were the sense of self of African American millennial women in HE support roles.

This investigation incorporated grounded theory and heuristic inquiry design approaches. Grounded theory is a qualitative approach used to “generate theory as a primary purpose of qualitative social science” (Patton, 2015, p. 111). Founded in sociology and developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967, grounded theory is a “qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the views of a larger number of participants” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82). In addition to generating theory, I found it important to include a heuristic inquiry framework to “bring to the fore my personal experience and insights” (Patton, 2015, p. 118) as part of the research process. The nature of having a “personal interest and intensity that yields understanding of the essence” (p. 119), the sense of self for African American millennial women in HE support roles, will add meaning and validation to this study (Moustakas, 1990, 1994; Patton, 2015). Since qualitative research is subjective, with the heuristic tradition requiring a personalized and reflexive stance, I found it necessary to insert my voice into the research as I share a unique experience with my participants as a Black millennial woman who formally served in an HE support role. Reflexivity entails how I position myself in the study, how my experiences inform the study, and how I share the findings from my inquiries (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Carlson (2010) defined reflexivity as a way for the researcher to focus on how their actions influence those being observed and balancing those influences with the phenomena observed. Therefore, reflexivity must be

considered in all phases of the research from the recruitment of participants to analysis of the data (Berger, 2015).

The pragmatic goal of this study was to promote African American millennial women in HE support roles in revealing their sense of self. According to Maxwell (2013), research questions explain what is intended to learn and understand through the design to “focus the study and give guidance on how to conduct it” (p. 75). The following central question and sub-questions were designed to generate theory about sense of self for African American millennial women. Central Question: How do African American female millennials perceive their sense of self within higher education support roles?

1. How do African American female millennials define their sense of self?
2. What images and stereotypes from the larger society shape their sense of self?
3. In what ways are their professional identities shaped by their sense of self?

In addition to giving attention to the interdisciplinary nature of this study, highlighted later in this chapter, a number of theories comprised the conceptual framework of this study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

As an African American millennial woman, who formally served in a HE support role position within a predominantly White institution, I supported faculty in one of the most racially, concentrated academic divisions of the university, with African American women occupying key roles. I wrote in my reflective journal:

*As a result, my work experiences may be different than those of my counterparts; during the past five years, I developed special relationships with several female, faculty of color. They have supported my personal and professional development as an Office Support Assistant, doctoral student, and mother. These women have served as my mentors in a space historically reserved for White males (February 13, 2020).*

I contend that young Black women in similar roles may not have the same positive experiences within HEI's; and as a result, their sense of self may be low and contribute to the "multiple-burdens" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140) of being a Black woman.

The theories and concepts of a theoretical framework are grounded in research and provide a general explanation of what the researcher hopes to find and/or provides a view of relevant literature through the lens of the study's participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Maxwell (2013) purports the theoretical framework is a "key part of your design" that works as an "idea context for the study" and helps illustrate relationships between ideas and data (p. 39).

Several theories and concepts shaped my research in uncovering the sense of self for African American millennial women in HE support roles. I wanted to uncover new theory for adding to the scarce body of knowledge on this topic. Therefore, the integration of the literature on HE administration and social sciences guided the design of this study through an interdisciplinary approach and the theories of culture and identity theory, Black feminist (womanist) theory, and intersectionality.

### **Interdisciplinary Study**

Interdisciplinary researcher, Repko (2012), defined a discipline as "a particular branch of learning or body of knowledge whose defining elements –i.e., phenomena, assumptions, epistemology concepts, theories, and methods—distinguished from other knowledge formations" (p. 4). Subsequently, an interdisciplinary research approach is:

...a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline, and draws on the disciplines with the goal of integrating their insights to construct a more comprehensive understanding. (p. 467)

This means that discipline integration is beneficial for solving complex problems. For the inquiry on African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles, an interdisciplinary approach was applied in three parts: (1) The social sciences discipline was examined through the lens of sociology, psychology, and political science, by means of the conceptual theory and methodology of this study; (2) The applied profession of HE was examined, as the workplace setting of the participants; and (3) Grounded theory methodology generated new theory among this population of women in HEI's. For these reasons, this inquiry consists of multiple disciplines that were analyzed and integrated to construct a greater understanding of the sense of self for this group of young women.

African American millennial women have experienced recent waves of feminism influenced by contemporary cultural/societal images and stereotypes of young Black women that shape their sense of self. I assert the cultural memories of this younger cohort of African American women's sense of self may be different from previous cohorts that experienced the Civil Rights' and Women's Movements. Older generations, through the oral traditions, have passed stories of oppression and lessons acquired to younger generations of Black women (Brown & Valk, 2010; Collins, 1998; Finnegan, 2018; Griffiths, 2010; Harris-Perry, 2011; Thompson, 2017; Walker, 1983). Millennials, born between 1982 and 2005, may neither have direct exposure to cultural memories of the struggle for civil rights nor opportunities to make meaning of these events (Apugo, 2017; Brown et al., 2013; Harris, 2011; King, 2016; Manley, 2015; Nyachae, 2016; Shavers, & Moore III, 2014; St. Jean & Feagin, 2015). In most schools, history is driven by White European culture that limits an analysis of the history of African Americans and other students of color, as well as, topics related to deeper analyses of race, classism, gender, and sexual identity (Banks & Banks, 2009; Gay, 2010;

Ladson-Billings, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Thompson et al., 2004). Thus, this study generated empirical literature and theory regarding younger Black women's sense of self within HEI's. The theories of the conceptual framework for this study follow in the subsequent discussion.

### **Culture and Identity Theory**

Culture plays a major part in African American women's identities. Anthropologists first developed the concept of culture to explain the ways of tribes, ethnic groups, and societies. Later, social scientists applied culture to human behavior in the workplace (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Schlein (1985) defined culture as "a pattern of assumptions...invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with problems" (p. 9). Other scholars define culture as shared beliefs and values that closely knit a community together and provide coverage against lost identity, repression, or assimilation (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Rose, 2008). However, Bonvillain (2020) asserts that although people within a given culture share a common understanding of the world, they are not a homogenous group; people may experience the world differently based on their sex, gender, or status within all societies. For the purpose of this study, culture will be defined as a group of individuals who share common values, beliefs, and identities and are connected by ethnic and social groupings (Bonvillain, 2020; Rose, 2008; Schlein, 1985).

**Social identity.** Identity formation was developed by George Mead (1934) as the cornerstone of modern sociological thought (Brekhus, 2008). Mead's (1934) seminal work found that society affects behavior (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014). Stone (1962) later introduced the concept of social identity as situated in social relations and "established when others place the individual as a social object by assigning her or him the same words of

identity as they appropriate or announce themselves” (Brekhus, 2008, p. 1060). Black psychologist, Wade Nobles (1973), provided a modification to Mead’s symbolic interaction approach and developed ideas related to the Black self-concept formed from feelings associated with being a member of a group. Positive group association develops a referent of self, which forms self-concept (Nobles, 1973). Thus, for African Americans, self-concept is formed from the identity of the group. African American women’s identity is complex and intertwined with cultural stereotypes and images that emanate from the larger society. In a recent study, Taylor-Lindheim (2016) conducted a mixed-methods inquiry regarding African American women’s experience of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) stereotype. Taylor-Lindheim (2016) defined SBW as “the African American woman who perseveres in life no matter the challenges or struggles she encounters” (p. 7). Quantitative measures of stress, depression, perceived racism, and the construct of the SBW stereotype were supplemented with open-ended and short-answer questions. The researcher surveyed 50 African American college-educated women, ranging from the ages of 25-64, who were either faculty, staff, or students at a large private university in Southern California.

Taylor-Lindheim (2016) found eight themes of the SBW phenomenon identified by participants; role model, negative affect and stress, masking, and empowerment were most poignant. Participants gave meaning to their experiences with the SBW stereotype described as: (a) the theme of role model provided a sense of responsibility, Black women felt they should have as leaders in their homes and communities; (b) the overwhelming effects of their responsibility can lead to damaging stress to their psychics; (c) ways to resist negative stereotypes of Black womanhood were often masked in behaviors; and (d) Black women used strategies of empowerment to conceal their weaknesses in order to imply strength.

While historical stereotypes were intended to humiliate and dehumanize Black women, the SBW phenomenon is an identity formulated for survival of Black women in contemporary culture. This study closely relates to my exploration on African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles, in that it supports the notion that Black women may have a low sense of self due to historical and cultural images that shape their experiences. An association with individuals, representing various cultural groups, may contribute to their identity formation; including having knowledge of individuals who have contributed to this broadly contested area. A discussion of Black feminist (womanist) theory is vital to this investigation of sense of self for African American millennial women.

### **Black Feminist (Womanist) Theory**

Black women fought for their voices to be heard in this country for centuries (Collins, 2009; Stewart & Richardson, 1987; White, 1990, 1985). In 1831, activist and political leader Maria W. Stewart was America's first Black female political writer. Stewart's renowned lectures challenged Black women to come out of oppression traced by the lines of race, class, and gender, created by the oppressor, and to forge new self-definition, self-reliance, and independence (Collins, 2009; Stewart & Richardson, 1987). In 1849, Harriett Tubman, also known as the "Moses of her people" (p. 20), led over three hundred slaves through the Underground Railroad to freedom (White, 1990, 1985). Tubman was an early Black feminist resisting bondage, escaping, and rescuing others from slavery (Heuman & Burnard, 2010; Hobson, 2014). In 1855, teenaged Ann Woods assisted a wagonload of boys and girls to escape North to achieve freedom from the domination of their South Carolina slave owner (Davis, 1981, 2011). In 1884, Sojourner Truth traveled to speak about abolition and women's rights (Stewart & Richardson, 1987). While in the late 1900's, Ida B. Wells founded the first

Black women's suffrage club to advocate for women's rights and fought against racism and sexism (Davis, 1981, 2011). Together these early activists, among others, were instrumental in creating a space for Black Feminist Thought, as defined by Collins (2009), "[r]eclaiming and constructing Black women's knowledges...providing a community...for activism and self-determination" (pp. 4-5). The historical context of Black Feminist Thought was significant to this study so as to uncover the sense of self for this culturally diverse population of women.

**Pragmatics of Black feminist (womanist) theory.** As previously mentioned, many young Black women are employed as domestic, clerical, and healthcare service workers (BLS, 2018). Further, Black women are confronted with stereotypes and invisibility while navigating their ways in HEI's. Johnson (2016) interviewed 16 African American women at four predominately White Midwestern institutions, these women identified as staff gave attention to the invisible life of staff in the academy; one participant, Candace, offered her experience regarding invisibility:

I know I am an asset to the University; but, sometimes, I feel there is no reward. I feel invisible until I am needed again to go above and beyond what I am paid to do. Pay increases have been little to none. I return to being invisible only coming into view of the department head when I'm needed once again. (p. 100)

Invisibility can make individuals feel that one's talent is not worthy or valued and only acknowledged as an organizational "mule" (Collins, 2009, p. 14) that goes above and beyond in times of trouble.

Black feminist (womanist) theory shapes feminist theory by raising the voices of this silent majority, who are Black women (hooks, 2000). Throughout the historical waves of feminism, the voice of the Black woman was the center that catapulted the movement toward equality, justice, and expressions of women's' lived experiences (hooks, 2000). There are

claims that White women, who dominated the feminist discourse in America, did not have an understanding of White supremacy and racism (Brown & Valk, 2010; Perry, 2011). For sure, race and class create a different identity for women of color relating to their quality of life, social status, and shared common experiences (hooks, 2000). Rousseau (2013) argued that “traditional feminist theorist missed the nuanced needs of diverse populations of women, including: women of color, women of poorer socioeconomic status, immigrant women, and non-heterosexual women” (p. 196). Collins (2009) agreed that in traditional feminist theory, Black women’s voices are often silenced, suppressed, and excluded.

Black Feminist (Womanist) Thought provides a platform for women of color to express their voices apropos of their lived experiences with respect to race, class, and gender. Such an analysis requires a discussion of intersectionality to understand the standpoint at which African American female millennials live their everyday lives in a White male dominated society.

### **Intersectionality**

Since the women’s experience and the Black experience intersect at two different analytic structures, the Black women’s experience must be analyzed through its own framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Rooted in Black feminism and Critical Race Theory, intersectionality is a heuristic and analytic tool (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013). In her 1989 landmark essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Anti-racist Politics,” Kimberle’ Crenshaw, introduced the term, intersectionality, addressing the marginalization of Black women within antidiscrimination law including feminist and anti-racist theory (Carbado et al., 2013).

In 1990, Crenshaw expanded the framework in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” She used intersectionality to highlight ways in which social movement and advocacy can prevent violence against women of color and their exposed vulnerabilities (Carbado et al., 2013). Intersectionality, known as the third-wave of Black feminism, emerged with the claim that “the space that women are made to occupy may be cognitively compulsory, yet differ in stressing both that individual women’s perspectives vary with social classifications such as race, class, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity” (Crary, 2015, p. 290). Other scholars explain intersectionality as “the experiences of one’s race, class, gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness, and age. Intersectionality acknowledges the cultural differences of women’s biases based on their experiences” (Olesen, 2011). Whereas, Collins and Bilge (2016) described intersectionality as:

...a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences...When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not be a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. (p. 2)

In short, intersectionality approaches maintain multiple constructs of race, gender, class, and sexuality and highlight the interlocking of individuals’ lived experiences. These lived experiences for Black women comprise multiple burdens that often reinforce the stereotypical image of the SBW.

**The Strong Black Woman.** Abrams et al. (2014) conducted focus groups with 44 Black women, ranging from ages 18 to 91 in the Mid-Atlantic region, to understand their definitions of SBW phenomena. The SBW phenomena entail the perceived Black women’s roles, responsibilities, and experiences based on historical oppression (Abrams et al., 2014).

The SBW phenomena are constructed of other forms of strength as in Superwoman Schema (Woods-Giscombe, 2010), the Sojourner Truth Syndrome (Mullings, 2006), and the Sisterella Complex (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Much of the literature analyzed the SBW to be “a provider and caretaker who is resistant to vulnerability or dependency, displays strength, suppresses emotion, succeeds despite inadequate resources, and assumes responsibilities as a community agent” (Abrams et al, 2014, p. 504). This study significantly provided a more complete framework for understanding the psychological and well-being of Black women.

The four main themes identified in Abrams’ et al. (2014) study of the SBW were: (a) self/ethnic pride in spite of intersectional oppression; (b) being every woman; (c) anchored by religion/spirituality; and (d) multiple forms of strength, manifested from obligatory independence, learned resilience, and matriarchal leadership. The researchers captured Black women’s thoughts about the significance of the historical hardships endured as a means of survival:

There appeared to be a cultural memory of resilience among participants which was inspired by ancestral legacies of strength that emerged in the face of hundreds of years of oppression. Women believed that if their ancestors could be strong in displaying resilience, they should be able to do the same. (p. 509)

This is an example of cultural pride and strength passed from our ancestors to the next generation of Black women. Thus, self/ethnic pride in spite of oppression, related to intersectionality, was defined as pride displayed as confidence in self; despite her flaws, occupation, economic status, marital status, or age, she is unashamed of self and able to recognize her worth (Abrams et al., 2014). This embraces the every woman theme attributed to Black women who take on the roles of provider, caretaker, and meeting multiple expectations of their home and community lives. Lastly, being anchored in

religion/spirituality the theme attributes to SBW to sustain and empower themselves through engagement in religious/spiritual practices that provide guidance, wisdom, and purpose for a fulfilled life (Abrams et al., 2014; Dillard, 2012).

Overall, at the intersection of being Black and a woman, the SBW takes pride in the SBW schema, which maintains a positive self-image for Black women and disallows negative stereotypes and discrimination to penetrate the esteem of their psyches. Additionally, intersectionality manifests political and theoretical approaches, which may marginalize Black women. They have been subjected to living in an oppressive White male-dominated society for centuries, having to carry two burdens: being Black and female (hooks, 1989). These burdens often disadvantage Black women and place them at the margins of society where they lack social power. Grounded in discrimination, intersectionality provided one of the theoretical frameworks for this investigation and uncovered the sense of self for African American female millennials in HE support roles.

### **Summary**

These theories, culture and identity theory, Black feminist (womanist) theory, and intersectionality, were major conduits for analyzing the findings of the study and are further explored in Chapter 2. In addition, the literature review of Chapter 3 added to the foundation knowledge of the study. Literature review topics include: (a) history of stereotypical images of Black women, (b) social identity and African American Women in the workforce, (c) support roles in the academy, (d) voice and silence for Black women in higher education, and (e) who are the millennials? A review of historical events that led up to how Black womanhood is portrayed in society is important to this discussion and reveals many of the stereotypes and images that continue to influence her identity. Secondly, social identity and

African American women in the workforce with an emphasis on how identity generally influences women's experiences are fundamental to the literature. Next, support roles in the academy illuminate professional identity and staff devaluation related to tensions between academic and support staff. Fourth, voice and silence for Black women in higher education are examined to highlight experiences of African American women faculty and the lack of voice for women in HE support roles. Finally, a discussion of Black female millennials is necessary to fill the gap in the literature about this group's sense of self that appears to be shaped by multiple elements of intersectionality.

Chapter 4 presents the methodology of the study. In the following section, I provide an overview of its content to communicate a comprehensive view of the study in its entirety. The task of the study's design is to outline perspectives and methods for generating theory related to sense of self for emerging Black women in HE support roles. I claimed this study as a heuristic grounded theory with grounded theory as a major perspective through a second qualitative perspective of heuristic inquiry.

### **Overview of Methodology**

I used qualitative research for the design of this study that included the approaches of grounded theory and heuristic inquiry. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) noted that "qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" (p. 3). Discovering the sense of self for younger African American women required using the grounded theory approach, formulated from fieldwork that emerged from systematic comparative analysis for generating theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Patton, 2015). Creswell and Poth (2018) explained grounded theory as, "the more systematic, analytic procedures of

Strauss and Corbin (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, 2015; Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1998), the investigator seeks to systematically develop a theory that explains process, action, or interaction on a topic” (p. 84). Charmaz (2014) argued that positivist assumptions, characterized by traditional forms of grounded theory, place an emphasis only on the researcher as an inherent part of the research, whereas constructivist grounded theory includes the researcher and the participants’ voices. The relationship between the researcher and participants was important for creating theory. I chose to use Charmaz’s conceptualization of constructivist grounded theory with the intent to generate theory using respondents’ data from a mixed questionnaire, interviews, and job-profile document reviews to gain insights about job responsibilities, requirements, and educational attainment levels.

### **Setting**

After gaining permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I conducted the research at two, four-year universities and a two-year community college in the Midwest. I worked with the universities’ human resources (HR) offices to identify African American millennial women in support roles to complete a mixed questionnaire, in addition to using snowball sampling, described below, at the community college to recruit additional respondents to complete the mixed questionnaire which did not require access through the HR department of the college.

I requested a participant email about the study to be sent to all employees classified as administrative and/or support staff at the two HEI’s. The email, sent to over 300 administrative and/or support staff positions, described my research, included a link to an anonymous Qualtrics questionnaire, and the respondent consent form (see Appendix B). Qualtrics is an electronic data-capturing tool that is free and secure to all users, including

participants. The same information was also emailed to respondents identified through snowball sampling at the community college. Recruitment efforts at the three institutions produced 24 mixed questionnaire responses and 13 interview participants. My goal was to identify 10 interviewees from the mixed questionnaire that would eventually become participants or co-researchers. The final sampling procedures yielded 9 of 13 co-researchers.

### **Sampling of Participants**

Criterion sampling, as a purposeful sampling strategy, and theoretical sampling for generating theory were used in my research design as recruitment efforts. Patton (2015) defined criterion sampling as a “predetermined criterion of importance, thereby explicitly (or implicitly) comparing the criterion cases [data from respondents and co-researchers] with those that do not manifest criterion” (p. 281). This type of sampling guarantees data are information-rich, ensuring in-depth qualitative analysis. Creswell and Poth (2018) explain theoretical sampling as “a sample of individuals to study based on their contribution to the development of the theory” (p. 318). The process began with criterion sampling of a homogeneous sample of individuals with criteria identified as African American or Black women, between the ages of 18-37, and hired in a support role capacity classified as administrative or support position. Criterion sampling was conducted at the two HE sites with snowball sampling implemented at the community college setting, defined as asking individuals who know people that fit the stated criteria. The use of criterion and snowball sampling then led to theoretical sampling to produce data that contributed to the development of theory regarding sense of self for African America female millennials in HE support roles (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

In addition to using the constructivist grounded theory approach for this study, I incorporated heuristic inquiry for data collection and analysis by inserting my voice; expressing my lived experiences as an African American millennial woman formerly employed in a HE support role; and by “bring[ing] to the fore the personal experience and insights of the research” (Patton, 2015, p. 118). I used the six phases of heuristic inquiry developed by American psychologist, Clark Moustakas (1990), throughout the analysis of the data, briefly explained in this section and expanded in Chapter 4, the methodology.

Grounded theory consists of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to generate theory. Similar to Corbin and Strauss (2015), Charmaz (2014) compared data with emerging categories, moving back and forth between data and analysis, but used a constructivist grounded theory approach that emphasized a larger number of individuals, 20 to 30, for adequately sampling to the point of data saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glaser & Strauss, 1999, 2017). Similarly, I originally aimed for 30 respondents to the mixed questionnaire that would generate 10 interviewees from the larger sample.

The questionnaire consisted of closed and opened-ended statements and Likert-scale items about their sense of self, historical images of Black women, work experiences, and professional identities (see Appendix D). At the end of the questionnaire, participants could opt-in to the second phase of the study that involved consenting to be interviewed.

The data analysis process for the grounded theory approach used initial and focused coding to develop subcategories and categories for theory generation (Charmaz, 1996, 2014). These primary procedures required line-by-line coding, and segmenting ideas into core categories, similar to themes, to develop theory. In addition, I conducted these steps

throughout the data analysis process and recorded ideas and thoughts about the evolving theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018) as I examined the mixed questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and job-profile document review. While the, open-ended statements of the mixed questionnaire, interviews, and job descriptions were dissected using the inductive process of grounded theory, Likert-scale items and closed-ended statements of the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Furthermore, since I share a unique experience with my participants, I used the six phases of heuristic inquiry developed by American psychologist, Clark Moustakas (1990), throughout the analysis of the data. The first stage is initial engagement, where the researcher becomes deeply involved in the research topic and questions. The second stage is immersion, stepping into the “tone, texture, mood, and range of the experience” (Patton, 2015, p. 576). The third stage is incubation, where the researcher waits to allow for intentional withdrawal to allow for insights and awareness. Fourth is illumination, where deep meaning and new reflections form patterns and themes; in my grounded theory approach, these are similar to subcategories and core categories. The fifth stage is explication, when other dimensions of meaning are added, unfolding of the experience through focusing, self-dialogue, and reflection of emerging themes and discoveries. The fourth and fifth stages of illumination and explication are where data analyses occur during the fieldwork phase of the study. The final stage is creative synthesis, which brings together emerging themes and patterns and showing their relationship (Patton, 2015). For my study, this step required the final generation of the theory and deciding how to develop the storyline. Together, heuristic inquiry and grounded theory were used to find subcategories and categories to generate theory that related to my

research questions on African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles.

### **Significance of the Study**

Being considered a professional member of an HEI is important to the self-esteem and identity of the staff person (Bacon, 2009; Whitchurch, 2009). For African American women, this sentiment may be greater given the past and present negative images of Black womanhood (Collins, 1986; Harris-Perry, 2011; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016). Some Black women in HE support roles may want to be considered as professionals who are valued, visible, and recognized for their contributions to the success of university. Researchers have found that that negative labeling, invisibility, stigmatizing, blaming (Allen-Collinson, 2009) and the cultural bias of intellectual inferiority (Steele, 1990) are some of the negative experiences this population of support staff might face, which can lead to a low sense of self. This is particularly vexing since this class of workers significantly contributes to the effectiveness of the institution by providing expertise and skills in student administration, policy development, and budget administration (Graham, 2009). Nevertheless, having a positive sense of self for African American millennial women in support roles may increase their professional identity and sense of belonging within HEI's, an institution historically reserved for elite White males.

Individuals who conduct research linked to race, identity, intersectionality, generation theory, HE administration, organizational theory, and Black feminist theory may be interested in the study. I also contend that the study may contribute to policy development for HEI's to develop programs to better support younger Black women in HE support roles. As colleges' and universities' student populations become increasingly diverse, so will its staff

members. Creating policy for career advancement and leadership opportunities will be beneficial for this group of women and the overall success of HEI's.

### **Organization of Dissertation**

Chapter 1 provided a comprehensive view of the study, including support for prevalence of the problem through a discussion of theories, concepts, and empirical studies. The problem statement laid the groundwork for Chapter 2, an expansion of the conceptual framework of the study concerning culture and identity theory, Black feminist (womanist) theory, and intersectionality. These theories led to the identification of the literature review of Chapter 3, often considered the foundation knowledge of the study. An overview of the methodology is presented here and will be further examined and detailed in Chapter 4.

My experiences with reporting on the theory generated, during the data collection phase of the study, are detailed in Chapter 5. Through grounded theory and heuristic inquiry, I centered the voices of the participants and incorporated the personal experiences I share with them. Answering the research questions, implications of the findings, recommendations, and future research are included in Chapter 6. I also conclude with reflections on my sense of self related to my interactions with other Black female millennials.

## CHAPTER 2

### RELEVANT THEORIES

As I argued in Chapter 1, the evaluation of sense of self for African American female millennials in higher education (HE) support roles is essential to the body of literature regarding self-esteem for younger African American women. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a discussion of major theories that drive this study. Turner (2009) noted that:

...theory helps us to build an edifice of concepts and explanations to understand social reality...an argument in which the social theorist strives to convince others about the nature of social reality by the use of evidence, narratives, hunches, concepts, and even material objects as “exhibits”. (p. 4)

In the same way, theory through concepts and explanations surrounding the context of sense of self aids the understanding of the social reality of this phenomenon (Turner, 2009). Consistent with the intent to derive meaning, Maxwell (2013) purported that theory also operates to organize the study in the following manner:

- Informs the study’s design.
- Aids in the assessment and refinement of its goal(s).
- Helps to set realistic and relevant research questions.
- Shapes the methods.

Further, Turner’s view is that theory requires empirical data and without data it is hollow; yet, empirical data also needs theory, “without theory we are blind” (Turner, 2009, p. 4). This inquiry consists of multiple disciplines that were analyzed and integrated to construct a greater understanding of the sense of self for this group of young women.

This chapter provides theoretical context on how a younger generation of Black women may perhaps define their sense of self, and through theories and empirical data lead to an understanding of the social realities of this phenomenon. With this goal in mind, I

discuss the following relevant theories: culture and identity theory, Black feminist (womanist) theory, and intersectionality.

### **Culture and Identity Theory**

Culture plays a major part in African American women's identities. Anthropologists first developed the concept of culture to explain the ways of tribes, ethnic groups, and societies and was applied to other disciplines, including education, history, business, organization, law, humanities, and the social sciences. Dupree, Spencer, and Spencer (2015) explained, "humans live culturally—engaging in nuanced, complex culturally-informed behavior patterns and culturally-influenced identity processes" (p. 117). Berry and Candis (2013) regarded culture as "events (singularly or collectively engaged) specific to a group of individuals with shared beliefs, values, traditions, customs, practices, and language" (p. 44).

Multicultural education scholar, James Banks (2009), defined culture as "a dynamic and complex process of construction; its invisible, and implicit characteristics are emphasized" (p. 1). This shared milieu may consist of "the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and religion" (Nieto, 2010, p. 136). Hence, culture is not static.

Other scholars define culture as shared beliefs and values that closely knit a community together and provide coverage against lost identity, repression, or assimilation (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Rose, 1994). Similarly, Gay (2010) explained culture as "referring to a dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give order and meaning to our own lives, as well as the lives of others" (p. 9).

Lee, Spencer, and Harpalani (2003) claimed people participate in cultural communities at a macro level, e.g., nation, ethnicity, gender, class, and age cohort, and at the micro level, e.g., personal interest, hobbies, professions, etc.; thus, reflecting membership of a social group.

However, African American culture is constructed in contrast to the dominant society and might be revealed through the oppression of the Black family. Black psychologist, Nathan Hare (1978), suggested, due to the suppression of the Black male and dehumanization of the Black female, the Black family has been oppressed by the larger society. Hare (1978) elaborated on this oppression and the Black family:

The black woman's greatest cry, if you will only talk to her sometimes and listen, is that she too often lacks a strong black male to stand beside her. She feels impelled too often to serve as the "backbone" of her family and to fulfill the formidable obligations of "both mother and father" to her children. This predicament and the denial and denigration of her beauty has resulted from efforts to defeminize her as the White oppressor simultaneously struggled to emasculate (lest we forget) the oppressed black male. (p.7)

Rooted in slavery, the separation and strife between Black males and Black females based on familiar refrain, culturally constructed, produced a different family socialization for generations of Black families. However, as children are birthed and raised in this particular cultural familial structure, challenges are met when their environment changes from home to a dominant White, middle class school culture. Within these settings, cultural milieu can be understood from the experiences of children.

In schools, African Americans children have lacked access to a quality education, imposed by economic disadvantage, segregation, social practices, and restrictive cultural orientations; thus, making it more difficult to identify with academic domains (Steele, 1997). Urban education scholar, Lisa Delpit, author of *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in*

*the Classroom* (2006) discussed how the culture of power impacts non-White, non-middle class students in the classroom. Delpit described the five aspects of power as:

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
2. There are codes or rules for participating in power, that is, there is a ‘culture of power.’
3. The rules of culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (p. 24)

These tenets bring awareness to the culture of power, and how it is implicitly embedded in our modern-day school culture. The question of adaptation for students of color to the culture of power is a constant dilemma for African American children and other diverse groups.

Delpit (2006) did not advocate that schools attempt to change homes of poor and non-White children to match the homes of those in the culture of power; however, she suggested schools should “incorporate strategies appropriate for all children in its confines” (p. 30), allowing these students to establish their own voices to be heard in the larger society.

Similarly, Banks and Banks (2009) asserted that:

Each major variable of the school...as such, its culture, its power relationships, the curriculum and materials, and other attitudes and beliefs of staff, must be changed in ways that will allow the school to promote education equality for students from diverse groups. (p.1).

Thus, a multicultural education advocates for diverse cultural groups to have an equal chance to achieve academically in school. In keeping with the relevancy of culture and social identity, African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles was explored with the nature of culture in mind.

Individuals are likely to use cultural experiences to form identity within social contexts, the result of early theorizing by George Mead (1934). Matter of fact, the formation of identity theory was initially explored by George Mead (1934), who considered the nature of society and its effects on behavior. He reasoned that, “society impacts itself, which impacts social behavior” (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014, p. 231). Mead’s conceptualization of the “I self” and a “Me self,” followed by the “We self” shaped the understanding of identity. The core concepts of the “I” and the “Me” proposed that self is a continual social process (Mead, 1934). The state of the I was viewed as the individual’s position in society, which influences one’s identity. The state of the Me was explained as an individual’s present self; their reactions in fast acting situations weaves back into the I, creating their social identity. The We self entailed the internalized attitudes one has toward being a part of a group (Mead, 1934).

However, Black psychologist, Wade Nobles (1973) challenged Mead’s social interaction approach as it was unable to account for the “African reality of Black people living in America” (p. 27). Nobles (1973) suggested the notion of self is a social process and reflects the awareness of three references of self:

The “I” – the self as a perceiver of oneself in relation to others’ attitudes and feelings toward you, the “me”—the self as the internalized or incorporated perceptions of others, and the “we”—the self as perceptions one has toward the group and being (or interaction with) the group. (p. 17)

Nobles' analysis of identity contrasts with the Western orientation view of the group as dependent on individual ingression (Nobles, 1973). However, the African world view suggests, "I am because we are and because we are, therefore, I am" (Nobles, 1973, p. 24). Which means one's identity is an extended identity of the group including the feelings and belongingness of that group which transcends one's self (Nobles, 1973).

Following Mead's (1934) conceptualization of identity, social scientist, Gregory P. Stone (1962) introduced the concept of social identity as situated in social relations. Stone noted that social identity is "established when others place the individual as a social object by assigning her or him the same words of identity as they appropriate or announce themselves" (Brekhus, 2008, p. 1060). Stone focused on how the individual interacts with others in interpersonal relations to formulate a sense of self (Brekhus, 2008).

For more than a century, the concept of self has been examined by psychologists with "roughly half of that time, substantial attention has been devoted to the relevance of race to self-concept and self-esteem" (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000, p. 26). Moreover, the seminal research of Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) was significant for making connections between self-esteem and race (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000). Cooley viewed self-esteem as social processes with individuals' portrayals of self, conveyed by others, through the looking glass analogy. Mead maintained that individuals develop a sense of other from experiences that reflect a generalized self-image, whereas self-esteem results from self-knowledge about different aspects of personal experiences. Stated another way, self as a social product has been contextualized as highly dependent on social interactions with membership in racial and ethnic groups; interacting with multiple perceptual and cognitive processes to construct an individual's sense of self or evaluation of self (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000).

Many psychologists, both Black and White, have noted the inadequacies of Western European measures and perspectives that use a “normative standard for human cognition, emotion and behavior [that] is questionable” (Robinson, 2012, p. 8). This position was best explained by Baldwin and Hopkins (1990):

Eurocentric-oriented research has tended to develop paradigms to interpret different scoring patterns that African Americans consistently exhibit relative to European-Americans on so called measures of self-concept/self-esteem, personal motivation and attributions, ability and achievement, etc., as reflecting psychosocial deficit and pathology...Invariably, then, the major conclusion drawn from this approach is that African Americans are culturally disadvantaged or deprived relative to European-Americans. (p 40)

Social identity is rooted in slavery for African Americans (DeGury, 2017; Eck, 2018; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Fontaine, 2011; West, 1995) which resulted in a collective survival ethos, contributing to individual and collective selves (Bordens & Horowitz, 2002). The individual self involves a sense of self that may include coming to know self; thoughts and self-knowledge that make up self-evaluation (Bordens & Horowitz). This conceptualization paralleled Mead’s (1934) I self and a Me self. The We self is aligned with Bordens and Horowitz’s (2002) collective self, referred to as individuals’ memberships within groups and the social order of the larger society. In 1987, child psychologists, Rotheram and Phinney (1987), shared explanations that identity was related to the constructs of race and ethnicity based on collective identity. They elucidated: “self-identification as the accurate and consistent use of an ethnic label, based on the perception and conception of themselves as belonging to an ethnic group” (p. 17).

Seminal literature implied that for Black children, society’s perceptions of them provide the basis for their self-identity. Some studies showed that White children have higher self-esteem than Black children (Long & Henderson, 1968; Richmond & White, 1971; Stabler, Johnson, & Jordan, 1971); others showed no difference in self-esteem

(Beglis & Sheikh, 1974; Busk, Ford, & Schulman, 1973; Hare, 1977; Samuels & Griffore, 1979); and some reflected higher self-esteem of the Black children, often explained by being exposed to and judged by homogeneous communities of color (Bewley, 1977; Simmons, 1978; Simmons, Brown, Bush, & Blyth, 1978; Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973).

Clark and Clark (1939) conducted one of earliest studies that examined racial attitudes of 160 northern and southern Black children, ranging from ages three to seven. Researchers devised and used doll and coloring tests techniques to investigate Black children's racial identification and preferences (Clark & Clark, 1939). The Clarks found that Black children demonstrated a pro-White preference in displaying a liking for lighter skin color (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990), naming darker skin as ugly and light and/or White skin as pretty. Conclusions were as follows: 67% of the Black children preferred to play with White dolls; 59% chose the White doll as "the nice doll"; and 59% chose the Black doll as being the one that "looks bad" (Clark & Clark, 1939). The Clarks determined that some groups of individuals are subjected to inferior statuses, stemming from dominant societal views about race, which ultimately influence personality development and self-concept that can have detrimental effects on their opportunities for success or life choices. These findings confirmed that by the age of five African American children are aware of their identity marked as an inferior status within American society. Thus, Black children must develop a positive self-concept to combat negative racialized self-images produced by society.

Findings regarding racial and identity were included in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* hearings, with Kenneth Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark, serving as expert witnesses in the *Brown* case. The Clarks stated, "a central premise in the landmark *Brown v.*

*Board of Education* (1954) case, which outlawed school segregation, was that Blacks who attended Black schools not only suffered educationally, but socially and psychologically from low self-concept” (Belgrave & Allison, 2006, p. 208). Since then, the Clark and Clark (1939) doll study has been replicated and revealed similar findings. When young Black children are presented with Black and White dolls, Black children will attribute positive qualities to White dolls more than Black dolls (Clark & Clark, 1947; Goodman, 1952; Greenwald & Oppenheim, 1968; Lewis & Biber, 1951; Morland, 1962, 1966). However, these findings have been widely criticized with caution. Interpretations do not necessarily suggest that Black children have feelings of shame or self-hatred, rather, these previous studies leave out the matters of mental health, adaptive strength, and other social conditions (Atkinson, Brown, Parham, Matthews, Landrum-Brown, & Kim, 1996; Cross, 1991; Davis, 2007; Jordan & Hernandez-Reif, 2009). Hence, fostering healthy attitudes of self-identification for African American children is vital to their self-concept as they emerge from adolescence into adulthood.

Contrary to the Black self-hate doctrine (Clark & Clark, 1939), Black psychologist, Maxine Clark (1982) administered the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory to 210 Black male and female children (ages 9 to 11) in the Midwest. Racial preferences and attitudes were measured by a survey designed after the Preschool Racial Attitude Measure II (PRAM II) (Williams, Best, Boswell, Mattson, & Graves, 1975). Results indicated no linear relationship between racial group concepts and general or specific self-esteem; rather differences found high significance of physical appearance esteem as a predictor of general self-esteem for Black children. These findings are contrary to the self-hatred doctrine that postulated Blacks

possessed a negative self-evaluation, with data indicating there is neither racial preference nor racial attitude as a significant predictor of general self-esteem (Clark, 1982).

More recently, DeCuir-Gunby (2009) described racial identity for Black people as “the attitudes and beliefs that an African American has about his or her belonging to the Black race individually, the Black race collectively, and their perceptions of other racial groups” (p. 103). When African American children reach adolescence, they become more aware of societal perceptions about them, which can be detrimental impediments to the choices, opportunities, and roles necessary to be successful in personal, school, and career areas (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990; Tang, McLoyd, & Hallman, 2016).

While all adolescents experience milestones confronted in the development of their identity, youths of color face a variety of childhood experiences they must reconcile regarding who they are:

- Ethnic and racial identification – a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group that uses an ethnic label is often glaring to them.
- Ethnic and racial preferences – proud of belonging to a certain group, which contributes to self-concept; often confronted with others that do not hold their group in high esteem.
- Ethnic and racial attitudes – societal views about the group, the responses of others toward the group significant to the individual; attitudes about self-involve positive regard for their own group and other ethnic groups.
- Reference group orientation or group identity studies – researchers conduct studies of African American children or youth that include racial attitudes, stereotypes, racial preferences, and skin color that may influence others’ views of them. (Spencer &

Markstrom-Adams, 1990, p. 292)

Summarily, youth's reconciliation of who they are is often compounded by a Western orientation of identity that Wynter (2003) suggested is problematic.

Providing a critical view of identity, Wynter (2003) argued that the initial concept of identity is formed by the present ethno-class (Western Bourgeois) concept of a human (White male), which is overrepresented and excludes the identity formation of other categories of people; defined by race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other intersecting identities. Wynter (2003) asserted that the present struggle of "coming to claim 'normal' Northern American identity by putting of visible distance between themselves and the Black population group...is the struggle against this overrepresentation" (p. 261-262) of White men. She highlights the Black population's struggle over the dominant class securing their well-being over other societal underrepresented groups. Hence, identity construction is formed at the intersections of race, gender, class, and other identifying categories.

### **Identity Formation for African American Women**

For African American women, identity formation is shaped as a collective (Brown et al., 2013; Garrin & Marcketti, 2018; Patterson, 2004). Collective identity serves to connect an individual with a larger social movement that share values bounded together by collective identity and cultural events (Garrin & Marcketti, 2018; Whittier, 1997). Culture holds a duality which can promote oppressive values or become a form of resistance (hooks, 1991). A culture of resistance is often used by marginalized groups and operates under a combined set of values that differentiates from the dominant culture. For example, the identity and appearance of Black women's natural hair is a form of resistance to combat White standards of beauty. Our hair is a recognition of African culture as a source of pride and strength.

During the Civil Rights Movement (from 1960 to 1970), Garrin and Marcketti (2018) interviewed seven African American women, in the Midwest, who were emerging adults between the ages of 18 to 25. The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of their experiences with wearing natural hair through the three dimensions of collective identity formation: boundaries, consciousness, and negotiation. Garrin and Marcketti (2018) found that (a) boundaries created by the 'Black is beautiful' ideology promoted Black culture and ethnic pride; (b) the raised consciousness of Black contributions and societal positions of Black women changed the imagery of Black women; and (c) the negotiation of their appearance, related to their life stages and activism within the movement, was noteworthy. This study provided support for the collective self-esteem of Black women, who form their identities as a collective through embracing who they are and resisting dominant culture using shared cultural values.

Moreover, for African American females, identity formation of their femininity is comprised of both traditional and culturally specific norms of Black womanhood. Davis (2018) conducted a web-based survey of 399 African American women at a Midwestern university, ranging in age from 18 to 69 (mean age of 30), on hegemonic and unique culturally specific norms defining Black womanhood. Social identity theory was used to explore factors to examine the content of existing measures for providing a comprehensive framework of African American femininity. Davis (2018) discovered the following feminine norms to emerge as consistent with African American femininity, including spirituality, pride, self-reliance and care for children, thinness, domesticity, and modesty. Specifically, Black women's "pride comes from both an intrinsic sense of identity as a Black individual and connection to the community for African American women" (Davis, p. 61). This intrinsic

sense of identity is derived from self-knowledge while connected to their cultural communities (Davis, 2018; Ogbar, 2019). Thus, African American women's identity development is based on ethnic and cultural pride and being a member of the community. Garrin and Marcketti (2018) found similar themes of identity rooted in a cultural and ethnic sense of pride and a collective identity. I contend that African American female millennials in HE support roles may need to have a strong social identity in order to promote their sense of self.

### **African American Women's Sense of Self**

What is "sense of self" for Black women? Renowned Black feminist author, Patricia Hill Collins (1986), asserted that self-definition and self-valuation is critical to Black women's survival. Collins emphasized the importance of rejecting "internalized, psychological oppression" (p. 18), challenging the images of dehumanization and exploitation of Black women's labor with a self-defined standpoint of authentic Black female images (Collins, 1986). Harris-Perry (2011) illustrated what it is like for Black women to exist in a world where negative images influence their sense of self. Harris-Perry (2011) lamented:

[w]hen they confront race and gender stereotypes, Black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some Black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion. (p. 29)

Black women may adapt to the preconceived notions about themselves, even "shifting" (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 6) to make others comfortable around them.

Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) conducted an African American Voice Project, designed to explore the impacts of racism and sexism on Black women in America. The researchers collected 333 surveys and carried out 71 in-depth interviews of Black women

from 24 states across the U.S. From their research, they found a response to relentless oppression of Black women, coining the term “shifting” (p. 6), defined as “a sort of subterfuge that African Americans have long practiced to ensure their survival in our society” (p. 6). Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) provided an example of shifting:

[Black women] shift to accommodate differences in class, as well as, gender and ethnicity. From one moment to the next, they change their outward behavior, attitude, or tone, shifting “White,” then shifting “Black” again, shifting “corporate,” shifting “cool”...shifting is what she does when she speaks one way in the office, another way to her girlfriends, and still another way to her elderly relatives. (p. 7).

This notion of shifting is often internal and invisible and entails the chipping away at “her sense of self, at her feelings of wholeness and centeredness” (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, p. 7), which can often become a consequence of living amidst racial and gender bias.

Shifting was also a mechanism by which earlier Black feminist scholars anticipated how Black women might survive. Through the analysis and survey of the interview data, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) found that Black women were still victims of racist and sexist behaviors. They specifically discovered several themes, including (a) race discrimination against Black women persists, (b) gender discrimination against Black women is also pervasive, (c) most Black women shift their behaviors to accommodate others, and (d) discrimination is experienced most frequently at work. These findings are significant to my investigation of African American female millennials’ sense of self in HE support roles as shifting can be considered a coping tool for Black women in the modern workplace. In HE, Black women who fill support roles, may feel that shifting is necessary for survival (i.e., remain employed) in an environment traditionally dominated by White males.

**Self-esteem.** How is African American women’s self-esteem shaped? Historically, due to systemic and environmental oppression, social scientists assumed negative

psychological outcomes for African Americans (Allport, 1954; Clark, 1965; Clark & Clark, 1950; Pettigrew, 1964; Simmons, 1978) would cause self-hatred and low self-esteem for people of this sociocultural background. However, over time, researchers revealed that Whites do not contribute to the formation of Black self-esteem (Baldwin, Brown, & Hopkins; Crocker & Major, 1989; Rosenberg, 1979). Self-esteem is developed through relational and familial environments (Patterson, 2004). This notion particularly applies to African American women who were once predicted to have low self-esteem in comparison to White female counterparts. Patterson (2004) explained that “Black women are consistently shown to have higher self-esteem than White women, and Black women may be better able to maintain high self-esteem throughout the life course” (p. 309) due to strong support networks. The subsequent studies support the principles of self-esteem for African American women.

DeFrancisco and Chatham-Carpenter (2000) explored the concept of self-esteem from the perspective of African American women in the Midwest, specifically about their views of high self-esteem. Researchers interviewed 21 women from the ages of 21- 69 and conducted follow-up focus groups. They utilized personal identity development theory and Black Feminist Thought as theoretical frameworks. DeFrancisco and Chatham-Carpenter claimed African American women face many adversities tied to racism and sexism; and indeed, have a higher self-esteem than their White female counterparts. They asserted, “As a rule, African American women have had to develop survival strategies that prevent them from internalizing negative messages from the larger culture and at the same time maintain a strong inner sense of self” (p. 76).

DeFrancisco and Chatham-Carpenter (2000) found two interconnecting themes that support African American women’s high self-esteem: social support and self-reliance. Social

support came from family, friends, church members, and neighborhoods or their communities. These supports gave these women confidence, leadership skills, and positive examples from other women in the community that demonstrated how to deal with certain aspects of life. In the same vein, social supports teaches self-reliance that comes from the idea that “no White knight is coming to save you. You gotta do this on your own” (DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000, p. 81), meaning that Black women are cautioned by their communities to take care of themselves and to not depend on anyone for survival. In addition to these two primary themes, DeFrancisco and Chatham-Carpenter, found other related themes; pride, respect, positive outlook, and the use of self-talk. For the women in this study, having a community base was vital to their overall concept of self, resulting in higher self-esteem.

Patterson (2004) highlighted a longitudinal study of African American women regarding the influence and maintenance of a healthy self-esteem. Black feminist theory and relative deprivation theory were used as theoretical frameworks. Relative deprivation theory suggests that Blacks will compare their socioeconomic status with other groups (Smith & Pettigrew, 2015); which may result in feelings of anger and resentment if one’s group is economically at the bottom of the ladder (Smith & Pettigrew, 2015; Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012). Patterson examined 428 African American women over a 14-year period using the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA): A Panel Study of Black Life 1979-1992. Difference-of-mean tests were used to measure self-esteem over three-time-periods: 1979 to 1980, 1986 to 1987, and 1988 to 1992.

Linear regression determined the effectiveness of three variable categories: support networks, achievement outcomes, and racial esteem between 1979 and 1992 (Patterson,

2004). Black women's self-esteem remained remarkably high throughout the 14-year period. Social support networks were the greatest influence on self-esteem for Black women. Social group rankings of the NSBA indicated they validated each other (Patterson, 2004); thus, their self-concepts are enhanced by group ties and interactions with family, friends, church, and community members.

Overall, the Patterson study (2004) supported the view that Black women resist oppression through empowering one another; showing that African American women can overcome the oppression of racism, sexism, and economic exploitation that results in multiple consciousness and a survival mentality (Byng, 1998; Collins, 1990; Gordon, 1987). King (2016) explained multiple consciousness as, "the dual and systematic discriminations of racism and sexism remain, pervasive, and, for many, class inequality compounds those oppressions" (p. 43). This study confirms the findings of DeFrancisco and Chatham-Carpenter (2000) that social support networks shape African American women's sense of self.

Hatcher (2007) highlighted in her research the lack of culturally relevant frameworks for studying self-esteem among African American women and conducted a critical analysis related to self-esteem measurements of African American women in the United States. Hatcher compared three commonly used measures: the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory. The purpose of this study was to test the validity of the measures of self-esteem for African American women. Hatcher (2007) found that these measures had not been adequately tested to include Black women's lived experiences and lacked theoretical support due to traditional definitions of self-esteem based on personal evaluations of self-worth (Coopersmith, 1967; Rosenberg,

1979). The measures failed to consider the experiences of African American women, supported in the literature as more community-based (DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000). The significance of the research revealed the unique needs of African American women in the area of self-esteem, as they are challenged by racism and sexism in their lived experiences, demonstrating the need for self-esteem scales to include these critical factors.

Overall, due to strong social and community supports, studies have shown that African American women have the capacity for higher self-esteem (Brown et al., 2013; DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter 2000; Patterson, 2004). These support networks build their self-concept to combat racist and sexist oppression. Historical and sociocultural implications may also influence their sense of self and how they operate in a White male-dominant society. Although research demonstrates that Black women may have higher levels of self-esteem, regardless of racist and sexist oppression, African American millennial women in HE support roles may possibly have a low sense of self due to oppression caught in a kind of “multiple-jeopardy,” (King, 2016, p. 47) defined as “...racism, sexism, and classism constitute three, interdependent control systems” (King, 2016, p. 47). These three systems have multiple effects of oppression. A discussion of Black feminist (womanist) theory, relevant to this inquiry, is in need of examination.

### **Black Feminist (Womanist) Theory**

Black feminist (womanist) theory is included in this discussion as it shapes feminist theory by raising the voices of Black women (hooks, 2000). As previously mentioned, I contend Black women are at a disadvantage due to the consequences of slavery that have influenced their lived experiences. hooks (1984) explained the condition of Black women in the United States:

Feminism in the United States has never emerged from the women who are most victimized by sexist oppression: women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically, and spiritually – women who are powerless to change their condition in life. They are a silent majority. A mark of their victimization is that they accept their lot in life without visible question, without organized protest, without collective anger or rage. (p. 1)

Additionally, these women have birthed a younger generation of Black women, who from a religious perspective, continue to pay for the sins of slavery, as they are oppressed (Bush, 2010; Crenshaw, 1989; West, 1995; Wyatt, 1999), stereotyped (Abrams et al., 2014; Collins, 2000, 2009; Jewell, 1993, 2012); misrepresented (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008; Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011); and misunderstood (Fordham, 2010; hooks, 1984, 1989; Smith, Caruthers, & Fowler, 2019) concerning how we live and move about the world. This review of Black feminist (womanist) theory undergirds the discussion about how younger Black women define their sense of self in a HE workplace environment, historically reserved for elite White men.

Ultimately, Black feminist (womanist) theory represents, “Black women’s lived experience and realities...Black Feminist Thought gives voice to the American Black woman whose experience and reality remain outside the realm of knowledge for most” (Hein, 2017, p. 1). Due to the unique status of Black women, Black feminist (womanist) theory places Black women at the center of discussion as it validates their thoughts, knowledge, and experiences (Collier, 2018). To contextualize this review, I examined silence and invisibility of the Black woman, knowledge construction of Black feminists, the emergence of Womanist theory, and Black feminist theory. However, I begin with an historical overview of the waves of feminism and how voice has been the center of the movement toward equality, justice, and expressions of Black women’s’ lived experiences.

## **Historical Waves of Feminism**

Ideology and philosophy have shifted overtime, creating “waves” of feminism. In the United States, four waves of feminism have guided women in an ongoing fight towards liberation for centuries. Not every wave has a distinct timeframe, rather a wave is defined by the goals and mechanism achieved during each period. A brief overview of the waves of feminism is pertinent to the development of Black feminist theory. For the sake of this discussion, I begin with the first wave which entailed the rights of White women. While the voices of Black women were raised during this period, they were excluded and ignore. The second wave involved the fight to end the oppression of Black women; important to this struggle was the formation of Combahee River Collective (2015) for political change to end oppression. Intersectionality was the third wave of feminism with the realization that women’s lives are “shaped not be a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 2). Finally, the fourth wave is the present, influenced by the internet and known as the “Call-out Culture” with an emphasis on raising critiques of oppression through public spaces and social media—“calling it out.”

**Rights of White Women: An exclusionary tale.** The first wave of feminism began around the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century and focused on women’s suffrage toward citizenship rights and the right to vote (Kokushkin, 2014). During this time, Black feminist pioneers such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Anna Julia Cooper, and Maria W. Stewart were integral to the women’s liberation and abolitionist movements (Collins, 2009; Stewart & Richardson, 1987; White, 1999). Activist, authors, poets, and abolitionists of this wave gave attention to the awareness of Black women’s struggles in a White male-dominated

society. For example, Sojourner Truth traveled the country speaking to crowds, urging individuals to understand the struggles of a former slave woman's lived experience. In her historical speech entitled, *Ain't I a Woman*, delivered at the 1851 Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, Truth challenged the audience to consider her life perspective as a Black woman:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (p. 1)

Sojourner Truth directed light to the contradictions of society's differences in the treatment of White women and Black women, exposing the culturally constructed meaning of being a woman. Truth claimed her experience as a slave woman as hard, lonely, sorrowful, and invisible. She asserted that being a woman has considerably more privilege than being a woman and former slave, bringing awareness to the oppression of Black women.

Although Black feminists fought for liberation and citizenship rights, the first wave of feminism established the rights for White women. The Declaration of Sentiments was the document created at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, which advocated for women's innate rights, including attaining the civil, social, political, and religious rights of women (Foner, 1976). Eventually, the first wave feminism in America culminated in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment (1920), securing women's right to vote. However, these legislative liberties were intended for White women and left out women of color in their advocacy and body of law.

**Black women's fight to end oppression.** Women's participation in World War II and the Civil Rights Movement were precursors to the second wave of feminism, which occurred during the 1960's and 1970's (Sheber, 2017). Social and economic justice, primarily dedicated to politics and equality, defined this wave. During this era, in 1974, several Black feminists began to meet and organize, they were known as the Combahee River Collective. The purpose of this collective was to start a political movement to combat racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression against Black women (Combahee River Collective, 2015). Formed out of the "outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters," (Combahee River Collective, 2015, p. 211), contemporary Black feminism formed a new generation of feminists to build political change to end the oppression of Black women.

Nevertheless, there were political strides that emerged from this wave. Crary (2015) argued, "the experience of oppressed people in general, and of women in particular, affords an epistemologically privileged perspective on social life" (p. 289). Yet, during this period several pieces of legislation were passed and enacted into law, including the *Roe v. Wade* (1973) decision, which legalized abortion and extended divorce rights for women and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which led to the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Despite the progression of women's rights in this era and the intersectionality of the Combahee River Collective's voices (2015), the second wave of feminism did not account for all women and excluded: lesbian, bisexual women, and women of lower class.

**Intersectionality.** The failure to acknowledge these women stimulated the next wave of feminism, the third wave of feminism emerged. This wave was influenced by

postmodernism and queer theory, bringing awareness to language and the centralizing of queer and other identities outside of the cisgender, heterosexual norm (Sheber, 2017). In addition, third-wave feminism brought attention to intersectionality. Crary (2015) expounded that “women are made to occupy [spaces that] may be cognitively compulsory, yet differ in stressing both that individual women’s perspectives vary with social classifications such as race, class, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity” (p. 290). Intersectionality acknowledges the cultural differences of women’s biases based on their experiences. Collins and Bilge (2016) explained intersectionality as:

...a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences...When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not be a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. (p. 2)

Intersectionality acknowledges the multiple oppressions and limited worldviews of previous White, middle class, and heteronormative waves. This wave recognized that Black women stand at the intersectionality of race, gender, and class which influences their life experiences.

**Call-out culture.** Lastly, the fourth wave of feminism began around the second decade of the 21st century and emerged as the “call-out culture” (Munro, 2013, p. 2), as the internet became a tool of empowerment for younger feminists to challenge issues of sexism and misogyny. This wave has many similarities to the third wave of feminism; however, differs as it prioritizes making feminist critique discourse through public spaces and social media (Sheber, 2017). This new wave of feminism created a global community of women (and men) who utilize the internet for discussion and activism such as body positivity causes, a pop culture media term that suggests we should have positive body images.

The first four waves of feminism centered on liberation and freedom of choice for women who are marginalized in a male-dominated world. The preceding waves of feminism were built from earlier women's accomplishments in order to better understand where feminism lies today and where it is headed in the future. Still, the issue of invisibility of Black women remains problematic in contemporary society, addressed in this review, and challenges the status of Black people, in general, as a problem and the silence and invisibility of Black women.

### **Silence and Invisibility**

Black feminist scholar Fannie Barrier Williams (1905) laments that “the Black race was best designated by the term “problem” (p. 150); therefore, Black women are hidden beneath the shadows of *the problem* of the Black race” (Williams & Washington, 1987).

Contemporary Black feminist scholar, Brittney Cooper (2018), communicated the emotions underlying invisibility for Black women:

[B]ut we also scream, and cry, and hurt, and mourn, and struggle. We get heartbroken, our feelings get stepped on, our dreams get crushed. We get angry, and we express that anger. We know what it means to feel invisible. (p. 4)

Cooper qualifies the feelings of African American women, for visibility exposes the wounds and compounds the pain of Black women's struggle. Therefore, we hide; we mask, and bear the burden of our silent struggles and invisible heartache.

Black women intellectuals, like Stewart and Cooper, revealed a foundation for a “distinctive standpoint of self, community, and society and, in doing so, create a multifaceted, African American women's intellectual tradition” (Collins, 2009, p. 5). Smith, Caruthers, and Fowler (2019) claimed the contradictions of Womanism is to negotiate space to make the invisible identity visible and to give voice to the voiceless (Cantey, 2014);

however, for womanish girls, their voices are often shamed into a muted status. Smith (2019) stated:

That is, my mother told me to go play rather than ask grown folk questions...in my small southern community, there were Black women who told me that I was too womanish. A contradiction for me is that I felt bad about the labeling, reacting with fear, hiding, shame, and silence (hooks, 2015)...However, there were moments when I basked in the name-calling. I glowed in the shame...I did not know it at the time, but I was trying to redefine myself (Blackburn, 1980)...having said that I was also silent and silenced...I was doing a contradictory two-step. (p. 3)

This contradictory “two-step” between acting “fast/hot” or too womanish versus being silenced can bring about shame for younger Black girls. The shame of experiencing silence as a young girl may perhaps encourage women to redefine themselves later in life.

The rich intellectual work of once-muted voices provides an opportunity for scholars like Smith et al. (2019) and others to collect and preserve their knowledge for future generations. Therefore, uncovering younger Black women’s sense of self adds to the body of Black feminist (womanist) theory. For Black women, it is important that our voices are lifted as we self-define our existence and our knowledge construction.

### **Black Feminist Knowledge Construction**

Collins (2002) explained knowledge construction as “lived experiences as a criterion of meaning...through validation of other African American women” (p. 266). Although feminism advocates for women as full human beings (Cleage, 1993), Black women in the United States encounter racial segregation in this ideological movement. Collins (1998) explained that “Black feminism examines how the particular constellation of issues affecting Black women in the United States are part of issues of women’s emancipation struggles globally” (p. 66). Further, she emphasized that “Black challenges the assumed Whiteness of

feminism and disrupts the false universal of this term for both White and Black American women” (p. 67).

Black feminist thought advocates for women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals (Collins, 2009). The task of reclaiming Black women’s voices involves discovery and reinterpretation. In a seminal study, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) investigated knowledge construction, in general, regarding voices of women. Researchers interviewed 135 women of different ages and backgrounds about women’s ways of knowing with respect to intellect and moral development. Researchers found five categories that pertain to this subject: Silence, Received Knowledge, Subjective Knowledge, Procedural Knowledge (Separated and Connected), and Constructed Knowledge. These characteristics were defined as: (a) feeling overpowered by authority; (b) truth is defined externally; (c) understanding from an intuitive process, hunches heard, but are not tempered with reason, and opinions of others; and (d) seeing the interrelationship between a specific piece of knowledge and various systems, disciplines and experiences (Belenky et al., 1986).

These themes as noted by Freeman and Coll (1991) are theoretical conceptualizations that captured women’s understanding of their experiences and worldviews. Freeman and Coll (1991) explained their perspectives on Belenky et al. (1986), and noted, “women struggle to ascend from a silent and/or passive position to a stronger place of self-awareness by recognizing past mistakes...” (p. 12) and due to a sense of powerlessness, they struggle to overcome a lack of voice. Contrary to this perspective, Black feminist theory led to the understanding that Black women and third-world women may experience voice in different ways based on the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and other areas of difference.

Viewed through the lens of systematic oppression, Womanist theory led the way to claim voice and break the silence.

### **The Emergence of Womanist Theory**

Adding Womanist theory to this discussion further contextualizes research about African American female millennials' sense of self. Womanism emerged around the early 1980's as a social theory based on the historical experiences of Black women that identified and analyzed sexism, anti-racism and their intersectional identities (Napikoski, 2019; Philips, 2006). In her acclaimed volume of essays, *In Search of our Mother's Gardens* (1983), poet and activist, Alice Walker introduced the term *Womanist* to bring attention to voices of Black women. She defined Womanist as:

From womanish (Opp. of 'girlish,' i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.)...From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish,' i.e., like a woman...A women who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually...Committed to survival of a wholeness of entire people, male and female. (p. xi)

This definition is concerned with both issues of racism and sexism; hence, a number of Black women prefer Womanist to Black feminist. Walker implies that Black women are somehow superior to White women because of their rich Black folk tradition (Collins, 1998). Lindsay-Dennis (2015) stated that the goal of Womanist theory is to include "everyday people to solve problems; ending all forms of oppression for all people; restoring the balance between people and nature; and reconnecting humans with the spirit realm" (p. 511). However, the concern about Womanism is that it is an ideal of Black women's liberation, whereas Black feminism seemingly addresses the current state of reality for the Black woman.

In addition, Womanism encourages intergenerational survival strategies including mothering, dialogue, self-help, and spirituality (Collins, 1998; Linday-Dennis, 2015).

Identity formation is constituted through socialization to transmit indirect and direct messages from one generation to another (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). These strategies communicate to younger generations how to operate through multiple spaces being Black and female. An overview of Black feminist (Womanist) scholars' historical work is helpful to understand the political advancement and liberation of women of color.

In 1831, activist and political leader, Maria W. Stewart's renowned lectures challenged Black women to come out of oppression traced by the lines of race, class, and gender created by the oppressor, and to forge new self-definitions, self-reliance, and independence (Collins, 2009; Stewart & Richardson, 1987). Stewart urged Black women to reject negative images of Black womanhood and the etiologies of their poverty. In her address delivered to the African Masonic Hall in Boston, February of 1933, she proclaimed the injustice of Black women's lives, "We have pursued the shadows, they obtained the substance; we have performed the labor, they have received the profits; we have planted the vines, they have eaten the fruit of them" (Stewart & Richardson, 1987, p. 59). She called the audience to action, urging them to "possess the spirit of independence...possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless, and undaunted..." (Stewart & Richardson, 1987, p. 53). To Stewart, Black women's survival was at stake, and she emphasized the importance of self-definition and valuation of the Black woman.

In response to the Womanism perspective, Hudson-Weems (1993) encouraged an inclusionary stance in that "Africana Womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women" (p. 24).

African Womanism considers race as more important than gender when confronted with issues of gender. Hudson-Weems (1993) asserted:

Clearly, the problems of these women are not inflicted upon them solely because they are women. They are victimized first and foremost because they are Black; they are further victimized because they are women living in a male-dominated society. (p. 30)

Hudson-Weems (2001) advocated for African women to first take up their race concerns before addressing issues of gender, prioritize supporting their male counterparts for the safety and security of their families and their communities. The ideology of Walker's Womanism is that Black women's liberation must entail all forms of oppression, even from their Black male counterparts. The liberation of women seeks to forge new self-definitions, including those that place Black women outside traditional female roles. Therefore, younger Black women, may not choose to place the concerns of their Black male counterparts above their own concerns and issues; thus applying the ideas of Womanism to their daily lives.

Other Black scholars have taken up the fight of Black women's liberation and have become largely known for their contributions, ranging from Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Mary McLeod Bethune to contemporary scholars such as Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker, and others. Walker (1983) captured the essence of the survival of our people's culture:

We are people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artist and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone. (p. 92)

Walker's (1983) statement urges Black women to preserve the culture or else it will be thrown away. Walker asserted that no matter how much distance each new generation puts between themselves and their new sophistications, one cannot hold back the pride of our descendants as an "inventive, joyous, courageous, and outrageous people" (p. 85).

Consequently, shaping sense of self through a foundational cultural community. This study was designed to uncover the sense of self for Black women while also employing a Black feminist perspective.

### **Black Feminist Theory**

Black feminist research draws from the postmodernism paradigm and challenges current society's way of thinking. Postmodernism is a conceptual framework that recognizes the differences of experiences and perspectives about the world (Collins, 1998). Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2000) suggested Black feminist theory "aims to empower [Black] women within the context of social justice sustained by intersecting oppressions" (p. 22). This study employed the tenets of Black feminist epistemology, as identified in the work of Collins (2000), including; (a) validation of lived experiences as a legitimate source of knowledge and truth, (b) use of dialogue to assess knowledge claims (c) ethics of caring with a recognition that all knowledge is intrinsically value-laden, and (d) personal accountability for knowledge claims (p. 275-284).

Black feminist theorist and activist Pearl Cleage (1993) defined feminism as "the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities—intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual, and economic" (p. 28). Moreover, Black Feminist Thought scholar, bell hooks (1989) explained the purpose of Black feminist theory:

Black feminist theory provides a structure of analysis and thought that synthesizes that which is most visionary in feminist thinking, talk, and discourse—those models of change that emerge from our understanding of sexism and sexist oppression in everyday life, coupled with strategies of resistance that effectively eradicate domination and engage us fully in liberatory praxis. (p. 35)

In other words, for Black feminist theory to be effective, there must be liberation; without liberation from the daily struggle of women, Black feminist theory and scholarship has no effective power (hooks, 1989). Hence, the goal of Black feminist theory is to educate the masses to explore and understand the oppression of sexism and work towards strategies for resistance and advancement of women, while challenging the system of oppression created to silence the Black female voice (Collier, 2018).

Patterson-Stephens and Vital (2017) used Black feminist theory to explore barriers and facilitators of success for Black doctoral women. Researchers selected seven women who identified as African American or Black, nearing the end of their doctoral programs across various U.S. higher education institutions. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to expand upon extant research and uncover trends observed among Black women in pursuit of their doctoral degrees.

Patterson-Stephens and Vital (2017) found three primary themes in the interview data: (a) socialization experiences; (b) student success; and (c) challenges. Within the primary theme of socialization experiences, one participant, Dr. Jay, shared that midway through her studies, a faculty advisor attempted to counsel her out of her doctoral program:

... the faculty actually voted not to let me continue on even though I had over 3.0 GPA. I had, you know, a dissertation plan they actually took full faculty vote on. They're like "No, we don't want you in the Ph.D. program." When I ask my advisor why, she said, "Well, the faculty thinks you'll be a great teacher, but Ph.D.'s a research degree, and we don't think you have what it takes to be a researcher." And so that just rang in my ears, and I was like, "Oh really?...watch." (p.15)

Dr. Jay's experience is an example of institutionalized racism that assumed she was intellectual inferior because of race.

Black feminist theory helps us understand that Black women are often treated as outsiders. Black feminist scholar, Audre Lorde (2012) coined the term *sister-outsider*,

referring to a particular placement of herself outside of the mainstream heterosexual, feminist, American frameworks (Davies, 2009). Further, Lorde (2012) expounded on the sister-outsider:

Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical norm*, which each one of us in our hearts knows “that is not me.” In America, this norm is usually defined as White, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. (p. 116)

Lorde continued the explanation of sister-outsider with remarks about the privilege of White women who deem women of color as other. She noted, “as White women ignore their built-in privilege of Whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, then women of color become ‘other,’ the outsider whose experience and tradition is too ‘alien’ to comprehend” (p. 118). Thus, Black women are treated differently based on being Black and a woman and often deemed intellectually inferior (Collins, 2000). Patterson-Stephens and Vital’s (2017) study confirmed the existence of systems in place that perpetuate racist, sexist, class-based ideologies, which influence the experiences of Black women in HE. Black Feminist theory provides useful discussion and perspective to this study.

For me, Black feminist (womanist) theory contributes to meaningful insight to the sense of self for African American female millennials in HE support roles, especially highlighting the historical experiences of Black women in this country. The work of Collins (2009) and others aim to reclaim the voices of the silenced by creating a space for African American women to share their knowledge and come out of the shadows of slavery’s past (hooks, 1989; Stewart & Richardson, 1987; Walker, 1983; Williams & Washington, 1987). Black feminist (womanist) theory examines historically marginalized groups as they reclaim their knowledge and power suppressed by a dominating culture (Collins, 2009). The Black

feminist perspective was an integral theory to consider as I made meaning of young African American women's sense of self.

Black feminist (womanist) theory, as a cultural lens, affirms the wisdom of the transnational and Africana sisters who reject the imperial interventions and profiteering of the west (Smith et al., 2019), and socially defined markers of identity that influence African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles. The next section will examine the intersectional identities of Black women that pertain to their sense of self.

### **Intersectionality Theory**

Rooted in Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory, intersectionality challenges White, male-dominated systems of oppression, and fosters ways to combat forms of discrimination associated with race, gender, class, and other identifying classifications. Intersectionality is a heuristic and analytic tool that institutionalizes practices and ways of thinking for understanding the experiences of historically marginalized groups (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013; Collier, 2018). In her 1989 landmark essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Anti-racist Politics," legal scholar and critical race theorist, Kimberle Crenshaw, introduced the term, *intersectionality*, addressing the marginalization of Black women within antidiscrimination laws, including feminist and anti-racist theories (Carbado et al., 2013).

Intersectionality addresses the disparities within feminist and anti-racist ideologies and communicates Black women's lived experience of sexism and racism (Bennett, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989; Ghavami & Peplau, 2013). In 1990, Kimberle Crenshaw expanded the framework in "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence

Against Women of Color.” Crenshaw used intersectionality to highlight ways in which social movements and advocacy can prevent violence against women of color and their exposed vulnerabilities (Carbado et al., 2013). Crenshaw (1991) identified a three-fold definition of intersectionality consisting of: (a) structural intersectionality, the understanding of Black women’s perspective from the traditional White women perspective; (b) political intersectionality, meeting the social and political needs of Black women; and (c) representational intersectionality, addressing sexist and racist images that marginalize Black women. Bennett (2016) explained these themes as “each person belongs to multiple social categories; one’s social category is informed by power relations systematized and historical, political, and social inequality; and one’s group identity is informed by both race and gender...” (p. 5). Therefore, intersectionality unpacks the multi-oppressive social conditions of Black women’s lived experiences. The subsequent sections will explore the historical analysis of intersectionality through the lens of employment and antidiscrimination frameworks and the experiences of young Black women regarding intersectionality.

### **Historical Analysis of Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is ground in antidiscrimination doctrine. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is a federal law that prohibits employers from discriminating against employees based on sex, race, color, national origin, and religion (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d., 2019). That discrimination is wrong proceeds from the identification of a specific class or category; either a discriminator intentionally identifies this category, or a process is adopted which somehow disadvantages all members of this category (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality is used as a theoretical lens to examine feminist and anti-racist dialogue in the experiences of women of color (Collier, 2018). Although Crenshaw coined

the term intersectionality, the concept has been researched by many Black feminist theorists including, Julia Anna Copper, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, and bell hooks. The Combahee River Collective (2015), previously mentioned as a group of Black feminist writers, preceded this term with the concept of *interlocking systems of oppression* as they took on the particular task to develop “integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (p. 210). This social movement was defined by the depiction of their views on intersectionality as combating the oppressions of women of color (Carastathis, 2014). Hence, intersectionality was developed by earlier Black feminists and used as a theoretical heuristic tool to challenge discrimination based on race and gender.

Kimberle Crenshaw’ (1989) groundbreaking essay highlighted three cases that brought attention to discrimination of Black women in the workplace. Crenshaw (1989) illustrated the difficulties of intersection for Black women in the judicial process as it relates to sexist and racist discrimination in three Title VII cases: *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*; *Moore v. Hughes Helicopter*; and *Payne v. Travenol*. In *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*: five Black women sued General Motors alleging mass layoffs of Black women during a recession between 1964 and 1970, in a “seniority-based layoff” (p. 141). Despite evidence presented at the trial, the court rejected the plaintiffs’ claims stating:

Plaintiffs have failed to cite any decisions which have stated that Black women are a special class to be protect from discrimination...they should not be allowed to combine statutory remedies to create a new “super-remedy” which would give them relief beyond what the drafters of the relevant statutes intended. (p. 141).

The court’s dismal of the *DeGraffenreid’s* complaint and the refusal to acknowledge Black women as a protected class was viewed as discrimination due to race and sex, as defined by White women’s and Black men’s experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). Hence, Black

women were only able to find protection under either class, but not combined as one lived experience.

In the case of *Moore v. Hughes Helicopter*, the plaintiff, *Moore*, alleged that the employer, *Hughes Helicopter*, practiced sex discrimination in promotions to upper-level craft and supervisory positions. Moore was the class representative for all women at Hughes; however, the court refused to certify Moore as the women's representative and she was forced to represent only the Black women in this suit. Moore provided statistical evidence establishing disparity of career advancement to supervisory positions for men and women; however, she was only allowed to use limited statistical data regarding Black women, which weakened her case. Crenshaw (1989) described the denied claim:

The court rejected Moore's bid to represent all females apparently because her attempt to specify her race was seen as being at odds with the standard allegation that they employer simply discriminated 'against females.' The court failed to see that the absence of racial referent does not necessarily mean that the claim being made is a more inclusive one. (p. 144)

Once again, this denial of implicit grounding of White female experiences above Black women's experiences is the doctrinal conceptualization of sex discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). Moore's case illustrates an additional way antidiscrimination doctrine undermines Black women's experiences and deems their discrimination groundless at the intersection of race and sex.

In the case of *Payne v. Travenol*, two Black women sued a pharmaceutical plant alleging race discrimination of Black employees. In the class action suit, the court refused to allow Black women to represent Black men, therefore, the plaintiffs were restricted to representing only the Black women of the plant. Ultimately, the court determined there was racial discrimination and awarded the class "back pay and constructive seniority" (p. 147) for the

Black female employees; however, the Black men of the plant were not a part of this judicial award. Crenshaw (1989) summed up the rejection of intersecting identities for Black women:

I am suggesting that Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by White women and Black men. Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to White women's experience; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. (p. 149)

Again, this case exemplified how antidiscrimination doctrines create a dilemma for Black women, forcing them to choose between their race and gender identities. Black women's experiences are often lost in the experiences of White females and Black males, denying both their compounded identities as Black women (Carastathis, 2014).

Overall, Black women stand at the intersection of race and gender. For this study on African American female millennial sense of self in HE support roles, I explored the intersectionality of race and gender and how these constructs may apply to younger Black women in the higher education workplace. Therefore, this diverse group of women are likely to be at risk of discrimination because of their race, gender, age, occupation, among other categorical identities that might have an influence on their sense of self. There are two key studies, depicted in next section that reflect intersectionality, regarding how young Black women identify themselves which links to their sense of self.

### **Young Black Women and Intersectionality**

Clearly, Black women have endured gendered discrimination for centuries (Eck, 2018; Fontaine, 2011; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Patton, 1994; West, 1995). Moreover, Crenshaw's (1991) research on intersectionality analyzed the double-discrimination that Black women's experience as symbolic of two marginalized groups. For younger African American women,

discrimination based on their race and gender is compounded by their sexual preference, religion, ability, social class, and other identifying categories (Jefferies & Jefferies, 2019). For these reasons, having a strong sense of self is vital for the survival and upward mobility of highly educated, ambitious, and successful younger cohorts of Black women.

Juan, Syed, and Azmitia (2016) conducted a mixed-methods longitudinal study related to the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and gender among women of color and White women at a large public university on the West Coast. They interviewed 65 college women (ages 21-23); who identified as female, women of color (African American, Asian, and Chicana/Latina), and/or as White women. The participants were asked two key questions regarding intersectionality of race/ethnicity, gender, and social class. They were asked to select among eight diagrams that represented all the ways race, ethnicity, gender, and social class are linked or not linked to one another (Juan et al., 2016). Data analysis involved thematic analysis within an intersectionality and social context framework. Researchers found that women of color are more likely to perceive their race, ethnicity and gender as interconnected; whereas, White women were more likely to perceive themselves as not characterized by these social constructs; revealing that gender, race and ethnicity may have less of an influence in their lives (Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011). Meaningfulness of the connections between race, ethnicity and gender was another key finding (Juan et al., 2016), establishing that women of color link their “minority social identity” (p. 233) to their sense of self, more than White women. Nia, a 22-year-old African American woman, explained this phenomenon:

Like, its' racism, sexism... like, all linked together to provide a special kind of oppression just for you, you know what I mean? Like, specially made, and it would be, obviously my experience would be different if I was like a rich woman of color, or White woman, a poor White woman, or something like that, you know. Like all

these things plays different into your experience and shape the way that we're going to react to you and how you're going to react to them. (p. 234)

Nia's sentiments highlight the oppression experienced by women of color as varied and complex under two marginalized identities. Intersectionality approaches can be used to accurately capture the experiences of racial/ethnic identity and gender identity at their intersections (Juan et al., 2016). This study sheds light on the unique social location occupied by a double marginalized group, specific to the experience of women of color at the intersection of race and gender.

The second study that reflected intersectionality of younger Black women was conducted by Thomas, Hacker, and Hoxha (2011) at a Midwest school district and university with 17 young women, ages 15 to 22. The study team implemented three focus groups to unpack the aspects of social identity, particularly gendered racial identity, from the phenomenological perspectives of participants. The intersectionality perspective provided a holistic framework for conceptualizing social identity processes (Thomas et al., 2011). Data analyses were conducted using a grounded theory approach, based primarily on data gathered from these questions:

What does it mean to be African American?

What does it mean to be a woman?

What does it mean to be an African American woman? (p. 542)

The findings from this study proposed gendered racial identity has greater salience for the participants as compared to the separate constructs of racial or gender identity.

The participants identified with historical and cultural stereotypes, e.g., Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and the SBW, in addition to issues conveyed by dominant standards of beauty. Also, emphasized was the importance of self-determination, breaking stereotypes,

and possessing inner-strength (Thomas et al., 2011). Gabriella, age 22, described her meaning of being a woman:

Not only are we women, but we have to be Black women. And it's hard. It's hard 'cause women already make less than men anyway, but then you have to be Black and have to enter the workforce. And all the stereotypes we have to face as Black women. We're loud, we're welfare queens, you know. All we do is have kids, we can't take care of our kids, we mistreat our men. So yeah, it's hard. (p. 535)

Gabriella's statement is an account of her experience of gendered racial identity (Settles, 2006). The young women in this study, as well as Juan's et al., (2016) study understood race and gender to be a part of their identities from early ages and learned through maternal and familial supports how to combat and cope with the negative expectations placed on them by sexist and racist behaviors, attitudes, and stereotypes.

**Intersectional bodies.** For Black women, our bodies are always a part of our consciousness due to the subjugation of racism, sexism, and classism (Brown, 2019). Directly traced to slavery's sting, Black women are still fighting for the full autonomy over our reproductive rights. Historically, *Roe v. Wade*, was a landmark decision in the United States Supreme Court where under the Fourth Amendment's Due Process clause, gave women the protective right to an abortion. Yet, for the first time in 40 years, at the State level, this decision is currently being challenged. Abortion rights are essential to the decision-making of poor women and young Black women that account for the highest abortion rates in the country (Guttmacher, 2017). A discussion of abortion, through the lens of intersectionality, deepens the review of the literature concerning how race, class, and sexuality shape the decision-making process for younger African American women.

Brown (2019) implemented an autoethnographic study that consisted of reflective dyadic and interactive interviews of four African American women in the Midwest involving

their experiences with abortion. Brown (2019) used three methodological components throughout this study: (a) embodied self-care, (b) intersectional bodies, and (c) vulnerable bodies. For embodied self-care, the researcher reflected on her own experience with the abortion process and took time to digest each individual story before moving on to the next interview. Brown (2019) examined data through the lens of intersectionality, as she captured “each woman’s experience...taking into account the ways in which our intersectional bodies played a role in our decision-making process” (p 93). The vulnerable bodies methodology emerged from the data as “each woman spoke in some regard to her Black body and the ways in which she experienced the ramifications of the oversexualization of the Black female body” (p. 94).

Multiple connected themes were identified: (a) abandonment, (b) denial, (c) shame, (d) dilemmas, and (e) fighting the stereotypes of repeating Mama’s mistake. The latter theme is most relevant to this discussion. All participants possessed the fear of repeating the choices their mothers made when deciding to have a child in a non-traditional, single-parent household.

In their experiences, watching their mothers’ struggle to raise children deterred the young women from making the same mistake; thus, leading to their individual decisions to terminate their pregnancy. One participant wrote “I didn’t want to have a kid in a broken home...I watched my mom struggle and I wouldn’t ever want to put myself in a position where that could be the case” (Brown, 2019, p. 101). Another participant wrote, “So for me, I didn’t want to be a baby mama because, you know, typical, cultural problems” (p. 101). In other words, she did not want to be stigmatized as being another Black single mother, raising a child in a non-traditional family structure.

These experiences will be forever woven into the fabrics of these women's lives; nonetheless, they all stated they were secure in their decisions and had no regrets. Consequently, these culturally diverse women and many others, live at the intersection of race, gender, class, and sexuality; having to consider the material circumstances of their lives, which weigh heavily on decisions to terminate pregnancies (Brown, 2019; Collins, 2002).

Intersectionality was originally developed to understand the impact of social systems based in race, gender, and social class. However, intersectionality can be useful, as reflected in these two studies, for understanding the personal and professional experiences of Black women. The discussion of relevant theories, culture and identity theory, Black feminist (womanist) theory, and intersectionality revealed the complexities of the lives of Black women in American and this younger generation of millennial Black women living within a White male-dominated system (Crenshaw, 1989; Juan et al., 2016). Contemporary moments of the call-out culture imply younger African American women live by “not be a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 2). They may view the world similarly as older generations, but are more likely to respond to it differently, empowered by the influences of the internet and social media.

The literature review follows, a thorough and more in-depth study of foundational knowledge of my study. The theories reviewed in this chapter are further expanded and give meaning to theories, concepts, and cited empirical studies of the literature review. As noted in this chapter, the search of the literature exposed limited research regarding the lives of

millennial African American women. This inquiry, through the voices of participants, fills the gap in the literature, as I theorize about their lives in HE environments.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I present an extensive review of the literature in areas related to younger African American women's sense of self in higher education (HE) support roles. According to Galvin and Galvin (2017), researchers are encouraged to use "an increasing number of academic journal articles that exclusively publish their material in digital format" (p. 18). Fox (2019) described the literature review as a story metaphor: the literature review is an ongoing developing story and may have several storylines. Multiple digital format journal articles are included in this review to tell the story of the literature. I also used books, scholarly journal articles, reports, and other resources related to my inquiry. The data bases of Google Scholar, Ebscohost, ERIC were primarily used, as well as the university library research system to identify other data bases and resources.

In addition, I used reports of seminal studies, and empirical literature and peer reviewed manuscripts related to the experiences of African American women, sociocultural factors for women in the workplace and HE environments. This review does not solely focus on HE literature; but covers empirical literature from multiple disciplines: history, education, HE management, management science, business, economics, law, organization development, sociology, and psychology. Thus, this inquiry consists of multiple disciplines integrated to construct a greater understanding of the sense of self for this group of young women.

I found over 400 resources from the following search terms used in different combinations: *African American women, stereotypes; Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, Super Black Woman, younger Black women, Millennials, sense of self, professional identity, identity, social identity, women in the workforce, African American women in the workforce,*

*modern-day workplace, intersectionality, voice, silence, higher educational staff, support staff, non-academic staff, and administrative staff.* I set a google alert for new relevant sources over the five-year period of developing my dissertation research.

After reviewing the literature, I found significant research regarding racial and gendered discrimination; intersectionality based on multiple differences including race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ageism, and others; barriers facing faculty of color in the academy; workplace issues and barriers confronting women, in general, and African American women, specifically; and mirrored challenges also facing students of color in elementary and secondary schools. However, I found gaps in the literature on younger African American women; particularly those of the millennial generation and the workplace, support staff roles in HE, and sense of self literature related to this group of women (Collier, 2018; Johnson, 2016; Singleton, 2018).

Additionally, limited studies have explored generational differences in levels of racial-ethnic pride or esteem associated with sense of self (Brown et al., 2013; Hatcher, 2007; Patterson, 2004). Another limitation included the scarcity of research in the United States related to professional identity of higher education non-academic staff, strongly related to a sense of self in the HE environment (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Castleman, Allen, & Bastalich, 1995; Dobson, 2000, 2006; Graham, 2012; Jo, 2008; Sebalj, Holbrook, & Bourke, 2012; Szekers, 2004; Whitchurch, 2008, 2009). Most of this research has been conducted in Australia and other European countries. For this reason, this study will bridge the gap in the literature related to African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles and discover generational differences that may exist regarding racial-ethnic pride or esteem, as well as professional identity.

In this chapter, I will discuss five areas that comprise the review of literature. Stereotypical images of Black women were introduced in Chapters 1, expanded in Chapter 2, and will be further explored here in terms of their historical underpinnings. Secondly, the shaping of identity for all women and intergroup relations are presented, particularly giving attention to support roles of African American women in HE. Third, I will examine support roles in the academy with a discussion of professional identity. Blurring of activities in professional support roles, due to twin dynamics and staff devaluation related to tensions between academic and support staff, are the center of this discussion. I focus, more specifically, on African American women in HE support roles. Additionally, voice and silence for Black women in HE are pertinent to this review; attention is given to the multiple dynamics of voice, Black women in predominantly White workspaces, and challenges and barriers in HE support roles.

Finally, the four generations in the current workplace are briefly highlighted in terms of their characteristics, followed by a more in-depth discussion of millennials in the workplace; in turn, Black millennial women in the workplace, as their sense of self is the unit of analysis for this dissertation and an area for in-depth inquiry. The review of the literature situates young Black women within a broader historical and sociocultural milieu and is connected to culture and identity theory, Black feminist (womanist) theory, and intersectionality theory, in Chapter 2. I begin with the discussion of the landscape of stereotypical images of Black women in America from the slave period and their persistence in contemporary society.

## **History of Stereotypical Images of Black Women**

African American women have a past shaped by stereotypes and socio-historical and sociocultural images (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014; Brown et al., 2013; Collins, 1986; Davis, 1981, 2011; Harris-Perry, 2011; hooks, 1989; James, Foster, & Guy-Sheftall, 2009; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016; White, 1990, 1985; Wyatt, 1997). Black women have lived in a White male-dominated society since the enslavement of Black people; stolen from Africa four centuries ago. Yet, Black women have endured, survived, and risen to unimaginable heights. African American women have broken barriers in the workforce, entering private and public sectors in corporate, education, healthcare, science, along with other industries and fields. Still, African American women remain widely discriminated against in the workforce for multiple reasons, including, but not limited to, negative stereotypes perpetuated from the slave period to the present day that are controlling images. A discussion of these persistent stereotypical images, embedded in their historical and contemporary lives, is warranted for this line of inquiry. Black feminism was a form of resistance and challenge to these persistent images. Moreover, the consequences of these stereotyped images are discussed for millennial Black women.

As noted in previous chapters, three stereotypes have been lasting and pervasive (Eck, 2018). The Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire are historical images that have influenced the ways Black women are perceived in today's society as stereotypical caretakers, hypersexual, and aggressive women (Abrams et al., 2014; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016). These images have been passed from generation to generation and may influence younger Black women's sense of self; nevertheless, these images do not embody the real lived experiences of Black women (Collins, 2000).

Substantial research exists on African American women's sense of self (Brown & Valk, 2010; Brown, White-Johnson, & Griffin-Fennell, 2013; Buckley & Carter, 2005; Collins, 1998; Finnegan, 2018; Griffiths, 2010; Harris-Perry, 2011; Hatcher, 2007; Thompson, 2017; Walker, 1986). These studies have found that Black women rely on community enclaves of women in churches, social clubs, private and public businesses, and organizations for support and encouragement that foster their self-esteem. Older generations pass down stories and memories of survival and resilience to younger generations (Brown & Valk, 2010; Brown et al., 2013; Harris-Perry, 2011; Hatcher, 2007). Unfortunately, prevalent stereotypes of the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire have persisted and transformed to new images that negatively depict the younger generation of Black women. These images use the conduits of mass media platforms (Adams-Bass, Bentley-Edwards, & Stevenson, 2014; Brown et al., 2013; Jerald, Ward, Moss, Thomas, & Fletcher, 2017), stereotypes and racism perpetuated from the larger society (Collins, 2000, 2009; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Lorde, 2012; West 1995), and the failure of America to address race (Bell, 2009; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Young, 2004; West, 1993, 2005). Hence, these images are not only persistent, but often control their lives.

### **Controlling Images of Black Womanhood**

Race, class, and gender oppression are at the root of controlling stereotypical images of Black womanhood (Collins, 2009). The Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire are stereotypical images that originated from slavery and have transformed to modern-day controlling images of Black women. Collins (2009) claimed that "these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (p. 77). Black women have been historically known as the

“other,” which demonizes African American women; and from this phenomenon, other groups define their normality (Lorde, 2012). Due to the denial of Black woman being fully accepted as human, I frame the focus of three stereotypical images (Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire) which are most prevalent in history and in research (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1989, 2009; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Lorde, 2012; West, 1995).

**Mammy.** This image is one of the most pervasive images of Black women. Aunt Jemima was a loyal domestic servant and joyous folklore character based on the Mammy (Eck, 2018) stereotype. This image originated in the South during slavery (Fontaine, 2011; West, 1995) and transcended the screen from the Academy Award winning, twentieth-century movie, *Gone With The Wind* (1939); which portrayed the character of Mammy as a faithful servant to the O’Hara family (Eck, 2018). The Mammy stereotype is a nurturing, subservient, and loyal slave to her masters. Physically, she is an obese, dark-skinned woman with African features and deemed asexual. This stereotype suggests an imagined and humane form of slavery where slaves consented to and enjoyed their enslavement (Eck, 2018). Furthermore, the imagery is symbolic of the antebellum South and White authority over the slaves (Radu, 2013). Phil Patton (1994) defined Mammy as someone “forgetting about her own persona, suppressing her identity inside the weight of heartiness, her sexuality inside her role as surrogate mother, teacher and cook” (p. 5). In short, the Mammy is a historical stereotypical figure of a loyal and domestic servant, who with blind obedience, cares for her White families while neglecting her own.

**Jezebel.** The Jezebel or the “bad-Black girl” (West, 1995, p. 462) also originated during slavery as a stereotype that Black women have “an insatiable appetite for sex” (Dunn, 2010, p. 114). During this time, White slave owners controlled Black women’s sexuality and

reproduction (West, 1995). Stripped down and nude on the auction block, enslaved Black women sold for childbearing capacity and rape, perpetuated by Black and White men (West, 1995). The origins of this slave character developed to justify sexual abuse by slave owners to enslaved women (Fontaine, 2011). Physically, the Jezebel was portrayed as a mixed-race woman, with thin lips and straight hair. Her physical features tended to be closer to the White standard of beauty. To hide the truth of the sexual and physical violence female slaves endured, Black women, then and now, are depicted as seductive, hypersexual, and exploiters of men's weaknesses (Dunn, 2010).

**Sapphire.** Originating in the 1800's, Sapphire began as an adaptation of the Mammy. "Sassy Mammy" (Fontaine, 2011) was, as her name described, sassy and because she was non-threatening, she was accepted by Whites in fictional and real life terms. During the Amos and Andy radio show (1928), later adapted to a television series (1951), the image of Sapphire became notorious for being the loudmouth, nagging wife of the character, George 'Kingfish' Stevens, who endured weekly emasculation by his angry, disrespectful, and abusive wife, Sapphire (Nicol, 2012; West, 1995); a large, but not obese, dark-skinned woman (West, 1995). Sapphire was another image of the "Angry Black Woman:" sassy, mean-spirited, and verbally abusive to African American men; using her limited voice in a loud, animated fashion (Cade-Bambara, 1970; Fontaine, 2011; Jewell, 1993). This stereotypical image is used to explain the degradation of Black families (Eck, 2018; Scott, 1982). Jones (2009) described plantation life: "Husbands and wives remained separated from each other, leaving women with the bulk of child-rearing responsibility...Because of the omnipresent threat of forced separation by sale, gift, or bequest, these families were not stable" (p. 31). Due to slavery's sting, family separation was a constant practice and fear, and

in an effort to weaken the Black family structure, the caricature of the Sapphire encouraged self-separation and the ubiquitous pitting of the Black woman against the Black man.

Essentially, the consequences of slavery depicted Black women as caretakers, hypersexual, and aggressors, which are historical tools used to perpetrate oppression by the dominant culture (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1989; Fontaine, 2011; West, 1990), including the Black family. Already weakened by forced separation, the pitting of Black women against Black men, the historical images of Black women made “social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Collins, 2009, p. 77); complicated by the Moynihan Report (1965), another indictment of the Black Family manufactured in the early moments of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Moynihan Report (1965), produced by the U.S. Department of Labor, and prominent in the 1970s, characterized the Black family as dysfunctional and deficit; policies were devised to explain issues of poverty and inequalities in housing, education, and employment (Berger & Simon, 1974). Today, researchers and practitioners at every level, are faced with discrediting “Moynihan’s declaration that African Americans are caught in a ‘tangle of pathology’ caused by the deteriorating structure of the lower-income family” (Logan, 2018, p. vii). Racial and gender discrimination have plagued Black women and men for centuries, affecting views of who they are, with the matriarchal family developed as a myth (Berger & Simon, 1974; Logan, 2018). In today’s society, African American women remain resilient; however, stereotypical images of Black women prevail. These negative stereotypes have evolved in new ways and have left indelible impressions on younger generations of Black women (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2013; Jerald, Ward, Moss, Thomas, & Fletcher, 2017).

## **Contemporary Stereotypical Images of Black Women**

The Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire are the three most common negative stereotypes that affect African American women today (Collins, 2009; Jewell, 1993, 2012). Originating from slavery, these stereotypes were created to dehumanize and oppress Black women.

Unfortunately, these negative images have transformed and persisted into modern-day culture. Society has continued to discriminate, discredit, and demoralize African American women. Modern-day stereotypes of Black women have transpired through dominant culture, governmental policies, mainstream media, and the workplace (St. Jean & Feagin, 2015; Wingfield, 2007). Empirical literature supports the persistent modern-day images of Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2013; Harley, 2008; Schroer, 2013).

**Mammy.** The stereotypical image of the Mammy entered the realm of HE through the assumed expectation of women of color as servants. Faculty women of color often take on large workloads, receive less pay, and experience barriers to advancement (Harley, 2008; Turner & González, 2011; Turner, González, & Wood, 2008) through a concrete ceiling (Catalyst, 2004; Davidson & Davidson, 1997; Johns, Fook, & Nath, 2019).

Harley (2008) found that African American women faculty at PWI's are assigned disproportionate service assignments, heavy teaching loads, and mentoring responsibilities while maintaining research and community involvement. Harley (2008) ascertained this could lead to burnout, psychological stress, and spiritual bankruptcy; and attributed many of these symptoms to the "maids of academe" (McKay, 1997, p. 20) syndrome, the devaluing of African American women in the professoriate:

Unlike their White female professionals who are daughters of White men and, subsequently benefactors of White privilege, African American women at PWI's are

overwhelmingly recipients of deprivileged consequences. To be deprivileged illustrates why African American women faculty are metaphorically referred to as the maids of academe. Deprivilege is played out in various ways at PWI's and within the requirements of the professorate. The maid syndrome becomes more evident when African American women remain at PWI's, where many abuses constantly beset their sensitiveness. (McKay 1997, p. 20)

Based on their racial, ethnic identity and gender, the mistreatment of Black female professors is subject to gendered racism and discrimination (Brown, Griffin-Fennell, & White-Johnson, 2011; Brown et al., 2013); thus, the justification of African American women as “work mules,” (Harley, 2008, p. 25) who due to their intersectional identities are burdened to carry heavy workloads.

Similarly, Turner, González, and Wood (2008) found that women of color at PWI's often experience marginalization, subtle discrimination, personal and institutional racism, gender bias and institutional sexism. They often experience difficulties with students who do not expect to be taught by women of color (Turner et al., 2008). In response to these findings, researchers observed that faculty women of color work to build community and support for other women of color in faculty positions across campuses. A number of studies confirm previous research that demonstrated, through a community base and social support (Brown, Griffin-Fennell, & White-Johnson, 2011; Brown et al., 2013; DeFrancisco, & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000; Patterson, 2004), the survival of African American women in predominately White spaces.

***Modern Mammy.*** Not only do African American faculty experience larger workloads and teaching assignments, they also experience philosophical stress; having to choose between their identity as Black females and the dominant views of their careers and/or professions. Jeanine Schroer (2013), the only African American woman academician in the discipline of philosophy at a Midwestern university, analyzed the terrifying tale of the

“Philosophical Mammy.” Schroer’s definition of a Philosophical Mammy is a “Black women carefully promoting and protecting the traditions...both institutional and methodological...of Anglo-Americans philosophy while it disregards and suppresses her and her kindred...” (p. 102). In other words, this Black female archetype has degraded the representation of Black women in the profession (Schroer, 2013) and is similar to the historical image of the Mammy, who is a trusted advisor and confidant; exclusively in service to White families while neglecting her own (Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Patton, 2004; Radu, 2013; Schroer, 2013).

*Philosophical Mammy.* Schroer (2013) highlighted her “worry” (p. 103) in having to choose between her intellectual commitments of western philosophy and intellectual ancestors of Black feminist theory in fear of betrayal of one or the other. Schroer (2013) maintained her identity as a Black feminist philosopher claiming both the western canon of philosophy, along with intellectual heritage leaders such as Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, and Patricia Hill Collins. She used the work of Collins (2000) to identify the “Philosophical Mammy” (p. 101) as an illusion.

Collins asserted that Black women are able to validate their own knowledge without the legitimate claims of the “Eurocentric, masculinist knowledge validation process,” (p. 187) and that Black women scholars can “invoke their own concrete experiences and those of other Black women in selecting topics for investigation and methodological used” (p. 193-94). Schroer (2013) reconciled the Philosophical Mammy is designed to suppress Black female voices. Therefore, being a Black feminist philosopher, she was in direct opposition of suppressing Black women’s voices, but rather in support of lifting them. The Philosophical Mammy is an example of how Black women in academia are expected to choose the

influences of the White community over their own. Her analysis of the Philosophical Mammy demonstrated how Black women validate their own intellect in traditionally White spaces.

Likewise, at a Midwestern University, Seo and Hinton (2009) conducted an auto/ethnographic study of two female professors: one Asian American and one African American; dispelling the “Model Minority Myth” (Chang, 1993; Chou & Feagin, 2008; Mann, 2000) and the “Modern Mammy” stereotype. The Model Minority Myth assumes all Asians are successful in all endeavors; while the stereotype behaviors of the Modern Mammy justifies the exploitation of African American women (Seo & Hinton, 2009). However, both stereotypes promote and ignore the racial discrimination and prejudice each marginalized group endures.

Seo and Hinton (2009) captured the account of an African American female participant (pseudonym DH) and her experience with the Modern Mammy phenomenon in the HE workplace:

I teach at a regional university that services a number of rural counties in our area. As a part of teaching the Introductory course, I require students to complete a research project that they are then required to present to the entire class...At their presentation, a young White female began to talk about the overwhelming number of African American men in the U.S. prison system. She began to explain this phenomena by saying that ‘these people don't value education’ and that if ‘these people would work hard for what they earn then wouldn’t be so many of them in prison’...After class, this young lady approached me and informed me that she ‘did not appreciate that I interrupted her presentation,’....She stepped back and said, ‘Are you calling me a racist?’ I informed her that I was not calling her a racist, but I wanted her to be aware that the terminology she used was problematic. She then started to cry; I asked her if it was ok if I gave her a hug, to which she consented. (p. 211-212)

DH’s experience is an example of the assumed expectation for Black women to be nurturing and caring of White individuals’ emotional needs, as a “faithful, obedient domestic servant” (Collins, 2000, p. 72). This professor’s experience also highlighted her resistance to

silence. The student did not expect to be challenged or interrupted during her presentation, however, as the professor, DH interjected to correct and explain to the class why such offensive terminology of Black males is problematic. These stereotypical preconceived ideas are steeped in falsehoods and provide ideological justifications for oppression on the basis of race, class, and gender for marginalized groups (Seo & Hinton, 2009). Overall, the study revealed how the Modern Mammy stereotype is embedded within HE institution and continues to perpetuate the Mammy stereotype of Black womanhood.

**Jezebel.** Researchers have termed gendered racism as oppression, experienced by African American women, that attack their gender and racial identities, e.g., negative, sexualized stereotypes of Jezebel and Sapphire (Brown, Griffin-Fennell, & White-Johnson, 2011; Brown et al., 2013; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). The racist and sexist acts during the slave era depicted female slaves as dehumanized, sexually aggressive, and victimized to justify their enslavement (Brown et al., 2013). Treatment of Black women during this time had a powerful influence on society's ideal of Black women and their self-identities (Brown et al., 2013; Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993); leading to the portrayal of Black women as oversexed, loud, aggressive, and angry (Jewell, 1993, 2012). For African American women and girls, such depictions may result in internalization of these negative images (Wyatt, 1997).

As discussed in Chapter 2, historic images like the Jezebel illustrated the fair skinned, shapely Black women who was seductive, alluring (especially to White slave owners), and used her sexual attractiveness to receive material goods (Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Stephen & Phillips, 2003). This Black female archetype originated to absolve White slaves owners, attracted to their female slaves, and used Jezebel as an excuse to rape, abuse, and

sexually violate enslaved Black women (Jewell, 1993, 2012; White, 1985). Today, the modernized Jezebel is embedded in hip-hop culture, specifically rap music where Black women are objectified and sexualized. Current displays of the modern Jezebel are labeled as *video girls*, *gold diggers*, and *divas*, which describe African American women as sexually aggressive and materialistic, who use their bodies for career advancement and/or improved social status (Ross & Coleman, 2011). This representation of Black women in mainstream culture persists throughout multiple platforms such as social media, television, film, and magazines. Therefore, the modern Jezebel may have a larger influence on a younger cohort of Black women (Brown et al., 2013), who may be bombarded with negative stereotypes more often than older generations.

***Modern Jezebel.*** There are many examples of the modern-day Jezebel, especially in the hip-hop music culture, such as Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Ciara, Rihanna, Nikki Minaj, Cardi B, and the self-proclaimed Queen Bee, Beyoncé. A quick Internet search of their oeuvre will provide photos, lyrics, and music videos of these musical artists scantily clad, using vulgar language, and various images of male seduction (using their sexualized bodies). These women of the hip-hop music culture can be considered products of the Jezebel stereotype, as their images perpetuate the stereotypes of Black women as immoral, hypersexual, and aggressive. However, rhythm and blues (R&B) singer-songwriter and actress, Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, has recently produced popular music infused with themes of Black feminism, political activism, and social justice. In 2016, Beyoncé's Super Bowl performance paid homage to the 50th anniversary of the Black Panther Party by making a political statement with an army of women dressed in "militant" Black Panther Party leather hats and black leotards with bandolier bullet sashes worn across their chests (Elgot, 2016).

Beyoncé performed her critically acclaimed song *Formation*, with a message for women to stand together and unite against sexism, racism, violence, bigotry, and misogyny. hooks (2016) analyzed Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade*, noting her intentionality to promote Black feminism through retelling the classic pain and betrayal of infidelity, while showcasing images of unglorified Black female bodies challenging the ongoing devaluation of Black women. hooks (2016) explains:

*Lemonade* offers viewers a visual extravaganza...a display of black female bodies that transgresses all boundaries. It's all about the body, and the body as commodity. This is certainly not radical or revolutionary. From slavery to the present day, black female bodies, clothed and unclothed, have been bought and sold. What makes this commodification different in *Lemonade* is intent; its purpose is to seduce, celebrate, and delight...to challenge the ongoing present day devaluation and dehumanization of the black female body. (p. 2)

Although, these images attempt to bring awareness to the continual degradation and disrespect of the Black female body; hooks (2016) asserted that *Lemonade* offers no new content, contending that a display of beautiful Black bodies is not enough for Black females to become "fully self-actualized and be truly respected" (p. 4). Rather, hooks suggested, "honoring the self, loving our bodies, is an appropriate stage in the construction of healthy self-esteem" (p. 4).

***Jezebel and generational differences.*** In this era of Beyoncé, I see her as a generational hero, reclaiming her voice and independence, however, older and younger generations of women may view her as another figure perpetuating the oversexualized Black female stereotype. To this end, Brown et al. (2013) conducted a multivariate analysis related to generational differences in the endorsement of the modern depiction of Jezebel to examine the relationship between racial-ethnic esteem and the endorsement of this sexualized image among 249 Midwest African American women, ages 18 to 78. Brown et al. (2013)

hypothesized there may be generational differences in the perceptions and acceptance of the negative images of African American women. Black feminist theory and racial-ethnic esteem undergirded this study. Brown et al. (2013) defined racial-ethnic esteem as:

[A]n evaluation based on African Americans as a group, accounting for the interdependence that is found in the racial-ethnic community (Hatcher, 2007). In contrast to the focus on personal evaluation found with individual self-esteem, racial-ethnic esteem incorporates the influence of the racial-ethnic culture. (p. 28)

In other words, racial-ethnic esteem is built on the collective esteem among individuals belonging to a racial-ethnic group, rather than the evaluation of an individual's private self-esteem.

Brown et al. (2013) sought the endorsement of the modern Jezebel stereotype and levels of racial-ethnic esteem among three age groups of the 249 African American women: younger women (ages 18-34), middle-age women (ages 35-54), and older women (ages 55-78). Participants were solicited via neighborhood arts and community listserv in African American communities and Black student organizations at a mid-sized college campus. After conducting and analyzing an online questionnaire using the Modern Jezebel Scale (Townsend et al., 2010) and the Stereotypical Roles of Black Women Scale (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004), researchers noted three key findings:

- Younger African American women accepted the endorsement of the modern Jezebel more than older women (ages 55 and older). Participants with a higher private esteem were less likely to reject the sexualized stereotype. They used private esteem as a coping mechanism to combat negative images in mainstream culture regarding Black womanhood.

- Younger and older African American women have an overall positive racial-ethnic esteem and as a collective racial-ethnic group, a greater sense of self (Patterson, 2004).
- Younger African American women with higher levels of education were more likely to reject the modern Jezebel images, given the understanding of the oppressive, gendered, and racialized stereotype (Brown et al., 2013). Therefore, younger Black women may feel good about their sense of self as a collective, whereas older Black women may have a higher sense of private self-esteem.

Both younger and older generations of Black women were able to reject the modern Jezebel depiction with prior knowledge and understanding of the origins of this oppressive stereotype.

hooks' discussion of Beyoncé's *lemonade* confirms these findings in that development of a healthy self-love overcomes the racial and gendered oppression Black women may experience. Even so, in her examination of Beyoncé's *Lemonade* visual album, Zeffie Gaines (2017) analyzed Beyoncé's recent work in the context of feminist theory, misogynoir, and Black self-love. Gaines contended that *Lemonade* is "an intervention against racist and patriarchal representations of black womanhood" (p. 9) and uses self-love as "a political rejection for a society that devastatingly devalues Black womanhood" (p. 102)... "reclaiming of all the many aspects of black 'beingness'" (p. 111) that American culture denigrates. Gaines (2017) concluded that *Lemonade* is a healthy representation of Black femininity and an artistic achievement of positive imagery of Black womanhood in America.

While Gaines (2017) and hooks (2016) obviously have differing views of the impact of *Lemonade* in the lives of Black women, hooks (2016) recognized that African American women must develop a healthy self-concept to consciously resist the societal stereotypes of Black womanhood passed from previous generations. Prior research suggested that younger Black women have a collective positive self-concept (Brown et al., 2013; Hatcher, 2007; Major et al., 2003; Patterson, 2004); however, they may internalize the higher frequency of sexualized images portrayed in mainstream culture, which may influence their sense of self. As a result, individual younger Black women may have a lower sense of self, compared to older generations of African American women.

**Sapphire.** The Sapphire historical stereotype has persisted and transformed into modern-day societal images. The Angry Black Woman and the Welfare Queen are modern-day archetypes of Black womanhood (Eck, 2018). Modern-day representations of Black women depicted as angry, loud, and aggressive permeate popular culture through television, film, and social media (Jean, 2019). The Sapphire stereotype depicts African American women as “harsh, loud, and uncouth” (Brown et al., 2013, p. 526). Portrayals of Black women as lazy, lascivious, and lacking morals, living and getting “rich” off government assistance is another controlling image of the Welfare Queen, an evolved stereotype of the original Sapphire. Researchers have indicated that the Sapphire stereotype remains a tool of oppression for younger generations of Black women (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2013; Patterson, 2004).

**Modern Sapphire.** Adams-Bass et al. (2014) conducted seven focus groups of African American youth, both male and female (ages 14-21), to offer responses to their interpretations of media images of Black women in the Midwest. Youths responded to

various popular images of Black female artists, actors, and activists (Adams-Bass et al., 2014) and found that Black women are perceived as caretakers, hypersexual, strong, and angry.

These findings confirmed previous research that stereotypical images of Black women exist (Brown et al., 2013; Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Patterson, 2004; Townsend et al., 2010; West, 1995; Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004). One participant noted the Sapphire stereotype transformed to the Angry Black Woman and described this character in television: “A lot of shows with one black person [the character] comes off as violent or mean, especially Black women. They [are] normally loud and rowdy” (Adams-Bass et al., 2013, p. 93). Researchers observed that youth participants were self-aware and critical of the negative messages these stereotypes portrayed in the media. Adams-Bass et al. (2014) purported that Black women’s behavior on-screen is usually that of “sassy, strong, and independent women” (p. 93). This study clearly validated how the Sapphire stereotype perpetuated negative images of Black women within mainstream culture. Young people critically considered surrounding daily media messages and how Black women were being represented on-screen and in society.

*Modern Sapphire in the academy.* Critical Race theorist, Schoene (2018) discovered recent similar media stereotypes in the use of in-depth interviews and case study research to explore the experiences of Black women with non-STEM majors. Black women enrolled in science courses discovered how their interactions with science professors reinforced or inhibited learning science. Case studies represented the narratives of six African American women from a two-year college in the southeastern territory of the United States. Findings revealed, due to stereotyping and racism from the science professors, the women felt they

were at a disadvantage. Besides the stereotype, “Black women do not have the capability of being smart” (p. 207), Schoene found characterizations associated with the Sapphire stereotype. Sweets, one of the six participants, felt the professors were trying to contest everything they said and to find ways to lower other students’ respect for Black women.

Schoene wrote about Sweet’s views:

She explained that Black women are often accused of raising their voices or being angry when in fact, they are just speaking in their normal tone and interacting the way they generally interact with others. She noted that if a professor does not know or socialize with any Black women outside of the Black women in their classes, he or she probably would not be familiar with how Black women speak, so she can see how this misunderstanding could occur, but it is still a stereotype with which she and other Black women must negotiate in science learning spaces. “We don’t mean anything by it,” Sweets explained, “some of [us] are just loud...we may sound stern, but that is just how we speak.” (p. 208)

Sweets’ feelings are related to Adams-Bass’s et al. (2014) claim about the images of Black women often portrayed in media images; the “sassy, strong, and independent women” (p. 93) or “loud and rowdy” (p. 93).

Overall, stereotypical images of Black women persist today through media, music, and mainstream culture (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2013; Ross & Coleman, 2011). Younger generations are bombarded with demeaning, sexualized, and domineering images of Black women more than previous generations (Brown et al., 2013; Jerald et al., 2017). The Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire images have evolved into other stereotypes of Black womanhood such as the Angry Black Woman, the SBW, and the Welfare Queen (Eck, 2018; Jean, 2019; Townsend et al., 2010). These controlling images may affect younger generations of Black women. Hence, the media’s portrayal of African American women may have negative consequences that influence younger Black women’s sense of self.

## **Consequences of Stereotypical Images of Black Women and the Media**

Understanding how the media influences younger Black women, a widely influential and technologically suave outlet, is significant to the discussion of African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles. Jerald et al. (2017) conducted regression analysis with 404 African American participants, 73% identified as female, ages 20 to 27, regarding the media's contributions to Black college students' endorsement of femininity ideologies and stereotypes about Black women at a Midwestern university. Participants completed measures assessing the media consumption of ideologies of the Jezebel, Sapphire, and the SBW stereotypes. Cultivation theory and social cognitive theory, focusing on perceived realism, were used as theoretical frameworks to buttress this study. Results indicated media use is significant in the endorsement of traditional ideologies and stereotypes about Black women with gender and ethnic identity playing a significant role.

The study confirmed that music videos and magazine consumption were the most consistent media platforms used to form these ideologies (Jerald et al., 2017). Due to the higher consumption of media depicting the SBW image, the SBW schema associated with Black womanhood occurred more than the Jezebel and Sapphire imagery. Repeated media exposure to these historical and cultural images contributed to viewers holding comparable beliefs about Black women (Jerald et al., 2017); perpetuating negative stereotypes and influencing how younger Black women see themselves. This low sense of self may transfer to their identities in the HE workplace.

Coleman, Reynolds, and Torbati (2019) conducted a study on the relation of Black-Oriented Reality Television (BORT) consumption and perceived realism to the endorsement of stereotypes of Black women. Researchers surveyed 115 Black adolescent women, ages 15

to 18 in the United States, regarding the Jezebel, Sapphire, and the SBW schema related to reality TV's portrayals of Black women. The Stereotypical Roles for Black Women Scale (SRBWS) (Thomas et al., 2004) was used to measure an individual's endorsement of stereotypical Black women. Researchers' hypothesis confirmed participants' endorsements of Jezebel and Sapphire did not constitute high levels of agreement with the stereotype due to the negative perceptions of Black womanhood as hypersexual and aggressive (Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993, 2012). However, this study did confirm previous findings of Thomas's et al. (2004) study, that the SBW schema has a higher endorsement of the lauded stereotype in the Black community (Coleman et al., 2019). Additionally the study, confirmed Jerald's et al., (2017) findings of younger Black women's endorsement of the SBW schema over the negative Jezebel and Sapphire stereotypes portrayed in the media.

In general, the shaping of African American women's sense of self is rooted in trauma from the slave period. The forming of our sense of self is influenced by historical and cultural images, originated from that era, that have passed down through generations and perpetually depict Black women as subservient, oversexed, and aggressive (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2013; Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Ross & Coleman, 2011). Furthermore, negative stereotypes portrayed in mainstream culture have grown exponentially due to the advancement of mass media and technology (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Coleman et al., 2019; Jerald et al., 2017; Ross & Coleman, 2011). Studies suggested that Black women combat these negative images through social support from other Black women in their families, churches, and communities (Brown & Valk, 2010; Brown et al., 2013; DeFrancisco, & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000; Patterson, 2004). Although younger Black women may have a positive sense of self as a collective racial-ethnic group (Brown et al., 2013), this younger

generation may internalize the negative depictions of racialized and gendered stereotypes, which influence their sense of self.

As previously discussed in the opening section, significant to this literature review is social identity as it relates to shaping the professional roles of women in HE support roles. A discussion of this area for all women is included in the subsequent section, with an emphasis on African American women in the HE workplace and their professional identities. I link their social identity to constructs of cultural identity theory discussed in Chapter 2.

### **Social Identity and African American Women in the Workforce**

Professional identity formation stems from social identity theory (Blackmore, 2013), originated from social science and psychology disciplines, and became the cornerstone of modern sociological thought (Brekhus, 2008). For more than a century, the concept of self has been examined by psychology with “roughly half of that time, substantial attention has been devoted to the relevance of race to self-concept and self-esteem” (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000, p. 26). The seminal research of Cooley (1902, 2017) and Mead (1934) were significant to making connections between self-esteem and race (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000). Cooley viewed self-esteem as social processes with individual portrayals of self-conveyed by others through the looking glass analogy. Mead maintained that individuals develop a sense of other from experiences that reflect generalized self-images and self-esteem results from self-knowledge about different aspects of personal experiences. This initial formation of identity theory, developed by George Mead (1934), contended that society is impacted by social behavior and the social construct of self was soon expanded to include race significant to identity formation (Brenner et al., 2014; Nobles, 1973).

Hanselman, Bruch, Gamoran, and Borman (2014) portended that identity and group membership shape individuals' behaviors through their perceptions of the world, cultural resources, and responses to social pressures. Furthermore, Gray-Little and Hafdahl (2000) suggested while cultural groups such as African Americans may feel separated from the majority; they collectively assess their social identity from their own group, often seeking desirable distinctiveness leading to positive social identity. As the group's distinctiveness become more renowned within the larger society, individual self-esteem is affected (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000). Stated another way, self as a social product is contextualized as highly dependent on social interactions with membership in racial and ethnic groups; interacting with multiple perceptual and cognitive processes to construct an individual's sense of self or evaluation of self (Dupree, Spencer, & Spencer, 2015; Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Hanselman et al., 2014; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990).

Areas significant to the topic of "Social Identity and African American Women in the Workforce" are multifaceted and connected to social identity theory as a major paradigm that undergirds this study. In the workplace, social identity helps to determine the nature of relationships with others, hence, the discussion of social identity and relationships in the workplace. For Black millennial women, these relationships develop a sense of community and belonging. While affinity groups reduce feeling of isolation within HE environments, stereotype threat and social identity threat affect African American millennial women's concepts of self and their performance. The third area of the literature review highlights support roles in the academy with a discussion of the elements of professional identity and twin dynamic and staff devaluation significant to the function of support roles in HEI's. Finally, addressed in this section are African American support roles in the academy and the

challenges these women face regarding boundaries related to advancement and microaggressions.

### **Social Identity and Relationships in the Workplace**

Scholars believe that job roles serve as an interface between social institutions; the positions within these institutions shape social identity (Walker & Lynn, 2013). Gregory Stone (1962) introduced the concept of social identity as situated in social relations. He claimed to form identity, individuals place importance on social objects (Brekhus, 2008). Tajfel and Turner (1979) explained how individual identity and group level (social, collective, cultural) identities integrate and emerge. Black psychologist, Amos Wilson (1978) defined socialization as an assimilation of group expectations, values, and norms that determined the extent to which individuals have feelings of oneness and belongingness to a particular group. In addition, Wilson affirmed what is socially acceptable for one group, may be inappropriate for another and stated, “a chief cause of Black and White conflict in America is the differing attitudes of these two subcultures as to what behavior should be considered social or antisocial” (p. 161). More recent literature also suggests the identity spectrum derives within social groups (Tenenbaum & Eklund, 2014). While the focus here is social identity and the HE environment that influence professional identity, these issues of identity and social relationships are reflected early in the academic performance of African American students in schools.

Noguera (2008) concurred with the notion that race is a barrier to academic achievement for Black students in schools, claiming failed attempts to alter this racial pattern:

Throughout most of American history, racial disparities in educational achievement and performance were attributed to innate genetic differences between population

groups, and as such, were regarded as acceptable and understandable ‘natural’ phenomena (Fredrickson, 1981). Intelligence was regarded as an innate human property rooted in the particular genetic endowments of individuals and groups (Duster, 2003), and therefore altering patterns of academic achievement was not regarded as feasible or even desirable. (p. 90)

Within this context, race as a narrative, continues to be implicated in patterns of student achievement (Noguera, 2008). The notion of intellectual racial differences is a falsehood that foundationally establishes disparities among individuals and inherently creates disadvantages for racially marginalized groups. Since the group and community are significant elements for the support of self-concept and identity, social grouping allows for individual identity formation and survival in all environments (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Johnson, 2016; Major et al., 2003; Steele et al., 2002; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Social identity is explained as self-categorization of the in-group and out-group (Stets & Burke, 2000). Applied to HE, faculty are the in-group due to the levels of their education and the expertise of their research; while support staff are the invisible out-group, perceived as the silent workers (Johnson, 2016). As a result, academic versus non-academic tensions form among workers (Dobson, 2000). However, recent research supports the view that for faculty, professional identity and personal identity both contribute to one’s self-concept in the workplace (Blackmore, 2013), which also applies to support staff. To theorize the meaning of social identity, I considered the intertwine of social identity, behavior, and relations. Social identity as explained by Tajfel (2010) was described as, “that part of ... individuals’ self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 2). Significant to this study is African American female millennials in HE

support roles forming positive professional identities that are socially supported within the university, which may increase their sense of self.

Researchers have investigated how social support influenced social identity (Brown et al., 2013; Brown & Valk, 2010; DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000; Patterson, 2004). Guan and So (2016) conducted a study of the influence of social identity on self-efficacy beliefs through perceived social support. The study examined social identity and perceived social support related to self-efficacy with members of a diverse group of fraternity and sorority organizations at a large public university in the United States. The majority of participants were White females and less than five percent were students of color e.g., Asian, African American, and Latinx students. The findings supported “the hypothesis [which] predicted that one’s social identity with a social group predicts one’s perceived social support from the group, which in turn is positively associated with...self-efficacy of performing a health-related behavior advocated by that group” (Guan & So, 2016, p. 598). This is to say that student health behaviors improved when associated with a group. Additionally, this study found that social identity could also influence one’s self-efficacy:

When users are able to experience heightened identity with the group due to their shared demographic identities and/or health conditions within a social support group, they may be more likely to increase their self-efficacy to overcome barriers...through interacting with more similar others, users may perceive and/or receive support from more relatable sources, which may contribute to greater increases in self-efficacy. (p. 600)

Consequently, social identity can play a major role in how individuals feel about themselves which contributes to self-efficacy, determinants of perceived capabilities. I assert that younger Black women in HE support roles need to have strong social identities to feel a sense of belonging in institutions historically reserved for White males.

In addition, the value of professional identity promotes positive social behavior, determined Brenner, Serpe, and Stryker (2014), who tested the causal order of prominence and salience in identity theory, focusing on university science students. The researchers found that prominence precedes salience due to the subjective value of identity, which precedes its performance (Brenner et al., 2014). Science students performed better because they had a positive social identity, which promoted healthy behaviors. Similarly, younger African American women in support roles may increase their sense of self if a positive social identity is fostered within their work environments.

Love, Booyesen, and Essed (2018) explored the intersection of race, gender, and generation among African American women performing social justice work. The 183 women ranged from ages 21-69 and included three generational cohorts: millennials 1982 to 2005, Generation X, 1962-1981, and baby boomers 1943-1961 in the Western United States. Utilizing an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, data were collected through six in-depth interviews, four focus groups, and an online survey (Love et al., 2018). Intersectionality, standpoint, and social identity theory were used as a theoretical framework. Researchers found five themes each generational cohort acknowledged that encompassed the ideology of race woven into the social fabric of the United States; nevertheless, group identification and the construction of the Black experience and negative stereotypes were most poignant. Love et al. (2018) discussed findings about the construction of the Black female millennial experience:

The data suggest that there are few if any generational differences about identifying as “Black.” [...] The social category of African American was a normative and explicitly positive factor of identification and identity. Generally, there were similar beliefs about group belonging and what separated a person from the group. A millennial shared her mother’s words about “the beauty of being African American,

that we come in all different sizes, shapes and colors and that I'm part of this same community regardless of the way I talk and dress.” (p. 482)

Researchers noted that millennials rejected the narrow construction of the Black experience and perceived this experience as unique due to their diversity. This culturally diverse group of millennials are more expansive in their thinking regarding multiple social identifications (Love et al., 2018). For that reason, African American female millennials readily acknowledged the intersectionality of their identities; therefore, expressing a need for a commitment to social justice work and collaboration with other socially oppressed groups.

### **Intergroup Relations**

Social psychologist, Henri Tajfel (2010), challenged the accepted meaning of social identity connecting to the individual's identity and a sense of belonging to a group, asserting that the view of the individual's self contributes to the membership of a certain social group or category. In other words, Tajfel (2010) suggested that the social psychology of intergroup relations is concerned with group behavior. He examined the power associated with dominant groups and suggested the need for individuals to identify with a group. Tajfel (2010) explained, “The social categorizations imposed upon those who are peripheral or dominated groups account for much of the way in which they define themselves and are defined by others” (p. 5). Intergroup relations are intricately connected to the psychological behavior of individuals, much like younger Black women in HE support roles who may value the attachment of social groups and their perceptions by other groups.

In contrast, Professor of Sociology Richard Jenkins (2014) opposed Tajfel's assumptions of social grouping—debating group identities, epistemological assumptions, and questioning if social grouping is indeed “real” (p. 7). Citing Brubaker (2004), Jenkins argued that ethnic groups are clearly bounded and homogenous and are not real. The sense of

“groupness of group membership” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 8) is real. Jenkins explained that individuals and organizations have ethnic conflict, not ethnic groups. Brubaker’s central argument is that identities do not make individuals act one way or another; the ongoing process of identification allows people to “identify” (p. 8) for their own reasons and purposes (Jenkins, 2014). What is significant here is the separation of what people do when taking on a certain group identity, which influences behavior, acting one way or another. For support staff, this identity and participation within HEI’s may construct a healthy professional identity.

Furthermore, when Black women in HE support roles are active in the university, they may form a more positive professional identity, which may increase their sense of self. Lawless (2017) implemented a single-case study on the activism of general professional staff of the academy staff. She studied a woman working in an Australian university as an administrative assistant in the Equity Office. Lawless’ study “challenges the pessimistic tone of activism by revealing the optimism and hopefulness of meaning making and life-affirming practices in activist work” (p. 57) and demonstrates how activism can be embedded in the work practices of general professional staff by making them visible. The experiences of the administrative assistant are reflected here:

[Rosemary’s] mainstream role in an equity unit is, in itself, related to the activist possibilities still available in the academy: serving the educational aspirations of a marginalized community, defending the equity unit against mainstreaming and budget cuts, and collaborating with Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues to ensure that equity goals are met. She infuses her ‘equity job’ with a passion and vision of progressive activism, bringing activist reflexivity to her work as she considers and actively manages heavy workloads, stress and other obstacles to activism in the academy. (p. 56)

Rosemary's attention to activism demonstrated the duality of the HE staff member. Support staff members serve the academy and often incorporate interests for activism. Similar to my previous role in the university, Rosemary resembles me, the active staff member who serves on campus committees (e.g., diversity, staff advocacy, women's council, etc.) to support colleagues who may feel alienated and excluded. Additionally, Bandiera, Barankay, and Rasul (2010) argued that social ties in the workplace affect workers' individual performance and the overall performance of the entire organization. They found that social incentives, e.g., formation of friendships at work, increase work performance. This study confirmed previous research of activism and the formation of social networks that can increase sense of self for Black women in HE support roles (DeFrancisco, & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000; Patterson, 2004).

**Affinity groups.** Yet, for African American women, the benefits of social networks may be supported by participating in affinity groups (Johnson, 2016). Diversity affinity groups are created by individuals within an organization who share a common identity, (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, etc.), shared extra-organization values, and/or interests (Briscoe & Safford, 2015). Johnson (2016) found that African American women are better able to cope in a HE workplace when making connections with individuals who identify with their lived experiences; thus, recommending affinity groups to help reduce feelings of isolation for African American female staff and creating safe spaces for women to network and connect.

Additionally, affinity groups began as race-based employee forums created in response to the racial conflict that exploded during the 1960's (Douglas, 2008; Johnson & Packer, 1987). Since then, these groups have expanded to include gender, sexual orientation,

religion, and other identifying categories. Affinity groups not only promote diversity within organizations, but also, act as the catalyst for an inclusive culture. Douglas (2008) contended that everyone in an organization should have the same advantages including: (a) a voice that is heard, (b) access to the information necessary for success, (c) productive links to other co-workers and management, (d) the chance to contribute, and (e) the opportunity to advance professionally. For African American women, affinity groups are a sacred space to share, mentor, and connect with other women of similar backgrounds and experiences.

Organizations that promote and support affinity groups, may have a stronger workforce which include a diverse population of people. Still, African American female millennials in HE support roles may desire to identify with an occupational group to increase their professional identity. Without an association to a social group, African American women support staff may be vulnerable to stereotype threat.

**Stereotype threat.** In the field of social psychology, the stereotype threat is widely researched beginning with the seminal work of Steele and Aronson (1995) who defined stereotype threat as a “social-psychological predicament that can arise from widely-known negative stereotypes about one’s group...anything one does or any of one’s features that conform to it make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others” (p. 797). Their work tested perceptions of African American intellectual inferiority. Black students’ abilities were tested against their White counterparts; controlling for initial differences, on a standardized test, researchers found Black students underperformed. However, on subsequent tests, the stereotype threat was removed; and they found no difference in the performance of Black and White students, again controlling for the skill level (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Findings revealed that the stereotype threat may promote

academic underperformance, compromising students' ability to perform. African Americans have been historically stigmatized and discriminated against in mainstream settings, including the workplace and may be influenced by stereotype threat (Major & O'Brien, 2005; Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003; Steele & Arson, 1995; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002).

Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, and Crosby (2008) conducted a study of 44 African American women, ages 18 to 54, to identify social identity contingencies that are relevant to African Americans' racial identity in corporate settings of Northern California. Social identity contingencies were specified as possible judgments, stereotypes, opportunities, restrictions, and treatments tied to one's social identity in a given setting (Steele et al., 2002). Purdie-Vaughns et al. (2008), exposed African American professionals to hypothetical corporate settings by developing corporate brochures and supplementing them with a corporate booth designed to look like a consulting firm on a recruiting trip. The purpose of this experiment was to establish the kinds of social identity contingencies African American would report. The researchers found when African Americans were depicted more in the corporate newsletter, Black participants were more willing to trust the company, than when there were fewer people of color. Thus, a lack of representation of underrepresented groups diminished the trust in the organization from the perspectives of people of color.

Similarly, Hoyt and Murphy (2016) explored the process and implications of the stereotype threat for a diverse group of women in leadership roles. The review included the model of stereotype threat; stereotype threat cues and the consequences of stereotype threat, including stereotype threat responses. Hoyt and Murphy determined that stereotype cues range from "more blatant and explicit exposure to lesser gender stereotypes, such as telling

participants that their experimenter is sexist or having them interact with a sexist man” (p. 389). The researchers discovered that women in leadership positions have several significant adverse consequences to stereotype threats. First, they are susceptible to underperformance creating an undermined sense of belonging. Second, they distance themselves from their perceived devalued group, altering their professional identities by separating their “feminine” and “work” selves.

Lastly, women in leadership engage in reactance responses, adopting more masculine communication styles, which can be perceived as negative by others as women in leadership are less likely to respond to requests, lacking likeability, and warmth (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Ultimately, researchers suggested organizations create safe environments to practice leadership, promote identity-safe cultures, career growth, and employee development. This study strongly implied a limited professional identity younger African American women may have in HE support roles as they encounter negative perceptions of their race, gender, and occupation. Consequences of stereotype threat may keep individuals from developing an increased professional identity which is likely to affect sense of self.

**Social identity threat.** According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2018), women make up 94% of secretaries and administrative assistants. Fifty-four percent of African American women were employed in 2018 and nearly 18% were African American women employed in office occupations. Subsequently, Black women in the workplace may be highly susceptible to social identity threat. Significant to this review is social identity threat as it relates to younger Black women’s sense of self in HE support roles.

Social identity threat originated from the theory of Steele and Aronson’s (1995) stereotype threat, expanded by the work of other researchers that studied the marketplace

dynamics of women and people of color. Researchers have found that women and people of color are the most common groups who experience stereotype threat (Derks, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2016; Holmes, Whitman, Campbell, & Johnson, 2016; Steele & IjAronson, 1995). Social identity threats are instances where people are confronted with situations that threaten their social identities (Holmes et al., 2016).

To investigate social identity threat, Derks et al. (2016) reviewed the Queen Bee phenomenon which purports that female leaders assimilate to male-dominated organizations and are defined as women who pursue individual success in male-dominated work settings and adjust to the masculine culture by distancing themselves from other women within the organization. The Queen Bee phenomenon is a response to the social identity threat of organizational gender bias. Derks et al. (2016) noted, “when members are a part of a disadvantage group, they are likely to perceive their group’s typical characteristics are not valued or considered important” (p. 458).

There are several consequences to the Queen Bee phenomenon as it pertains to social identity threat. First, women with this phenomena make personal sacrifices, such as being single and/or childless (Ellemers & Haslam, 2011) and due to their demanding careers, often limit their time with family or friends. Second, due to senior women’s negative evaluations of them to male supervisors, junior women within the organization may have limited opportunities for advancement. Derks et al. (2016) explained:

[Q]ueen bees may also damage junior women’s self-confidence because when junior women expect that senior women will act in their best interest (Ely, 1994), they may attribute negative feedback coming from them even more internally than they would had it come from a male boss. (p. 464)

Like younger Black women in HE support roles, this study implied junior women are influenced by senior women within the organization as senior women can provide support

through mentoring to promote junior women's development as professionals. On the other hand, senior women can be poor role models and perpetuate the stereotype that women have difficulty working with one another (Derks et al., 2016). Lastly, there are consequences for organizations, as the Queen Bee phenomenon limits the opportunities for diversity that women bring to an organization. All in all, social identity threat perpetuates gender inequality in organizational work settings, which may lead to discriminatory behavior against women in the workplace.

Summarily, social identity theory connects individuals' associations with a sense of belonging to groups in the workplace. The literature supports the view that women are more susceptible to stereotype threats and social identity threats, especially women of color (Steele & Aronson, 1995). These types of threats in the workplace affect employees' concepts of self and their ability to perform. Future research should focus on the stereotype process for masculinity standards, the effects of Eurocentric standards in the workplace, women in leadership, social identity and intersectionality, organizational gender bias, and interventions to combat group distancing. Implications of findings from the relevant literature and empirical studies presented here bring to mind that African American female millennials in HE support roles may experience similar threats to their professional identities in the workplace. The next sections will examine the value of support roles in the academy and the importance of voice for African American women in these roles.

### **Support Roles in the Academy**

For decades within HEI's, there have been tensions between academic and non-academic staff (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Bonk, Crouch, Kilian, & Lowell, 2006; Dobson, 2000; Sebalj, Holbrook, & Bourke, 2012; Szekeres, 2004; Whitchurch, 2009). These tensions

likely influence the professional identity of individuals in support roles. Often, support positions are filled by women who hold post-secondary and advanced degrees (Jo, 2008). However, most of the research regarding professional identity and support roles in HEI's have been conducted in countries such as Australia and Great Britain (Castleman et al., 1995; Dobson, 2000; Sebalj, et al., 2012; Szekeres, 2006, 2011; Whitechurch, 2008). Dobson (2000) reported the tensions between academic and support staff in Australia. He said, "universities have not improved the 'them vs. us' attitude and the propensity for general staff (non-academic staff) is ignored" (p. 203). Castleman's et al. (1995) earlier research on women in HE discerned the invisibility of non-academic staff:

...general staff are all but invisible in either the official statistics or in other analyses of the higher education industry...it is worth remembering that general staff contribute nearly half of the higher education work force and are an indispensable part of the operation of the industry. (p. 53)

HE support staff make significant contributions to the university in many administrative and technical roles, supporting students, faculty, and administrators. Furthermore, having a positive professional identity and high job satisfaction are factors needed for support staff to feel valued, visible, and recognized.

In a 1996 seminal study, the University of Western Australia (UWA) surveyed the aspirations of women as general staff. This survey "sought to identify structural and cultural...impediments within the University which might work against the aspirations of women..." (p. 206). UWA found that there was indeed an issue between academic and general staff and their perceptions about employment concerns and job satisfaction (Dobson, 2000). The UWA identified four overarching issues:

- "A divide between academic and general staff,
- Employment concerns linked primarily to high levels of contract employment,

- Career development opportunities,
- Inadequate communication” (p. 206).

Conclusions indicated a distinct difference between academic and general staff and these issues were connected to professional identity. The academic/non-academic binary may influence support staff’s perceptions of their professional identities.

However, professional staff in Australia have increased discourse about their professional practices and identities in the last decade (Graham, 2009; Szekeres, 2006, 2011; Whitchurch, 2010). Nonetheless, limited attention has been given to HEI work environments for professional and support staff in the United States (Bonk et al., 2006; Costello, 2012; Johnson, 2016; Wohlmuther, 2008). Support staff in Australia are referred to as “Professional Staff” (Sebalj et al., 2012). Macfarlane (2011) explained the “fragmentation of the academic role and the rise of the [non]-academic...staff who specialize in one aspect of academic practice...including the up-skilling of professional staff and the de-skilling of academics” (Graham, 2012, p. 2).

Further, as Graham (2012) described, the changing roles of professional staff are due to a number of reasons: (a) advancement in technology (University of Technology Sydney, 2011); (b) student outcomes (Prebble et al., 2004); (c) accountability and funding (Lock & Lorenz, 2007; Stensaker & Harvey, 2010); and (d) massification of higher education (Dobson, 2006, 2010). Changes in work roles are accompanied by changes in professional identity, since new roles require new skills, behaviors, attitudes, and patterns of interactions (Graham, 2012; Ibarra, 1999). Office support staff are increasingly working in changing environments in which there is a need to take on new responsibilities in increasingly complex workplaces such as Australia and abroad (Graham, 2012).

The remaining of this section highlights several issues related to support roles in the academy including professional identity, twin dynamics, and staff devaluation. Professional identity, highlighted earlier as less of an area of study in U.S. universities, involves the professionalization of HE support roles in several leading countries. Twin dynamics infers blurring of activities in professional support roles and staff devaluation expresses the long-standing tensions between academic and support staff who are often excluded and devalued in the academy. While this discussion focuses on other parts of the world, it has implications for roles of African American millennial women and their sense of self in higher education institutions.

### **Professional Identity**

HE administrative support staff and professional identity have been scarcely researched in the United States; however, in the United Kingdom, Thomas (1998) furthered the discussion of identity and grouping. Thomas developed Britain's *Dearing Report* on university governance in the United Kingdom, which focused exclusively on administrative support staff. Four focus groups of support staff and university administrators were conducted across eight universities. According to Dobson (2000), three main groups of administrative support were identified: Niche finders identified as staff members "tended not to be highly qualified"; subject specialists "are employed in posts which were linked to particular subject areas"; and new professionals "educated at least to a degree level" (p. 207). The report concluded support staff and administrators "feel that their role[s], contribution[s] and professionalism have failed to be recognized" (Thomas, 1998, p. 70). As a result, support staff may perceive their roles in the university as insignificant; thus, affecting professional identity within the academy.

In a more recent study, Sebalj et al. (2012) administered a questionnaire to 194 research staff members at 36 participating Australian universities to assess the valuation of general staff. The questionnaire consisted of characteristics or perspectives including professional job profiles, role responsibilities, workplace relations, workplace opportunities, and changes in workplace implementation. The researchers found that 42% of respondents preferred 'University Administrator' as an assigned job title because it was "positive, providing clarity on the roles and responsibility levels" (p. 466). "Non-Academic Staff" was the least preferred job title by 40% of respondents. Consequently, Non-Academic Staff was deemed "demeaning terminology" (p. 465) and did not describe the "breadth and depth of work roles or accountabilities nor critical thinking and analysis performed by respondents on higher salary levels" (p. 465).

Additionally, the researchers noted the term "Professional Staff" had not yet emerge at the time of this study and planned to include this term for future studies (Sebalj et al., 2012). Researchers also found the problem of the ongoing devaluation of general staff entailed the desire "to be visible, recognized, and valued" (Sebalj et al., p. 469), which is also an issue for higher education staff in United States. The solution to resolve devaluation was to change the nomenclature of university staff to a non-exclusionary title as Professional Staff (Sebalj et al., 2012). In general, this study supported the view that positive workplace nomenclature for support staff may increase their perceptions of self, relating to their professional identities, thus increasing their sense of self as individuals.

In contrast, perceptions related to feelings of devaluation may affect the professional identity of the staff person. Hall (1996) explained professional identity as "constructed on the backs of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person

or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation” (p. 6). Professional identities are associated with social position or roles which Colbeck (2008) maintained that “role labels convey meaning and expectations for behaviors that have evolved from countless interactions among people in a social system” (p. 10). HE support staff are a part of the university’s social system and many want to feel valued as professionals and accepted by other occupational groups, e.g., faculty and administrators, etc. Thus, inclusivity from other groups may help to increase HE support staff’s professional identities, relating to their sense of self.

### **Twin Dynamic**

Similarly, a sense of belonging and opportunity for growth is related to job satisfaction, recognition, and value of non-academic staff. Whitchurch (2008) explored the concept of identity through an inquiry of the “twin dynamic” (p. 376), regarding increased functional specializations and blurring of activities across professional locations in relation to the professional identities of general managers. The researcher conducted 24 in-depth interviews across three-types of universities in the United Kingdom: “(1) a multi-faculty, research-intensive institution; (2) a green-field, campus university; and (3) a post-1992, inner city institution serving a mass higher education market” (p. 380). Whitchurch (2008) found professional identity development is a “career-long project” (p. 384), meaning that HE professionals’ identities develop over a period of time with various job roles and work experiences.

In this study, Whitchurch (2008) coined three terms to characterize staff identity: (a) bounded professionals who are governed by “rules and resources” (p. 380) of the organizational structure; (b) cross-boundary professionals, who hold multiple identity

“components, seeing boundaries as opportunities rather than constraints” (p. 381); and (c) unbounded professionals, who have a “disregard for boundaries” (p. 381) and “have a flexible and an open-ended approach” (p. 383) to their work activities. These three terms classified the different levels and functionalities within the roles of non-academic staff members and how the boundaries of their job roles closely related to their professional identities. The more bounded the job role, the lower the professional identity of the support staff person.

### **Staff Devaluation**

Consequently, devaluation of non-academic staff occurs as a result of being perceived as secondary to the academic staff within higher education institutions. Judy Szekeres (2004) argued there are increasingly more allied staff (non-academic staff) in HE due to the pressure for higher education institutions to become “managed like more private sectors” (p. 19). Szekeres explained the relationship between roles and power dynamics, “the concept of role and role differentiation is important as people occupying different roles are ascribed different degrees and kinds of power. These power dynamics affect interactions and people’s sense of themselves, which are closely intertwined” (p. 123).

Further, Szekeres (2004) posited the basis of the problem in relation to the previously conceived notions of non-academic staff:

The commonly held views of the administrator as a secretary who is at the beck and call of academics to do typing...and take phone calls does not capture the complexity of their roles today, the skills required, or the difficulty of where they sit in the organization. (p. 20)

The complexity of support staff roles is increasingly due to dwindling university budgets, advancement in technology, and the growing workloads. This commonly held view was established in McInnis’s (1998) qualitative study conducted at the Manukau Institute of

Technology in New Zealand. He administered an anonymous online questionnaire to 202 full and part-time managers, administrative, and technical support staff members. McInnis's discovered the source of tensions between academics and administrative staff "derived from the lack of acknowledgment administrators felt they received for their increasingly specialist skills and knowledge" (p. 170).

Wohlmuther (2008) supported McInnis's inquiry and concurred that "allied staff outnumber the academic staff and are becoming more qualified" (p.170), acquiring multiple degrees of HE, accordingly, increasing the perceptions of the academic versus non-academic divide. In this fashion, Allen-Collinson (2009) investigated the occupational life-worlds of research administrators and their experiences with "morale exclusion" (p. 941) within the academic/administrative divide. Allen-Collinson interviewed 27 administrators from 19 universities in the United Kingdom and found a similar neglect of negative marking and labeling of the research administration occupational group. The researcher discovered major themes that include (a) negative labeling of the occupational group, (b) feelings of invisibility and exclusion, and (c) stigmatizing and the blaming of academic colleagues. The data detailed participants sharing their experiences of invisibility and negative labeling in informal and formal meetings. Then again, due to the uncertainty of research administrators' social identity in the workplace, Allen-Collinson (2009) also found that this was a positive aspect of the job role, in that identity is rather fluid and undefined to others outside of their role, lending to greater flexibility in their daily workflows. This investigation provides empirical evidence that the non-academic/academic binary divide exists within higher education institutions, and often produces feelings of invisibility, exclusion, and stigmatizing for non-academic staff members.

While much of this research was performed outside the U.S., there has also been a long-standing academic/staff binary divide in U.S. universities, valued for their educational attainment, research, and teaching. Although, staff too are becoming more educated and skilled, they do not seem to receive the recognition they deserve. For African American women, the challenges of being recognized and valued for their worth are more complex. Historically, the HE workplace has been a setting of discrimination for African American women, carrying a dual burden of being Black and female (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Steele & Arson, 1995; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). Younger African American women bring the value of diversity to the workplace. More students are entering HE (Cokley et al., 2013; Rickes, 2009; Shavers & Moore III, 2014), that have multiple oppressed identities (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Thomas et al., 2013), and African American millennial women are more likely relate to this new generation of students (Bolser & Gosciej, 2015; Taylor & Keeter, 2010). As HEI's become more complex, organizational leaders will rely more on the expertise of diverse support staff persons.

### **African American Women in Higher Education Support Roles**

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Black women make up nearly 18% of the office occupations (BLS, 2018). For some African American women in HE support roles, navigating the higher education environment amidst negative perceptions, is challenging and may contribute to a low sense of self (Brown & Valk, 2010; Brown et al., 2013; Buckley, & Carter, 2005; Collins, 1998; Finnegan, 2018; Griffiths, 2010; Harris-Perry, 2011; Hatcher, 2007; Thompson, 2017; Walker, 1983). Concerned that stereotypical images may affect Black women in the workplace as they aspire to become leaders, Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, and Harrison (2008) highlighted emerging literature on how professional

Black women align historical images with their workplace experiences and how these images can derail career advancement. They analyzed stereotypical images of professional Black women and the challenges faced while combating historical images such as the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire along with emerging stereotypical images as the “Crazy Black Bitch” (CBB), and Superwoman (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). The researchers provided implications for each of the stereotypes and concluded not all Black women may be negatively impacted from these images; however, “many suffer from the implications of these images which help maintain White dominance in the workplace and can be mentally, physically, and emotionally damaging for Black women...” (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008, p. 139).

**Support staff barriers.** According to Johnson (2016), African American women in support roles are relegated to clerical positions and perceived as doing menial and mundane tasks. These perceptions of Black women and their low professional identification may be barriers to their career advancement. Costello’s (2012) earlier inquiry found similar concerns regarding women in classified support roles within the academy and described classified staff as “employees often found at the bottom of the college hierarchy [and] perceived to perform unimportant, menial tasks invisible within the organization” (p. 100). Costello (2012) concluded culture and climate, institutional policies, and internal/external barriers to advancement hinder professional advancement for women in classified positions.

Due to fear of career advancement or organizational climate, culture, and structure, Iverson (2009) depicted women in classified positions as caught in the *loyalty trap*, which translates into staying in one place too long. Subsequently, women trapped in these roles have *sticky floor jobs*, meaning individuals are employed in low-level jobs and are invisible;

this includes, but not limited to, clerical staff, administrative support workers, and paraprofessionals (Costello, 2012; Harlan & Berheide, 1994).

Due to gendered organization barriers, a major obstacle is the difficulty for women to advance from classified to professional positions (Acker, 1990; Costello, 2012). Acker (1990, 2006), explained gendered organization as a place where “meaning and identity, exploitation and control, and advantage are patterned through and in terms of distinction between male and female” (p. 146); specific to organizations that “produce class and gender inequalities” (p. 147). For Black women, gendered organization is compounded by racial discrimination often experienced by African American women in the workplace. Thus, position location, gender, and race seem to place Black women in HE support roles at a disadvantage. They are often affected by insidious barriers within environments where racial microaggressions are pervasive that may influence this diverse group of women’s professional identity and sense of self.

**Microaggressions.** Sue et al. (2007) described racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to target a person or group” (p. 273). Sue (2010) identified five reactions of individuals that are likely to happen when they experience racial microaggressions:

- Phase One—Incident: Individuals confronted with an incident or situation.
- Phase Two—Perception: Individuals sift the incident or situation through their belief systems to determine if racially motivated. Self-questioning may involve yes, no, or unsure.

- Phase Three—Reaction: Individuals may have a quick response to the incident or situation.
- Phase Four—Interpretation: There is a point of self-reflection to derive the meaning of what happened, answering such questions as: Why did the event occur? What were the person's intentions?
- Phase Five—Consequence for Individuals: As a result of incident or situation, overtime, reactions are behavioral, emotive, or reflective.

Due to their experiences with microaggressions, young Black millennial women may set boundaries for themselves in the workplace. These boundaries become more complex for these women who may confront other microaggressions due to intersectionality.

Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto (2015) used phenomenological qualitative methods, anchored in a constructivist paradigm, to examine the experiences of racial microaggressions in the workplace and the coping strategies of Black women managers in corporate American positions. The researchers interviewed 10 Black women, ages 26 – 56, who acknowledged that racial microaggressions existed in society and in their workplace. Holder et al. (2015) found five themes and six coping strategies that confirmed racial microaggressions in the workplace for Black women; however, the themes of racial microaggressions, stereotypes of Black women, and invisibility were most poignant to their findings. Participants shared their experiences of either being expected to be nurturing and supportive of their White colleagues' personal issues, much like the Mammy stereotype; or being considered too aggressive in the workplace, such as the Sapphire stereotype. One participant remarked about a non-Black colleague who received acceptance for being passionate about her work:

There's no other reason why she can be a bully and can be loud and can curse and it's okay because it's just her way. She's assertive. She's strong. She's passionate. If I

were to be a fraction of that I would immediately be the angry Black girl with the attitude. (p. 170)

Yet, despite being in senior-level positions, these participants often experienced being invisible and ignored by their colleagues. Another of Holder et al.'s participant noted, "I didn't even have a voice for many years. I remember trying to figure out what I said that was so different than the person who said it after me and made it credible" (p. 171).

While all three of these elements, microaggressions, stereotypes of Black women, and invisibility were found in Holder et al.'s (2015) study, Sue et al. (2007) noted how frequent occurrences of racial microaggression can diminish one's self-esteem. This study explored the limited voices of African American professional women regarding their professional advancement and marginalization due to racial microaggressions in the workplace. Their skills, abilities, and intellects were often undermined and discredited. Aligned with historical images and invisibility that may derail career advancement, microaggressions are often lived experiences for Black women in HEI environments.

Advocating for self and breaking their silence require Black women in these insidious environments to speak for self. From a critical perspective, voice is connected to one's history and understood through culture and identity which influence interactions with others. The seminal work of Hollingsworth (1994) regarding feminist theory, suggested "voice has its own history; linked to an 'emerging feminist consciousness'" (p. 7) common to feminist research. The concepts of voice and silence for HE Black support staff roles merit a discussion.

### **Voice and Silence for Black women in higher education**

The importance of voice is key to the literature as it pertains to younger African American women's sense of self in HE support roles. Several seminal management studies

expressed voice as a legitimate recuperative mechanism, highly likely to be active when members have substantial involvements (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Britzman, 1990; Davies, 1991; Farrell, 1983). hooks (2014) explained, “‘the engaged voice’ must never be fixed and absolute, but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself” (p. 11).

Organizational studies within many institutions argued that employee silence is not the absence of speaking up, but the motivation to withdrawal (Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003; Farrell, 1983; Morrison, & Milliken, 2000). Morrison and Milliken (2000) stated:

We expect that in most cases, when cues from the top indicate that the organization is not open to employee input, the attitudes of senior management will trickle down and affect the behavior of middle managers (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994) and that they, too, will send cues to those below them that voice is not welcomed. (p. 714)

Conversely, employee voice is intentional about expressing ideas, information, and opinions. Dyne et al. (2003) delineated voice as “expressing ideas, about work-related improvements” (p. 1360). Although employees’ voices are important to growth and development in today’s organizations, speaking up can be risky as it may damage one’s image or offend authority (Jiang, Gao, & Yang, 2018; Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

Therefore, this section will begin with exploring multiple dynamics of voice related to this study. Secondly, I discuss women and silence, in general, followed by workplace silence for women in support roles with an emphasis on African American women and their voices. While the seminal work of Belenky et al. (1986) helped us understand voice and silence, the voices of African American women are impacted by a different set dynamics, including race, gender, and class. An additional topic, significant to this discussion, involves Black women, who often require mentoring and self-care, to survive toxic environments in predominantly White workspaces. I conclude with challenges and barriers for Black women

in HE support roles that may consist of limited opportunities for advancement and the devaluation of the knowledge and skills of these younger diverse women.

### **Multiple Dynamics of Voice**

Britzman's (1990) definition of voice is paramount to this discussion of voice as it relates to younger African American women's sense of self in HE support roles. She viewed voice as "meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community ... Voice suggests relationships: the individual's relationship to the meaning of his/her experience" (p. 14). The individual relationship one has with a community relates to their sense of self. Therefore, I contend that voice is a key aspect of sense of self for this diverse group of women.

In a landmark study on voice and feminism, Davies (1991) conducted social analysis related to feminism post-structuralism. Davies stated that, "voice is position in the humanist discourse that predominates the social sciences and is synonymous with being a person. It is used interchangeably with such concepts as freedom, autonomy, rationality and moral authority" (p. 42). The concept of voice, as a part of the human identity in conjunction with one's freedom of choice and expression, is paramount to this discussion of sense of self.

Likewise, feminist researchers, Lipton and Mackinlay (2016) described the term voice as a "particular public expression of a certain type of perspective on self and social life" (p. 62). Voice carries the assumption that individuals have the right to choose (Lipton & Mackinlay, 2016). Couldry (2010) explained the concept of "voice as value" (p. 2) which aligns with my use of voice in this study. Couldry stated:

Treating voice as value means discriminating in favor of ways of organizing human life and resources that, through their choices, put the value of voice into practice, by respecting the multiple interlinked processes of voice and sustaining them, not undermining or denying them. (p. 2)

Couldry suggested the “act” of choosing to value voice is vital for organizing human life. Hence, valuing voices as an affective process within organizations may be a way to promote healthy professional identities among younger African American women in HE support roles for elevating their sense of self.

Recently, Jiang, Gao, and Yang (2018) conducted a study on voice behavior between employees’ critical thinking skills and leaders’ inspirational motivation style. Researchers tested 302 employees using a critical thinking survey and found a positive effect on employee voice that mediated the relationships between employees’ critical thinking skills and voice and leaders’ inspirational motivation style (Jiang et al., 2018). This study reported a strong relationship between employees and their supervisors fosters a positive effect on their voice behavior. Younger African American women’s voices in HE support roles are likely to increase when they have positive relationships with their supervisors, which develop their professional identity and enhance a sense of self. Silence in the workplace can be devastating for the women in this study and other women in support staff roles.

**Women and silence.** For more than 30 years, women and silence in the workplace and other settings have been the focus of various researchers (Belenky et al., 1986; Freeman & Coll, 1991; Shahjehan & Yasir, 2016). The literature communicates that women may feel a sense of powerlessness from authority; and, as a result, struggle to overcome lack of voice. The seminal work of Belenky et al. (1986) communicated five ways women addressed positions of knowing:

- Silence is a position whereby women view themselves as having limited knowledge and voice; more likely to respond to external authority (pp. 24-34).

- Received knowledge constitutes a perspective which allows women to conceive of themselves as capable of receiving and reproducing the knowledge of those in authority, not capable of producing knowledge on their own (pp. 36-51).
- Subjective knowledge entails a perspective from which truth and knowledge are conceived as personal, private, and subjectively known (pp. 77-86).
- Procedural knowledge involves separate knowing that is objective and outside of self, as well as, connected knowing and understanding that involves empathy and the perspectives of others (pp. 103-130).
- Constructed knowledge consists of constructivist thought: the knower is an intimate part of the known, answers to questions depend on the context and the frame of reference of the person doing the asking. (pp. 137-152)

Belenky's et al. research gave rise to ways of knowing from the perspective of White women; however, women of color are more explicit about the intersectionality of their lives and the influence of culture on truth, knowledge, and authority.

Most Black and third-world women recognize the connectedness between race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality as lived experiences of domination, simultaneously affecting their everyday lives (Rose, 1993), including their views of the world. The intersections of these social constructs shift knowledge from an objective and positivist stance to a mind and body perspective (Boler, 2007; Dall', Alba, & Barnacle, 2005; McLaren, 2007); this embodiment of knowledge contributes to epistemological stances, what it means to know.

For example, Shahjehan and Yasir (2016) found counterproductive behaviors related to women and silence in the workplace at three universities in the United Kingdom.

Researchers investigated organizational silence, voice, and women's behavior at work. Shahjehan and Yasir sampled 168 women academicians at three different life cycles, ranging from ages 25 to 53, and representing three universities. The environments of the universities were populated mostly by female support staff who displayed behaviors of silence and withheld their opinions and concerns in the workplace (Shahjehan & Yasir, 2016). They determined counterproductive behavior (e.g., acquiescent silence, defensive silence, and prosocial silence) led to organizational silence at the individual and organizational levels. Acquiescent silence refers to disengagement, defensive silence is the fear of speaking up, and prosocial silence entails withholding work-related ideas or opinions with the benefit of helping others or the organization (Shahjehan & Yasir, 2016). This study, with a focus on support staff and voice, illuminated the context of a gender-based organizational process for understanding silence and voice.

**Workplace silence for women in support roles.** Studies of voice are associated with employee silence in the workplace and other spaces they encounter (Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003; Farrell, 1983; Jiang et al., 2018; Lipton & Mackinlay, 2016; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Silence in the workplace is often tied to a form of dissatisfaction. In a seminal study of organizational behavior, Farrell (1983) defined voice as “a political response to job dissatisfaction,” (p. 597), usually involving appeals to higher authority and generally a final effort for exiting the organization. Voice in this context, can also be used as a protest to gain attention to unfair job situations. Conversely, voice can be constructive to organizational leaders and improve the current work conditions for current and future employees. However, voice requires bravery and in most organizations silence is paramount (Belenky et al., 1986; Freeman & Coll, 1991; Shahjehan & Yasir, 2016).

More recently Kirrane, O’Shea, Buckley, Grazi, and Prout (2017) administered a mixed questionnaire (n=110), consisting of closed and open-ended statements, related to discrete emotions and silence in the workplace at an Ireland university. Seventy-seven percent of the participants were females, ranging from ages 22 to 55, from a broad range of industries and sectors including telecommunications, construction, health care, and financial services. The majority of participants held senior-level or mid-level management positions. The researchers identified reasons for being silent in the workplace, mainly due to the underlying motive of silence as acquiescent silence and defensive silence. Acquiescent silence may occur because employees do not feel that their opinions are valued by their supervisors or managers. Kirrane et al. (2017) named defensive silence as “the fear of negative consequences of speaking up. It occurs when employees are aware that there may be a better course of action to speaking up, but say nothing about it” (p. 356). The most common forms of silence is defensive silence (protection) and acquiescent silence (exclusion). This study confirmed that fear and exclusion are consequences of silence.

**African American women and their voices.** Due to racial and gendered discrimination in the workplace, Black women often become invisible and silenced, either through lack of recognition or credit for their contributions (Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Yet, Black women continue to enter into organizations not traditionally created for us; but Black women survive and thrive in areas we reclaim as our own. Black Feminist author Joy James (2019) characterized silencing as a “form of coercion that legitimizes theft: the stealing of the labor and voice of captives in predatory societies” (p. xi). James (2019) described the violence and disenfranchisement women and girls endure around the globe, as well as Western society dominated by men exploiting and silencing Black females. However, Black

women and girls still manage to speak through what is often labeled as “womanish ways,” key to breaking silence passed down from generation to generation.

Womanish is used to affirm the wisdoms of African sisters who reject the elites’ control of Black women within systems of White supremacy in various sites; including the university, where Black women are told not to speak (Smith et al., 2019). Black women resist silence by reclaiming their voices and intellect through communal supports, re-purposing the master’s tools: a form of resistance to maintain ownership of their voices (Lorde, 2017; Smith et al., 2019). To assist African American women in combating silence in predominantly White workspaces, Kirrane et al. (2017) offered a way to dispel silence; managers and employees should build positive relationships to understand their emotional states before they succumb to silence.

### **Black Women in Predominately White Workspaces**

For numerous reasons, women of color are silent in the workplace. Johnson’s (2016) groundbreaking study, cited multiple times in this study, is one of a few studies specifically designed to understand the experiences of African American women staff in HE. The aim of Johnson’s (2016) study was to focus on staff as they are not “typically given the opportunity to have their voices heard” (p. 3).

Johnson (2016) insisted that staff voices deserve to be heard for the overall success of the university:

It is clear that staff at institutions are there to do a job, but let us not forget that they are human and have feelings, thoughts, and desires just as faculty, administrators, and students. Institutions need to ensure that staff is not forgotten and that they are included in the shared governance on our campuses. We need to hear the voices of all groups for our institutions to succeed. We must also broaden the voices around the table and make sure they, the decision makers, reflect the diversity of our campus. (p. 152)

Johnson (2016) identified four key themes that African American women support staff experience at PWI's: (a) obstacles and advancement represented the effects of the staff's lack of voice, which can reveal the climate of the institution; (b) impact of colleagues' interactions exposed many issues African American staff experienced related to advancing their careers and regulating their interactions with co-workers; (c) support/coping mechanisms, reaching out to other African American women staff, as a means to cope with the daily stressors of conforming; and (d) the importance of mentoring for establishing relationships to advance careers.

**Importance of mentoring.** Due to double-oppressed identities, African American women may experience mentoring differently than the dominant culture (Crenshaw, 1989; Holmes, Land, & Hinton-Hudson, 2007). Coinciding with mentoring as a coping mechanism in the academy, Holmes et al. (2007) contended the historical legacy of race and gender oppression surrounding Black women in society and in HE has been prevalent for decades; thus, finding formal and informal mentoring relationships are beneficial for African American women in HE.

As it pertains to tenure track faculty, McCarther, Davis, and Caruthers (2012) explored academy mentoring by examining two African American female tenure track professors in the Midwest. Data analysis of the critical self-tale exposed two faculty members' experiences with mentoring. Researchers found both women had successes and failures in their mentor/mentee relationships, and, ultimately, found mentors who fostered feelings of safety, trust, and accountability.

One participant of the McCarther et al. (2012) study recounted the first meeting with her mentors, two Black faculty members, who tutored her through the political, social,

academic, and emotional aspects of surviving the academy. She stated, “As our first formal mentor-mentee session came to an end, I knew I had gained two tenacious advocates for my education and success who would hold my feet to the fire and expect nothing but the best from me” (p. 238). As a younger Black female in a support role for a majority of African American female university professors in a division, I too felt similar sentiments as I was encouraged to further my education and received support in my pursuits to become a HE leader.

Moreover, McCarther et al. (2012) noted having a mentor of the same race/ethnicity and gender may be optimal in developing a productive mentor-mentee relationship to aid in navigating the path toward tenured faculty status. While mentoring in the academy is a way to help Black women with the historical legacy of race and gender oppression, self-care may lead to reduce the stressors from these inequities.

**Self-care.** To understand elements of self-care for African American women, Hall, Everett, and Hamilton-Mason (2012) conducted three focus groups of 41 African American women, ages 18 to 55, that represented diverse occupations recruited from student centers, college offices, social clubs, and churches in the Southeast. The focus of the study was to explore how they coped with work-related stressors that affect their lives. Hall et al. (2012) defined stress as “life events demand adaptation and emphasizes the importance of cognitive appraisal in defining an event as stressful” (p. 208). For African American women, stress is compounded as they experience “gendered racism” (Woods-Giscombe & Lobel, 2008, p. 10), compromised of race, gender, and socioeconomic status related stressors, e.g., general, nonspecific worries, etc. Coping is a process that involves determining the meaning of the

situation, assessing one's coping resources, carrying out the coping strategy, and evaluating its effectiveness (Hall et al., 2012; Smith & Carlson, 1997).

Using an exploratory design with grounded theory methods, five basic themes emerged that identify when racism and sexism are stressors for African American women in the workplace (Hall et al., 2012). The themes were:

- being hired or promoted in the workplace,
- defending one's race and lack of mentorship,
- shifting or code switching to overcome barriers to employment,
- coping with racism and discrimination, and
- being isolated and/or excluded.

One participant remarked about feeling a sense of loneliness and isolation:

Noticing that you're the only African person, African American, or of African descent is very stressful because that adds on an extra—I don't know how to put [it], you have to show yourself that you're worthy or prove it. We're [Black women] the burden bearers, is it because of what people expect, or the position we have allowed them to place us in? It's a lonely feeling. (p. 217)

Another participant commented on invisibility in the workplace:

There's the stress of work and everything you have to do and then there are the more indirect things we've talked about. Not being recognized, being discriminated against, and being treated in a way that's not right. That's more stressful because you tend to internalize them. (p. 218)

Similar to African American females in HE support roles, racial and sexist discrimination persisted among these 41 Black women of various ages; however, connecting to positive social supports are often used as a coping mechanism to combat these psychological stressors. One respondent reflected, "I like to get out and walk and have some quiet time by myself, and kind of reflect on myself. I think probably the best coping strategy for me is

finding a quiet place and just reflect on what I need to do to pull myself out of the situation” (p. 219).

Besides self-care, participants noted identifying with other Black female colleagues, friends, and family members were major components of their social support system (Hall et al., 2012). Findings from this study construct explanations for stress and coping mechanisms for Black women in predominately White workspaces. These findings connect to Johnson’s (2016) study and other research related to the importance of social supports for a healthy development of African American women’s self-concepts (DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000; Hatcher, 2007; King, 2016; Patterson, 2004). This research supports the need for African American women and other women of color to better highlight and understand the similarities and differences of workplace stress related to racism and sexism.

Overall, studies have shown, due to fear or withdrawal, the voices of female support staff positions may be limited; especially for women of color (Hall et al., 2012; Johnson, 2016; Lorde, 2017; Shahjehan & Yasir, 2016; Smith et al., 2019). This investigation on African American female millennials was designed to uncover how this diverse complex group of women define their sense of self, while navigating their careers in the HE workplace. The next section will discuss challenges and barriers for African American women in HE support roles.

### **Challenges and Barriers in Higher Education Support Roles**

Support staff in HE face many challenges. Often hired to support students, faculty, and the overall operations of the university, many go unrecognized for their contributions. Staff who are involved in the life of the university and connect with others, are more likely to have positive work experiences (Lawless, 2017). However, due to race and gender discrimination,

African American women in these roles may have trouble in the workplace. They often feel invisible, go unrecognized, and are silenced (Johnson, 2016; Sebalj et al., 2012; Shahjehan & Yasir, 2016). Moreover, due to invisibility, this group of diverse women may have difficulty navigating and advancing in their careers.

**Opportunities for advancement.** Twenty-first century higher education institutions must be proactive in developing their staff members to retain their talent for the overall success of the organization. In order to create welcoming and inclusive programming to support staff in their professional development, HEI's must implement strategies to "eradicate invisible barriers in the workplace" (Johnson, 2016, p. 7). Staff who take advantage of professional development programs and opportunities are likely to have more positive experiences in the HE workplace (Johnson, 2016). Hite and McDonald (2003) conducted a study on career aspirations of non-managerial women in two Midwestern organizations. They convened four focus groups with 26 front-line workers to explore career development and motivation. Researchers found that participants' career choices were greatly influenced by their life choices (Hite & McDonald, 2003), which suggested that career advancements were important to them. Themes included altering career goals, family influence, security needs, and overall support factors.

Hite and McDonald (2003) also understood the culture of the organization provides few opportunities for non-managerial women to advance or develop their skills. Hite and McDonald noted, "the findings of this study suggest that non-managerial women may benefit from assistance in career planning to help them explore ways to maximize their potential, whether they stay in their current jobs or choose to move on" (p. 233). Therefore, twenty-first century HEI's must be strategic in developing their talent, as the ever-changing educational

environment becomes more reliant on the skills of non-academic staff, their historical knowledge, and their expertise.

**Institutional valuing of support staff.** The literature reviewed so far supports the view of a divide between academics and non-academic staff. Specifically, for support staff, there is a desire to be valued, visible, and recognized (Dobson, 2000; McInnis, 1998; Sebalj et al., 2012; Szekeres, 2004). Commensurate with growing and challenging role expectations, administrative support staff are becoming more qualified (Sebalj et al., 2012; Wohlmuther, 2008). Support staff provide vital services to HEI's that equip institutions to operate effectively (Jo, 2008). Yet, African American women often experience discrimination due to gendered racism (Johnson, 2016; Reynolds-Dobbs, 2008; Sue et al., 2007) and using their voices to challenge inequalities is often problematic for them (Freeman & Coll, 1999; Davies, 2009; Lorde, 2012; Shahjehan & Yasir, 2016). As others suggested, it is important that younger Black women in HE support roles use their voices to avoid silence in the workplace (Collins, 2009; Hall, Everett, & Hamilton-Mason, 2012; Johnson, 2016; Robinson, 2012; Stanley, 2006). Hence, the association between voice and sense of self are strong. Twenty-first century colleges and universities should provide advancement opportunities to staff for the overall success of the organization (Collins, 2009; Hall et al., 2012; Johnson, 2016). Higher education support staff members contribute to organizations' bottom-line; hence, the need to develop staff members as an innovative practice in 21st century HEI's. The final section will discuss the millennial generation in the workplace and how race, gender, and generational differences possibly influence these younger Black women's sense of self in HE support roles.

## **Who Are the Millennials?**

To understand the millennial generation in the workplace, it is imperative to juxtapose this generation to other generations currently in the workforce and their characteristics. Working-age Americans in 2020 fell into four main generations: Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. Although there are variations of precise designations of definition and birth generation years, there are intergenerational shifts in viewpoints, values, and beliefs that have been well documented (Crumpacker & Crumpaker, 2007; Singleton, 2018; Strauss & Howe, 2000; Tulgan, 2009). I find it important to preface this discussion with the understanding these are conventional definitions of the four main generations that leave out historical, cultural, and social narratives that shape the lives of individuals and their lived experiences.

Further, I explore the nature of millennials in HE environments, who are the first generation to always be connected as they are savvy with digital technology and social media (Bolser & Gosciej, 2015). The discussion of millennials segues to Black female millennials in the workplace with an emphasis on early career women and occupational segregation.

### **Four Generations in the Workforce**

**Veterans.** The Silent or Traditionalist generation, known as the veterans, was born between 1925 and 1942 and is the oldest of the generations (Crumpacker & Crumpaker, 2007; Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Singles, 2018). They were predominantly raised in a traditional family structure, where the father worked and the mother was a homemaker (Martin & Tulgan, 2006). Childhood events such as the WWII and the Great Depression shaped their values, morals, and ideals about the world (Crumpacker & Crumpaker, 2007). Consequently, they are considered patriotic, formal, and conservative. In the workplace, they

are considered dependable and loyal to the organization, committed to their jobs, and believe in a top-down management with clear lines of authority (Crumpacker & Crumpaker, 2007).

Overall, they have an excellent work ethic and believe in command, control, and respect.

**Baby boomers.** This generation was born between 1943 and 1961. Born to parents of the depression era, Baby Boomers were raised by parents who made them the center of their lives and instilled a sense of safety and optimism (Crumpacker & Crumpaker, 2007; Martin & Tulgan, 2006). Veteran parents expected Boomers to make the world a better place; thus becoming “inner-directed idealistic thinkers who are obsessed with the spiritual meaning of life” (Singleton, 2018, p. 34).

Baby Boomers came of age during the Civil Rights and Women Rights movements, as well as the Vietnam War (Crumpacker & Crumpaker, 2007). In the workplace, Baby Boomers are dependable, committed, and have a strong work ethic. They are known to be competitive and yearn to be successful. They are known to work long hours and are described as micromanagers. Baby Boomers are the first generation to challenge the top-down command-and-control system and create work teams and quality circles (Johnson & Johnson, 2010). Generally, Baby Boomers are loyal to their jobs and value success.

**Generation X.** Born between 1961 and 1981, Generation X represents the smallest of the generational cohorts (Crumpacker & Crumpaker, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 2010; Martin & Tulgan, 2006). For the first time in history, this cohort of children grew up in single-parent and divorced homes. Many mothers of Generation X children began to work outside the home; and as a result, these children let themselves in with a key after school; and became known as “latchkey” children as there would be no one at home to greet them from school (Singleton, 2018).

Generational researchers Martin and Tulgan (2006) stated, “the most unsupervised generation; Generation Xers were left to take care of themselves and develop a fierce ‘I’ve got to fend for myself’ attitude” (p. 12). Therefore, Generation Xers are independent and self-reliant. Events that shaped their life were the Gulf War and the Challenger, the energy crisis, and the evolution of hip-hop.

In the workplace, Generation Xers place their loyalties in themselves, rather than the organization for which they work. However, they are known to be innovative, flexible, and risk-takers. Generation Xers invented the work-life balance trend, wanting a flexible schedule to manage family, play, and work (Bartley, Ladd, & Morris, 2007). In addition, Generation Xers grew up with the first computers in their home and technology has always been a skill of mastery in the workplace (Martin & Tulgan, 2006). Overall, Generation X are independent, goal-oriented thinkers able to manage, balance work and family life.

**Millennials.** Generation Y or the millennial generation are a cohort of children born between 1982 and 2005 (Strauss & Howe, 2000; Tulgan, 2009). Their attitudes, values and beliefs are shaped by historical events they experienced as a collective: 9/11 terrorist attacks, school shootings, 2008 economic downturn, and deadly natural disasters (Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Singleton, 2018; Strauss & Howe, 2000). Despite tragic experiences, millennials are characterized as confident, optimistic, and full of self-esteem (Singleton, 2018). Some millennials were born to the most child-centric parents, Baby Boomers (Strauss & Howe, 2000; Tulgan, 2009); who gave them continual praise, protection, and nurturing (Singleton, 2008). Therefore, millennials are secure, maintain close relationships, and possess a positive outlook on life (Crumpacker & Crumpaker, 2007). Generally, millennials are upbeat and are socially conscious (Singleton, 2018).

## **Millennials in the Workplace**

By 2025, millennials will comprise nearly 75% of the world workforce (Sengupta, 2017). In the United States, millennials already occupy 79% of the workforce (BLS, 2019). Millennials are well educated and often have multiple degrees as a key to success (Fry, 2014; Singleton, 2018). In the workplace, they are goal and team oriented and entrepreneurial thinkers (Martin & Tulgan, 2006). Research has been conducted on how organizations must adapt to the needs of this cohort as employees in the modern workplace (Rikleen, 2016; Singleton, 2018; Woodward, 2015).

For the first time in history, millennials are the most diverse generational cohort (Crumpaker, 2007; Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Strauss & Howe, 2000). However, studies on Black female millennials are limited and their experiences are often grouped within the larger cohort. Therefore, they share varying experiences even among themselves, as they are diverse in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, varying ability, and geographic origin (Singleton, 2018). Black female millennials are the focus of this study; an examination of who they are as workers is vital to the discussion of sense of self.

The work experiences of Black women of the millennial generation intersect between race, gender, class, age, and other categories. For African American women in HE support roles, their lived experiences may be different from White counterparts. They may find themselves in situations of a modern Mammy, where in White male-dominated institutions, Black women are hired to only perform menial tasks; subjected to low wages, silence, and discrimination. Although Black women have rising levels of educational attainment, the majority are often hired in lower level positions (BLS, 2018).

## **Black Female Millennials in the Workplace**

Underrepresented emerging adults in the workplace may be treated as ‘pets’ rather than professionals (Thomas, Johnson-Bailey, Phelps, Tran, & Johnson, 2013). Thomas et al. (2013) remarked, “by pet, we mean to suggest that new professional employees who are members of underrepresented groups may be welcomed into their workplaces, yet may be embraced for all the wrong reasons” (p. 276). Pets are beloved, cared for beings, whose master knows what is best for them. This status may be given to women in underrepresented groups by their colleagues or supervisors from dominant groups, e.g., White men, (Thomas et al., 2013). In addition, the concept of ‘pets’ is linked to tokenism. Dickens, Womack, and Dimes (2019) described tokenism as, “when employers showcase a few successful employees of color as superficial representations of diversity in their department...” (p. 7).

**Early career Black women.** These women may be relegated to the status of tokenism; however, researchers found coping mechanisms through identity shifting as a survival tactic that Black women have used to succeed in the workplace (Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Harris, 2007; West, 1995). Dickens and Chavez (2018) explained identity shifting as “involving change, not only how one speaks, but also how one’s behavioral patterns and other factors that compose an individual’s sense of self” (p. 760), and they concluded that Black women are likely to shift their identities, based on a White-dominant work environment. Dickens and Chavez interviewed ten early career college-educated Black women, ages 23 to 28 working in predominately White spaces across the U.S., about the costs and benefits of identity shifting in the workplace. Phenomenological variant ecological systems theory was used to examine racial, gender, and class identities among these women.

Dickens and Chavez (2018) based their findings on several themes related to identity shifting. The themes, benefits of identity shifting and the costs of identity shifting, connected to subthemes that included (a) managing interpersonal rejection, (b) the frozen effect, and (c) confronting and dismantling stereotypes. Since Black women find themselves balancing between dual identities to appease White and Black communities (Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003), they may possibly develop coping mechanisms to combat Black female stereotypes (e.g., aggressive, sexually promiscuous, dominant, and strong) (Thomas & King, 2007).

One of the participants in Dickens and Chavez's (2018) study explained opposite behavior bordering on the silence Shahjehan and Yasir (2016) found in their study, as a form of the frozen effect. She became silent in the workplace as she began to question her sense of voice: "Mostly I just won't talk...I would just kind of answer questions yay or nay" (p. 767). Dickens and Chavez (2018) defined this behavior as the "frozen effect," the process of mentally removing one's self from a situation to avoid further experiences of discrimination by becoming silent. Early career Black women in predominantly White workspaces may find themselves exhibiting this behavior more so than other groups of employees. Overall, there are many costs and benefits to identity shifting; however, compared to senior Black women in predominately White workplaces, these factors may have stronger consequences for early career Black women because of the complexities of the ways race, gender, and class contribute to younger Black women's identity formation in the workplace. Additionally, they are more likely to experience occupational segregation that affects their sense of self.

**Occupational segregation.** Black millennials, ages 21 to 36, are overrepresented in domestic, clerical, and health care services at 73% (BLS, 2018). For office support

administrative positions, young White women in the same age group, occupy 76% percent of these positions (BLS, 2020). Black women, in general make up over 59% of the United States workforce and comprise 14% of the population as compared to White women at 45% in the workforce and 60% of the population (BLS, 2018; Catalyst, 2020). White women comprise 17% of the professional workforce, compared with Black women at 12% (Catalyst, 2020). Therefore, Black women are more likely to be ‘segregated,’ hired into less desirable, lower-paying service jobs, such as domestic helpers, health aids, and cashiers (Rosette, de Leon, Koval, & Harrison, 2019).

Furthermore, of the Black women hired into administrative service occupations, their pay rate is significantly lower than that of their White female counterparts (Rosette et al., 2019). Researchers stated that “Black women working full-time in the United States earned \$0.63 for every dollar earned by White men, significantly less than the \$0.79 that White women make for every dollar earned by White men” (Rosette et al., 2019, p. 9). This wage disparity demonstrates occupation segregation as women of different racial groups face unique obstacles that relate to their gender and race. Gender biases and stereotypes hold fast to the beliefs of traditional gender roles as the male as the breadwinner and the female as the caretaker (Rosette et al., 2019). For more than half a century, women have been the majority in the workforce with persistent gender role assignments which may potentially place younger African American women at risk for continued double jeopardy for racial and sex discrimination. With the diversity of the Generation Y, African American millennials are also likely to experience other types of discrimination based on intersectionality.

## Summary

In summary, African American millennials' sense of self in HE support roles may be influenced by various factors including race, gender, class, age discrimination, occupation segregation, lack of identity, and voice. Historical images of Black womanhood have persisted and transformed in today's society (Abrams-Bass et al., 2014; Adams et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2013; Patterson, 2004); originating from slavery, stereotypes of the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire respectively perpetuates Black women as caretakers, hypersexual, and aggressive (hooks, 1989; Collins, 2000, 2009; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Lorde, 2012).

Centuries later, these archetypes remain and have transformed into modern-day stereotypes, now called in today's society the Angry Black Woman, the Strong Black Woman, and The Welfare Queen (Brown et al., 2013; Patterson, 2004). Due to the progression of the media, negative images of Black women remain persistent; hence, younger generations of Black women may experience discrimination and oppression due to these controlling images (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2013; Collins, 2000; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016; Harris-Perry, 2011; Hatcher, 2007).

Additionally, as I reviewed relevant literature regarding experiences of women in the workplace, their social identities, and their voices, I noted patterns that possibly contribute to feelings of invisibility that may influence one's sense of self. In higher education, support staff make many contributions to the success of HEI's, however, often their efforts go unrecognized. For African American women in this role, these sentiments are prominent due to racial and gender discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989; Lorde, 2017). Voice is synonymous with being a person (Britzman, 1990; Davies, 1991; hooks, 2014), significant to identity. Black women in HE support roles may feel invisible and perceive their contributions, talents,

and even presence go unrecognized. These negative experiences may contribute to their overall sense of self.

Millennials are the largest growing generational cohort in the U.S., have earned more advanced degrees, and are more optimistic than previous generations (Strauss & Howe, 2000; Tulgan, 2009). For African American women of this cohort, their collective self-esteem may perhaps be higher than previous generations; however, their private self-esteem could possibly be lower than older generational cohorts (Brown et al., 2013). African American women find support through a community base, connecting with one another for social support and for survival in life and in the workplace (Brown & Valk, 2010; Brown et al., 2013; Finnegan, 2018; Griffiths, 2010; Johnson, 2016; Thompson, 2017; Walker, 1983).

There is a significant amount of research on sense of self of older generations of Black women in the HE workplace; however, limited research exists regarding younger Black women in HE support roles in the United States. This research bridged the gap and brought awareness to a highly educated cohort of diverse women who have potential to be tomorrow's HE leaders.

In Chapter 3, I elucidated the theoretical framework of culture and identity theory, Black feminist (womanist) theory, and intersectionality from Chapter 2 and communicated ongoing stories of the literature through a discussion of concepts, theories, and empirical studies associated with the complexities of sense of self for millennial Black women. The following chapter also discusses the design of the study using the story metaphor (Fox, 2019), which describes the methodology and adds to the existing storyline. Using grounded theory and heuristic inquiry, I generated theory regarding sense of self and positioned the foundation for telling the story of the data.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY

There is limited research on African American female millennials' sense of self in higher education (HE) support roles. Hence, I generated theory using heuristic inquiry and grounded theory to explore how this diverse group of women defined their sense of self. To uncover the theory, the following central question and sub-questions were posed: Central Question: How do African American female millennials perceive their sense of self within higher education support roles?

- How do African American female millennials define their sense of self?
- What images and stereotypes from the larger society shape their sense of self?
- In what ways are their professional identities shaped by their sense of self?

Self-definition and self-valuation are critical to the esteem of Black women (Collins, 2000). I wanted to discover how younger African American women in HE support roles defined their sense of self, regardless of socio-historical images and stereotypes others may use to identify them (Abrams et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2013; Collins, 1986; Davis, 1981; James, Foster, & Guy-Sheftall, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016; Wyatt, 1997). This interdisciplinary inquiry provided empirical evidence to add to the literature or the story (Fox, 2019) regarding sense of self for younger African American women in HE support roles.

This chapter will discuss the rationale for qualitative research, the role of the researcher, the design of the study including the site, participants and sampling procedures, data sources, and data analysis process. Additionally, I include detailed information

regarding limitations, validity and reliability, and ethical considerations. First, I begin with the rationale for the use of qualitative methodology and its fit for this study.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research contributes to understanding the world by capturing stories and diverse perspectives, observing, and analyzing behaviors, and finding patterns to use for meaning making (Patton, 2015). Lincoln and Guba (2011) defined qualitative research:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. (p. 3)

Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings to understand and interpret phenomena of the meanings people bring to them; expressed in thick description.

Merriam (2009) explained, “thick description is a term from anthropology and means the complete, literal description of the incident or entity being investigated” (p. 43). When interpreting or making sense of other people’s experiences, one is actively engaged in meaning making (Baxter, Magolda, & King, 2012). Meaning making, in this regard, is supported by the qualitative researcher’s process of data gathering, analysis, and write-up of the study (Stake, 2010).

Qualitative research was appropriate for several reasons. First, the research questions dictated the methodological approach in that it requested responses from individuals’ perceptions, values, and feelings (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This approach is specific to the study of social relations, the inequality of the way of life is examined for new ways of living (Flick, 2009). Second, Corbin and Strauss (2008) attested that “qualitative research allows researchers to get an inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed

through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables” (p. 12). For this inquiry, the participants’ sense of self is the unit of analysis, rather than numerical data. Third, qualitative research brings researcher and participants together for an opportunity to connect using shared experiences. Flick (2009) asserted that it is important to understand the researcher’s own thoughts and feelings to interpret the meaning of the data. Finally, qualitative research is the best approach because as the researcher, I am challenged to bring my “whole self into the process” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 13). In short, qualitative researchers are deeply committed to the process and are “absorbed in the work” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 10), which enhances the integrity of the research.

Moreover, researchers choose qualitative over quantitative methods for the following reasons: (a) to explore the inner experiences of participants, (b) to explore how meanings are formed and transformed, (c) to explore areas not yet thoroughly researched, (d) to discover relevant variables that later can be tested through quantitative forms of research, and (e) to take a holistic and comprehensive approach to the study of phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). While quantitative research distances the researcher from participants, qualitative research connects the researcher and participants to discover meaning from their lived experiences. Qualitative research is designed to explore areas not yet thoroughly researched, similar to the study of African American female millennials’ sense of self in HE support roles.

For this inquiry, “qualitative interpretation as meaning making” (Patton, 2015, p. 4) fits grounded theory and was implemented through a mixed questionnaire, a job-profile document review, and in-depth interviews. These data sources provided substantively meaningful patterns communicated in Charmaz’s form of grounded theory, discussed later in

this chapter, using the language of focus coding that led to subcategories and categories. Additionally, grounded theory as a qualitative approach best fits this study related to the phenomenon of the sense of self and theory formation. Drawing upon the pragmatist and interactionist theoretical orientations (Hughes, 1971; Park, 1967; Thomas, 1966), theory development is for the purpose of building theory from data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). More importantly, qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to be a part of the work as one can interact and connect to a subject in many ways. I wanted to learn about their experiences, attitudes, and feelings in order to generate new theory.

I used the heuristic inquiry approach inserting my voice, expressing my lived experiences as a millennial African American woman in a HE support role to “bring to the fore the personal experience and insights of the research” (Patton, 2015, p. 118), which supported the generation of theory. Since grounded theory is the major approach for meaning making, I begin with a more detailed discussion of its contours followed by heuristic inquiry which served as an overarching lens, guiding the study through my shared experiences with participants. The grounded theory approach has specific data analysis processes that formulate data corresponding to the research questions for generating new theory. I further describe the data collection, data analysis, and coding in subsequent sections. However, the development of empirical knowledge was a key purpose for this research to add to the scarce body of knowledge on sense of self for this younger cohort of Black women.

### **Grounded Theory**

In the mid-20th century, a positivistic conception of the scientific method supported quantitative inquiry, which was the dominant paradigm of natural science (Charmaz, 2014). This method tested hypotheses from existing theory, which seldom led to the development of

new theories (Charmaz, 2014). According to Corbin and Strauss (2015), Glaser and Strauss' groundbreaking publication from 1967, *Discovery of Grounded Theory*, developed the "armchair theorizing" (p. 6) concept that seemingly builds theory from concepts based on data. Additionally, Glaser and Strauss (1967) used the methods of qualitative inquiry to develop specific coding and technical procedures to analyze data for the purposes of generating new theory. This new approach, labeled grounded theory, was a cutting-edge theoretical perspective for qualitative inquiry.

However, when it came to data analysis approaches, a philosophical divide formed between Glaser and Strauss (1967) who later parted ways due to their differences (Grbich, 2013). Glaser preferred a constant comparison coding method, comparing data against each other for similarities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This method along with open coding and theoretical sampling data emerged (Grbich, 2013). Strauss preferred the analytic strategy of questioning to develop concepts and explore their relationships (Grbich, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 2015). This process includes three levels of data fracturing: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding involves word-by-word, line-by-line analysis which forms concepts and categories that can be "dimensionalised" (Grbich, 2013, p. 83). According to Grbich, axial coding encompasses "taking one category that has emerged in open coding and linking it to all the subcategories that contribute to it" (p. 86). Selective coding validates the relationship between the central category and together drawing outcomes with generation of theory (Grbich, 2013). Differences aside, these types of coding are synonymous with grounded theory.

Renowned researchers of grounded theory, Corbin and Strauss (2015), stated that "...grounded theory was a way of thinking about and conceptualizing data" (p. 257).

Qualitative researchers, Creswell and Poth (2018) expressed grounded theory as a “qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the views of a larger number of participants” (p. 82). According to Professor of Sociology, Kathy Charmaz, grounded theory is inductive, rather than deductive and popular in social sciences, education, nursing, and health sciences (Charmaz, 2014). Nursing researcher, Jean Ivey (2017) stated that “Grounded theory uses data to generate theory, and ultimately, produce hypotheses that account for the behavior seen for further research and testing” (p. 288). What these multiple definitions have in common is grounded theory builds on empirical knowledge, used to develop theory by observing real life experiences (Grbich, 2013) and account for behaviors through broad generalizations unearthed in the data.

The theoretical underpinnings of grounded theory are derived from symbolic interactionism that presumes reality is a constructed entity where social processes can be changed by interactions with people (Grbich, 2013). Corbin and Strauss (2015) defined symbolic interactionism as “the study of how we use and interpret symbols not only to communicate with each other, but also to create and maintain of ourselves, to create a sense of self” (p. 17). Along with symbolic interactionism, the developers of grounded theory heavily relied on the pragmatic writings of Dewey (1929) and Mead (1936) who found pragmatism as “the meaning of conceptions is to be sought in their practical bearings, that the function of thought is to guide action, and that truth is preeminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 17). In other words, knowledge is created through actions and interactions. Blumer (1969) explained the central worldview assumption of grounded theory as the “external world is a symbolic representation, a

‘symbolic universe.’ Both the interior worlds are created and recreated through interaction. In effect, there is no divide between the external or interior world” (as cited in Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 23).

A growing number of scholars, including Charmaz (2014), found that grounded theory was too positivist of an approach and offered constructivism as a more flexible model that resists mechanical applications of the method. Charmaz contended:

Constructivist grounded theory adopts the inductive, comparative, emergent, and open-ended approach of Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) original statement. It includes the iterative logic that Strauss emphasized in his early teaching, as well as the dual emphases on action and meaning inherent in the pragmatist tradition. (p. 13)

Further, critics maintained that positivist grounded theory relied on the authoritative voice of the researcher and uncritically accepted the metanarratives about science, truth, and worldviews (Charmaz, 2014), quieting the voices of participants. Charmaz argued that the positivist assumption takes into the account the researcher as an inherent part of the research, whereas, constructivist grounded theory includes the researcher and the participant voice, positionality of the researcher, and perspectives that “[foster] researcher’s reflexivity about their actions and decisions” (p. 13). The relationship between the researcher and participant produces data that creates action and meaning of theory generation. Given a group of women that have not been studied extensively in the literature, qualitative inquiry through grounded theory and heuristic inquiry were the best theoretical traditions for my inquiry.

### **Heuristic Inquiry**

As a younger African American women and HE professional, I found it necessary to incorporate heuristic inquiry into this study as I share a unique experience with my participants. The process examines the felt and thought experience of individuals (Ozertugrul, 2017). In *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications*,

renowned psychologist Clark Moustakas (1990) explained the root meaning for heuristics and understanding of the phenomenon:

The root meaning of heuristic comes from the Greek word *heuriskein*, meaning to discover or to find. It refers to a process of internal research through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis. The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge. Heuristic processes incorporate creative self-processes and self-discoveries. (p. 9)

Heuristic inquiry emerged from phenomenology research, which examines the common meaning of lived experiences of a collective of individuals (Grbich, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Empirical science became the common method to explore philosophy toward the end of the 19th century and searching for wisdom was reintroduced with phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The origins of phenomenological research, with its philosophical underpinnings, draws heavily on the writings of German mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). He raised the question: What is phenomenology? Husserl and other writers agreed on a common definition expressed as the study of the lived experiences of persons with the intent to develop the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Van Manen (2014) described phenomenological research as “beginning with wonder at what gives itself and how something gives itself. It can only be pursued while surrounding to a state of wonder” (p. 27). Stewart and Mickunas (1990) outlined four philosophical perspectives of phenomenology: (a) a return to the traditional task of philosophy, (b) a philosophy without presuppositions, (c) the intentionality of consciousness, and (d) the refusal of the subject-object dichotomy. For the individual, the meaning of the experience is not filtered through the subject-object dichotomy; the “object is only perceived within the meaning of the

experience of an individual” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 76). These philosophical assumptions form phenomenology research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Heuristic inquiry applies phenomenological analysis to one’s own experience (Patton, 2015). Throughout the process of heuristic inquiry, the researcher experiences growing self-awareness and self-discoveries while understanding the depth of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1990). The idea of suspension of the “natural attitude” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 76) was an *epoche* introduced by Husserl. This is the notion of withholding judgments on what is real until the researcher understands the essence of phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). According to Creswell & Poth (2018), the intentionality of consciousness “is the idea that consciousness is always directed toward an object,” or in other words, “is divided not into subjects and objects but into the dual Cartesian nature of both subjects and objects as they appear in consciousness” (p. 76.).

Heuristic was launched from Moustakas’ publications on *Loneliness* (1961), *Loneliness and Love* (1972), and the *Touch of Loneliness* (1975). From these writings and other influential publications on-actualization and self-disclosure, Moustakas developed the approach through the examination of other literature, wrote personal notes of self-reflection, engaged in an immersion process, and searched for knowledge and experience for deepened and extended awareness, which led to the development of the phases of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). The fluidity of the heuristic inquiry process is comparable to the scientific process in that it moves from whole to part to whole again in this manner, “...from the individual to the general and back again...from the feeling to the word and back to the feeling, from the experience to the concept and back to the experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p.

16). In the heuristic process, researchers must be open to their experiences, trust their self-awareness, and constantly evaluate self.

To sum it up, qualitative researchers determine what is meaningful through interviews, observations, documents, and other data sources to determine meaningful patterns and themes (Patton, 2015). As noted, a scarcity of research exists related to sense of self for younger Black women in HE support roles. Grounded theory provided knowledge in this area to better understand individuals' experiences and developed new theory (Grbich, 2013). As a Black woman and higher educational professional, I share a unique experience with my participants as a younger Black woman and a former HE support staff person. Hence, my experiences relate to why I applied heuristic inquiry as a second perspective or lens to view my study and make meaning of its findings. In keeping within the tradition of heuristic inquiry, I became a part of the inquiry process, viewing my participants as co-researchers. The next section will discuss my role as the researcher for this heuristic grounded theory inquiry on African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles.

### **Role of Researcher**

Qualitative researchers study phenomena in their natural settings, consisting of a set of interpretive practices that make the world visible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Qualitative researchers have the opportunity to learn about the human response that bring their full selves into the process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). My intent as a grounded theorist was to identify new insights to generate new theory with heuristic inquiry as a second approach. I drew on my own experiences when analyzing materials and remained open to the data as new knowledge was formed. The use of reflexivity, reactivity, and voice were important roles for me throughout this inquiry.

**Reflexivity.** As a qualitative researcher, it was imperative that I developed trust with my participants through reflexivity. While conducting in-depth interviews, I was careful not to ask leading questions during this process. Practicing reflexivity conveyed to participants my interest in this study by sharing my background, work experiences, and cultural experiences related to African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Reflexivity allowed me to reflect openly and honestly with myself and my participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Patton (2015) describes reflexivity in qualitative inquiry:

Reflexivity encompasses reflection—indeed, mandates reflection—but it means to take the reflective process deeper and make it more systematic than is usually implied by the term reflection...The term reflexivity is meant to direct us to a particular kind of reflection grounded in the in-depth, experiential and influential, and interpersonal nature of qualitative inquiry. (p. 70)

Therefore, deep reflection was an integral part of the data collection process. As a researcher, I acknowledged that I have a level of power and influence over my participants, which could lead to participant responses that may not be truthful and/or complete due to my positionality within this research study (Maxwell, 2013). Finlay (2002) stated that reflexivity is a “valuable tool to examine the impact of the position, perspective, and presence of the researcher and promote rich insight through examining personal responses and interpersonal dynamics” (p. 532). In order to support reflexivity, I practiced self-reflection through memoing that allowed me to develop insights about the data through transparency and self-awareness (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

**Reactivity.** In qualitative research, role and relationship dilemmas may arise that make the research vulnerable to certain threats in the interpretation of data and reporting on findings (Paterson, 1994). Reactivity can become an issue because participants know they are

being studied. Paterson (1994) described reactivity as “the response of the researcher and the research participants to each other during the research process” (p. 301). Participants may change their behaviors due to the presence, power, and influence of the researcher. Reactivity is certain during research; however, there are ways to reduce its effects, similar to those of reflexivity, through an awareness of positionality. I was attentive to “the importance of deep introspection, political consciousness, cultural awareness, and ownership of one’s [my] perspective” (Patton, 2015, p. 70). To address the threat of bias due to reactivity, I engaged in reflective self-talk, submitted interview transcripts to the participants for member checking, kept a journal of my reactions to participants, and wrote memos for self-reflection regarding my thoughts, feelings, observations, as well as, the data collection and analysis processes (Patton, 2015; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

**Communication of voice.** By engaging qualitative research, one can choose a position along the continuum from centered (authoritative) to decentered (off-stage facilitator) or move between both (Grbich, 2013). For this study, I incorporated the views of others, also using “I,” the first-person active voice, for transparency of the process (Grbich, 2013; Patton, 2015). Since, I share a unique experience with my participants, I elected to “bring my experience to the fore” (Patton, 2015, p. 118) speaking in my own right. This allowed me to communicate authentically and build trust with my participants. Patton described the perspective of the researcher as an instrument, “You as human beings are the instrument of qualitative methods. You as a real, live person make observations, take field notes, ask interview questions, and interpret responses. Self-awareness, then, can be an asset in both fieldwork and analysis” (p. 73). Meaning that the researcher’s personal observations, thoughts and experiences are integral elements of the data collection process. Voice reveals

and communicates the dominance of experiential knowledge of self (Brown, 1996); hence, valuing my own voice and perspective were crucial throughout this study. Yet, at the same time, I could not allow my voice to overshadow the voices of my participants.

Hence, I found it important to take a certain positionality interacting with my co-researchers. England (1994) asserted “the researcher’s positionality and biography directly affect fieldwork and that fieldwork is a dialogical process which is structured by the researcher and the participant” (p. 80). Being born and raised in Southern California, my positionality may differ from the cultural norms of my participants who are from the Midwest. However, my identity as a younger Black women in an HE support role, closely related to their experiences, sharing similar views of sense of self. I was careful not to allow my positionality to minimize their voices and maintained a keen awareness of our similarities and differences, including cultural, social, and political environments.

**Cultural, social, and political environment.** As a researcher, I was aware of the cultural, social, and political environment my participants were exposed to and how these factors may have influenced their daily lives. Dumas (2016) argued that anti-blackness is constructed as a problem “for White people, for the public (good), for the nation-state, and even as a problem for (the celebration of) racial differences” (p. 12). Meaning, that Black is associated with something other than human (Lorde, 2012); thus, anti-blackness is an irreconcilability between Black and any sense of social or cultural regard (Dumas, 2016).

Since the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump, the cultural and political climate has reached a resurgence of overtly racist, sexist, and oppressive attacks toward Black people and women of color. In 2018, President Trump singled out three African American journalists, Abby Phillip, April Ryan, and Yamiche Alcindor:

...calling one of Phillip's questions "stupid," described Ryan as "a loser" and brushed off Alcindor, saying her question was "racist"[...] "You talk about someone who's a loser," Trump said of Ryan, a reporter for American Urban Radio Networks and a contributor to CNN. "She doesn't know what the hell she's doing." (Farhi, 2018, November 9)

This type of rhetoric is a long-standing racist dogma that has positioned Black people as intellectually inferior to others in the larger society (Clark & Clark, 1939; Collins, 2000; Dumas, 2016; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Stanley, 2006; Steele, 1990; Turner et al., 2008; West, 1995).

More recently, the president publicly attacked four U.S. Congresswomen, who identified as female, Black, Latina, Christian, and Muslim. He took aim toward their race and religion, stating on the social media platform, Twitter, asking "Why don't they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came" (Kellman, 2019, July 15). Once again, this racist trope, filled with bigotry, hate, and fear-mongering, ignited a national debate on this established racist attack. African American Congresswoman, Representative Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, born in Cincinnati and raised in Chicago stated, "THIS is what racism looks like. WE are what democracy looks like. And we're not going anywhere. Except back to DC to fight for the families you marginalize and vilify everyday" (Kellman, 2019, July 15). As Representative Pressley, practiced resistance (Collins, 2000), President Trump defended the tweets suggesting the Democrats leave the country if they have complaints. Consequently, this type of climate not only divides the country politically, but racially and emboldens White Supremacist hate groups to attack people and women of color on social media and in our daily lives. This divisive hate-culture may negatively affect younger Black millennial women, particularly in predominantly White work environments. The current cultural and political climate generated new theory

regarding their sense of self in this study, a focus of the subsequent chapter. For many young Black women, our identities meet at the intersection of race, gender, class, age, sexual orientation, political associations, and other differences. Therefore, as a qualitative researcher, I must be aware of recent and ongoing events in our nation affecting this population of diverse women.

Overall, qualitative research studies people in their natural settings and attempts to develop insightful meanings of phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 2011). For this qualitative study, grounded theory and heuristic inquiry were the two theoretical traditions used to generate new theory for African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles which also brought to the forefront my experiences related to this topic. Reflexivity allowed me to reflect openly and honestly about myself and participants. Using this technique built trust through transparency and by memoing my observations, emotions, and thoughts, new insights developed. As a qualitative researcher, I used strategies to combat the effects of reactivity, as well as ways to communicate my voice without dwarfing the voices of co-researchers throughout the research process. Awareness of the current cultural and political climate guided my process for generating new theory. I was keenly aware of the current political climate and its influence on the sense of self for African American millennials.

I have illuminated the nature of qualitative research and the theoretical traditions of grounded theory and heuristic inquiry that influenced my choice to develop theory regarding sense of self for millennial African American women and my role in the research process. In the next sections, I provide a thorough discussion of the design of this inquiry; including details related to the research site, participants and sampling techniques, data collection that

incorporates a discussion of data sources, management, and analysis. The final section details a discussion of limitations, including validity, reliability, and ethical considerations.

## **Research Design**

### **Research Site**

There is no definite number of research sites or participants when using theoretical sampling. According to Corbin and Strauss (2015), theoretical sampling focuses on concepts— not people, although people are used in research to generate theory for a concept. Creswell and Poth (2018) define theoretical sampling as “a sample of individuals to study based on their contribution to the development of the theory” (p. 318). Thus, the researcher will recruit and sample in particular settings where they hope to find people that represent the phenomenon studied. I had some ideas about where to sample, as well as, to what to sample for regarding theory related to sense of self among African American millennial women. I started with a purposeful criterion sampling as Coyne (1997) suggested “and then the next stage of data collection is when theoretical sampling begins” (p. 625), which involved collecting data from participants that would produce the theory. Patton (2015) asserted that criterion sampling is a “predetermined criterion of importance, thereby explicitly (or implicitly) comparing the criterion cases with those that do not manifest criterion” (p. 281).

Grounded theorists require flexibility to sample settings for research based on theory construction. For the most part, the literature suggests that a specific research site cannot be predetermined prior to conducting the research; however, after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I identified two institutions of HE, and worked with their human resources (HR) offices to purposefully identify respondents for this study. The third setting was an urban community college and snowball sampling was employed to identify

additional respondents which entailed asking people to recommend those who fit my criteria for the study. These sites were certainly not predetermined, I had to gain access through important gatekeepers to obtain permission; “researchers must take time to build connections with gatekeepers who provide access to a given population of interest” (Abrams, 2010, p. 542). I started with the two HE institutions and added another site to eventually gather other respondents that would yield the desire numbers for generating theory.

**University A.** The first study site was a four-year urban research university located in the Midwest. This institution serves 16,000 students and employs nearly 2,000 faculty and staff that are predominantly White. The focus of this institution is to promote learning through discovery, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge of public value across a broad spectrum of disciplines and fields of study (University A, 2020).

**University B.** The second site was a four-year rural public institution located in the Midwest. This research institution serves over 22,000 students and employs over 3,000 faculty and staff that are also predominantly White. This institution aims to foster the lifelong process of seeking knowledge and greater understanding and reaches for excellence through diligent effort and collaboration (University B, 2020).

**Community college.** The third research site, a two-year urban community college, located in the Midwest, serves a more concentrated population of 6,000 students of color. These students are served by over 500 faculty and staff. The community college is dedicated to serving the educational needs of the community, through programs that help students to understand themselves, the society in which they are a part of and the universe in which they live (Community College, 2020).

To summarize, sampling in this study began with purposeful sampling to identify sites through specific criteria followed by theoretical sampling that provided data needed for generating theory. “Researchers typically venture out to places where people are likely to have key insight on their chosen topic, and then proceed to recruit and sample available participants within those settings ...” (Abrams, 2010, p. 542). More details regarding sampling for various data sources in this study follow.

### **Participants and Sampling Techniques**

Similar to the selection of the sites in grounded theory, an identified population for the study was also selected with the generation of theory in mind (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Creswell (2013) described individuals for inclusion in a grounded theory study, “individuals who are accessible, willing to provide information, and distinctive for their accomplishments and ordinariness or who shed light on a specific phenomenon or issue being explored” (p. 147). The process of criterion and theoretical sampling of participants for this study began with a homogeneous sample of women in HE support positions within the various units at the selected campuses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As indicated earlier, in an effort to reach a desired sample size, I also employed snowball sampling as a back-up method to criterion and theoretical sampling. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) stated that “snowball, chain, or network sampling is perhaps the most common form of purposeful sampling” (p. 98). I asked key individuals to aid in recruitment of Black, millennial women in HE support roles and used this technique to identify information-rich participants (Patton, 2015).

Through HR departments of the two HEI’s, I requested a participant email about the study to be sent to all employees classified as administrative and/or support staff. As a criterion sample, I sought individuals who identified as female, African American/Black (in

whole or in part), and between the ages of 18 to 37. The email, sent to over 300 administrative and/or support staff positions, described my research (see Appendix C), included a link to an anonymous Qualtrics questionnaire, and the respondent consent form (see Appendix B). Recruitment efforts were similar in the community college; but through snowball sampling, I was able to bypass the Human Resource department and obtain consent from additional respondents.

Included in the respondent letter, individuals who met the criteria were asked to complete the questionnaire. The mixed questionnaire include a demographic section, closed-ended and open-ended questions about their sense of self, historical images of Black women, work experiences, and professional identity (see Appendix D). At the end of the questionnaire, respondents could opt-in to the second phase of the study. This shorter, secure section requested respondents' contact information to conduct an interview. Conducting this second step, added an extra layer of protection of their identities.

The purpose of this section was to recruit interview participants that would provide rich and thick description to aid theory development (Merriam, 2009). I used the data from the secure section of the questionnaire to identify seven participants for interviews based on their descriptions of sense of self, personal stories related to the influences of historical images, and work experiences at their HEI's. Snowball sampling was incorporated to recruit an additional six interview participants for a total of 13 participants for this study. However, after several attempts to make contact with four respondents, only nine support staff committed to the interview phase of the study.

In heuristic inquiry, participants are considered co-researchers with the researcher (Moustakas, 1990). Individuals who completed the mixed questionnaire were considered

respondents in this study. The individuals who agreed to participate in the interview phase of the research were labeled co-researchers. However, I use the terms participants and co-researchers interchangeably. In essence, the participants and co-researchers were also respondents because initially they completed the mixed questionnaire. The next sections explain the data collection process and the nature of analysis for each data source type.

## **Data Collection**

### **Data Sources**

I collected a mixed questionnaire of 24 respondents, in-depth interviews with nine participants, and a document review of six HE support staff job descriptions. Collectively, these multiple sources served as data for generating theory on sense of self for younger Black women in HE support roles. The 33-item mixed questionnaire, consisting of a combination of closed and open-ended statements and questions, produced beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of the sense of self for this diverse group of women. I conducted nine in-depth interviews with participants identified from the questionnaire. The job-profiles were official documents obtained from the HEI's career webpages and described the interview participants' administrative and support roles. Document analysis of the job-profiles enabled me to gain insight into job responsibilities and requirements including educational attainment levels. These four data sets, with the mixed questionnaire viewed as two data sources, one quantitative and the other qualitative, crystalized the research for generating theory regarding the research topic (Ellingson, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). A crystal "combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach" (Richardson, 1994, p. 92). The subsequent sections describe each of the data sources used to generate theory.

**Questionnaires.** Researchers administer questionnaires to learn about values, beliefs, and attitudes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, 2014). The purpose of a quantitative questionnaire is to statistically describe certain features of a population (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, 2014). Flick (2009) maintained that using a short questionnaire along with interviews is fruitful, stating that “the questionnaire will allow you to collect the data (e.g., demographic data)...this permits you to reduce the number of questions and to use the short time of interviews for more essential topics” (p. 164). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), questionnaire instruments are useful in qualitative studies when there is little known about a population or there is a need to gather data from a larger sample. The questionnaire supported the criterion and theoretical sampling of the population to identify respondents for the mixed questionnaire and participants for in-depth interviews.

The questionnaire was adapted from Collier (2018) with permission, as it aligns with the unit of analysis, sense of self; however, instead of the questions focusing on educational leaders, I modified the questionnaire to align with younger Black women in HE support roles. The first two parts of the mixed questionnaire involved quantitative data related to demographic information and positions of the respondents. The remaining four parts included a mixture of closed and open-ended questions related to sense of self, images of Black women, workplace experiences, professional identities, and the current political climate. Together, the questionnaire topics allowed the respondents to share their perspectives to generate theory. Since the questionnaire topics may have caused emotional and mental stress for respondents, they had the opportunity to withdraw from participation at any point without penalty or repercussion. This information was stated on the questionnaire, listed in the consent form, and reviewed with interview participants. The data generated from the

questionnaire were collected on Qualtrics and securely downloaded on a password-protected computer. As noted, the questionnaire led to identifying interview participants.

**Interviews.** The purpose of interviews in qualitative research is to “learn about [the] lives, feeling and experiences” of the interviewees in order to gain meaningful insight into phenomena (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012, p. 1). In his four volume study, *London Labor and the London Poor (1861-1862)*, Henry Mayhew’s initial position was that interviewing human subjects was for the “more learned” (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012, p. 1), but later found that the humbler classes or poorer people were capable of telling their own stories, which generated extraordinary insights of their lived experiences. Interviewing, as it is known today, was not fully established until the mid-1960’s (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). Although interviewing is still considered relatively young, it is one of the most common data sources in qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2015) and adds to a body of knowledge in qualitative inquiry.

Additionally, deMarrais (2004) explained several types of interviews: intensive interviews, in-depth interviews, open-ended interviews, unstructured interviews, conversational, clinical, and long interviews. deMarrais noted that, “Researchers using terms like open-ended, unstructured (Lofland & Lofland, 1971), and conversational are characterizing the informal, conversational style of the interview process, which enables the participants to engage in the process more freely without merely responding to researcher-generated questions” (p. 53). Kvale and Brinkman (2009) pointed out that during open-ended interviewing, the person is describing their life world, while the researcher is interpreting and condensing the flow of meaning.

Moreover, according to Silverman and Marvasti (2008), open-ended interviews are the most popular approach for qualitative interviews in that qualitative researchers favor this

type of interview as it captures the “lived experience” of the participant (p. 152). Flick (2009) explained semi-structured interview questions as “...the concrete issue is defined and the response is left open” (p. 150). Subsequently, semi-structured interviews allow researchers to have consistency throughout the topics by having a set list of questions to guide the interview; however, participants are able to have some control in the interview process, especially toward the end of the interview protocol, when the researcher asks the participant to add their thoughts, perceptions, and/or experiences to the context of the discussion (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

I utilized a general set of questions with all participants (see Appendix E) with the realization that interviews varied with the context of each situation and allowed me to capture participants’ worldviews and new ideas (Merriam, 1998). Examples of interview questions were:

1. How do you define your sense of self as an African American women?
2. How do you define your sense of self as a Black millennial woman?
3. In what ways have historical and cultural images (Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, SBW) shaped your sense of self?
4. Describe your experience as a support staff member working at your higher education institution.
5. How do does your sense of self shape your professional identity in the workplace?

Furthermore, interviews played a central role in the data collection process of my grounded theory study. I was able to collect data from the interview participants or co-researchers from their verbal and non-verbal communication to analyze and create meaning (Corbin & Strauss,

2008). Throughout the conduct of semi-structured interviews, I documented with memos and journaled the verbal and non-verbal communication of participants and my interpretation and reaction to them.

I implemented interviews through Zoom Video Conferencing. I sent participants a secure link along with a meeting time and a consent form. To protect the participants' identities, each chose a pseudonym and agreed to interview in a private room setting. This allowed for semi-structured (Lichtman, 2010), conversational style interviews and created an environment where participants spoke openly. Before the interview, I requested their permission to audio record the interview and used a pre-established interview protocol as a guide. After the completion of each interview, it was transcribed and sent to interview participants for member checking. This process to ensure validity and reliability received little to no changes in the interview content from participants.

To sum up, interviews were a source of information gathered for the purpose of developing new insights to add to the body of knowledge (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). The interview participant's job titles were identified and analyzed after the interviews.

**Documents.** For this study, I conducted a document review of HE support staff job descriptions during the four-month period of data collection or field work. Documents can be categorized as personal, official, or popular culture, and can be used in connection with in-depth interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Silverman (2016) argued that documents are a necessary component of the qualitative research. Silverman explained, "prominent scholars continually remind us of the research potential that documentary data hold...when documents are included in the data set, they tend to serve as background material, often crosschecking oral accounts" (p. 156). In short, documents can also be used to add to other

sources of data collection (interviews, observations, etc.) for the purposes of augmenting the validity of the findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), a concept for qualitative inquiry discussed later in the chapter.

Documents may not be the most popular data source within the social sciences; however, they can add value to qualitative research inquiry. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explained how data interpretation must be related to the literature that highlights the researcher's findings and to broader concerns and concepts. As a qualitative researcher, I conducted line-by-line coding and focus coding to identify subcategories and categories that would contribute to theory development. Often as I observed frequency of focused codes and subcategories in the documents, the process resembled quantitative analysis of counting and sorting. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) argued that "although there may be statistics and quantitative data used, it is still the responsibility of the qualitative researcher to turn the numbers into value" (p. 154). Corbin (2016) encouraged qualitative researchers to be thorough when categorizing data to process a "good audit trail for conceptual development" (p. 84) and include memos to make decisions about the relationships that exist between concepts. Documents provided a source of data for me to make connections to theory development.

I selected support staff job descriptions from the career websites of two Midwestern universities and one community college. This selection was based on the job titles of the nine interview participants. Four of the nine participants had the same job titles; and so, I was left with six job descriptions for analysis. These job descriptions meet the requirements of an official document, as they were written to communicate to an internal and external audience and are used for public consumption (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In each of these documents, a

summary of the job position gave specific job duties, the hiring department and location, minimum qualifications, preferred qualifications, knowledge, and skills, salary, and shift type. Each of these documents also included application instructions, a benefits summary, and a diversity statement. Together, the mixed questionnaire, interviews, and documents supported the generation of new theory related to African American female millennials' sense of self.

**Data management.** The aforementioned data sources guided my research. I manually coded and compiled all questionnaire data and audio transcriptions. As pointed out earlier in this chapter, participants and co-researchers were also respondents. After identifying potential participants, I was able to trace their individual questionnaire data which allowed me to combine all of their data, including interviews and job-profile documents for generating theory. The mixed questionnaire's quantitative and qualitative data, from the remaining 15 of the 24 respondents, were also utilized to generate theory.

During this process, quantitative data were displayed in tables for organization and management and I converted qualitative data into electronic codebooks. Different code books were used for each form of qualitative data and allowed me to develop theory through initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2014). The four codebooks were stored on a password-protected computer, during the four-month data collection and analysis phase. All data will remain in a locked/encrypted file for a seven-year period.

Overall, quantitative and qualitative data from the mixed questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and document review of job-profiles contributed to multiple data for the purpose of generating theory for African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles. The following section will discuss the data analysis process pertaining to heuristic

inquiry and grounded theory. The heuristic process was an overarching framework that guided grounded theory and allowed me to incorporate my shared experiences with data from respondents and co-researchers for generating theory.

### **Data Analysis Process**

Data analysis began after the first data set was collected—analysis led to concepts and theories that helped to answer questions posed to guide the generation of theory with data collected to the point of saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Heuristic and grounded theory approaches were applied to analyze the data. According to Corbin and Strauss (2015), the data analysis process is fluid and generative, breaking apart data for understanding of the intended meaning, weaving concepts together for data interpretation. The aim of the data analysis procedure is to identify patterns to develop categories for theory development, often referred to as themes in other qualitative perspectives. I begin with the explanation of grounded theory followed by a brief review of Charmaz’s (1996, 2014) constructive grounded theory approach, specifically related to coding and adopted for my research. Charmaz moved away from what is often described by others as traditional positivist methods of grounded theory (Blumer, 1969; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). I describe the coding process used for constructivist grounded theory and portray in this section how heuristic inquiry was applied in the process of theory formation.

**Grounded theory procedures.** This study generated theory on sense of self for younger Black women in HE support roles using the grounded theory approach. I gathered “rich, thick descriptions” (Merriam, 2009, p. 43) from quantitative and qualitative responses

from the questionnaire, job-profile documents, and interview transcriptions. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), a well-constructed grounded theory meets four criteria:

1. The theory generated should match the phenomenon investigated.
2. Multiple data sources should be used to convey meaning to research participants and practitioners in the area.
3. The process of abstracting the theory should be varied and applicable to diverse contexts related to the phenomenon.
4. Theory should convey the conditions to which it applies with clarity and focus related to the situation.

With these criteria in mind, Charmaz (2014) expressed grounded theory consists of systematic guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct new theory. In her earlier work, Charmaz (1996) asserted that “grounded theorists evaluate the fit between their initial research interests and their emerging data. They do not force preconceived ideas and theories directly upon their data. Rather, they follow leads that they define in the data” (pp. 32-33). To this end, using the constructivist grounded theory approach as espoused by Charmaz (1996, 2014), the labels of subcategories and categories were incorporated as grounded theory coding procedures in my study.

***Constructivist grounded theory approach.*** Basic strategies such as coding, memo writing, and sampling for theory with constant comparative methods are transportable across epistemological and ontological gulfs (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivist grounded theory focuses on the flexibility of the methods, rather than their mechanical applications. Instead of using positivist strategies, endorsing mid-century assumptions of an objective external reality or passive and detached empiricism, the constructivist approach suggests the researcher

needs the following caution: “start with the assumption that social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed, then we must take the researcher’s position, privileges, perspective, and interactions into account as an inherent part of the research reality” (Charmaz 2014, p. 13). This construction of the theory acknowledges subjectivity and the researcher’s involvement in the construction and interpretation of the data which fits well with heuristic inquiry. I used the constructivist approach to develop theory related to African American female millennials’ sense of self in HE support roles.

*Coding the data.* My analysis process involved multiple data sources identified with theoretical sampling. Coding is the initial analytic phase for generating theory. Maxwell (2013) stated that one of the intellectual goals of qualitative research is “identifying an anticipated phenomena and influences, and generate new, ‘grounded’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) theories about the latter” (p. 30). Meaning, one must keep updating the conceptual framework as new information is generated during the coding process.

According to Charmaz (2014), the data analysis process for grounded theory consists of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to generate theory. Similar to Corbin and Strauss (2015), Charmaz begins the process by comparing data with emerging categories, moving back and forth between data and analysis. Initial and focused coding are applied to form categories for theory generation during the first step of line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 1996; 2014). Secondly, I used focused codes to sift through the data, “to advance the theoretical direction of the work” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). For this step, I took a code that emerged in the initial coding and linked it to subcategories that contributed to the understanding and synthesizing of a category (Charmaz, 1996; 2014; Grbich, 2013). The final coding process allowed me to use the phenomenon of self to

identify and systematically relate it to other categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I analyzed the data by relating the concepts to each other, then delineating concepts/categories into raw sections of data, and creating a proposition to connect the core categories.

To make analytic sense of the rich stories and experiences the researcher must identify what is happening in the data. Some basic questions I used during this process were:

1. What is going on?
2. What are people doing?
3. What is the person saying?
4. What do these actions and statements take for granted?
5. How do structure and context serve to support, maintain, impede or change these actions and statements? (Charmaz, 1996, p. 38)

These questions allowed me to study emerging data and pay close attention to participants' situations, attitudes, and lived experiences. This process continued until no new information emerged about a code or category and the process of saturation was complete (Grbich, 2013)

Additionally, I used memo writing to help develop my theory. Memoing is an important aspect of grounded theory analysis. It is the process of the researcher writing ideas down as these become a developing part of the theory. Charmaz (1996) suggested to "Bring your raw data right into your memo so that you preserve the most telling examples of your ideas from the very start of your analytic work" (p. 43). I conducted memo writing throughout the data analysis process, and wrote down ideas and thoughts about the evolving theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Overall, the grounded theory approach is distinctive in discovering phenomenon through a set of data collection and coding procedures, while heuristics demand deep meaning of one's own experiences.

**Heuristic inquiry.** Heuristic inquiry imparts phenomenological analysis of experience (Patton, 2015). Moustakas (1990) noted that:

Heuristic inquiry is a process that begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer...[through it], the deepest currents of meaning and knowledge take place within the individual through one's senses, perceptions, beliefs, and judgments. (p. 15)

As a heuristic researcher, I found it significant to incorporate my personal experiences in the study of African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles, as I share a unique experience with the initial respondents of the mixed questionnaire and the nine participants who became my co-researchers. This qualitative approach provided me the opportunity to participate in the creative self-process and have a deeper understanding of those who also experience this phenomenon. Moustakas (1990) explained the six phases of heuristic process analyses:

1. *Initial Engagement:* at one with the research question through self-awareness and self-knowledge.
2. *Immersion:* come to be totally involved in the world of data and the experiences gained.
3. *Incubation:* intense concertation or knowledge expansion through increased awareness, intuitive or tacit insights or understanding.
4. *Illumination:* an active knowing process to expand the understanding of the experience through a breakthrough.
5. *Explication:* reflective actions and a comprehensive construction and depiction of the core themes.
6. *Creative synthesis:* bringing together and displaying data creatively to show the patterns and relationships of the essences of the experiences. (p. 27)

Patton (2015) clarified, to understand heuristic inquiry the researcher must “step into one's self in all that is—of contacting the texture, tone, mood, range and content of the experience” (p. 576). These six phases allowed me to reflect on the emerging theory and fully immerse

myself in the process of gathering data and understanding the meaning making process incumbent to produce the storyline of the theory.

***Initial Engagement.*** During this initial phase, the researcher identifies a topic, theme or problem that is a critical to their search that calls out interest to invoke social meaning or compelling implications. Moustakas (1990) noted that “during the initial engagement, the investigator reaches inward for tacit awareness and knowledge, permits intuition to run freely, and elucidates the context from which the question takes form and significance” (p. 27). While on maternity leave in 2016, I began to think of a topic I was deeply passionate about that resonated with me personally and represented a critical interest of research. At this point, I developed the idea to research support staff job titles and the relationship to our professional identities as support staff; however, after reading the literature, I was moved to explore the sense of self for younger Black women in HE support roles which led to developing my research questions.

***Immersion.*** During the second phase of heuristic inquiry, the researcher becomes immersed in their research questions. They live and breathe the topic and “everything in their life becomes crystalize around the question” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). A recommendation offered by Moustakas (1990) is to live the data – to be at one with the data. At this phase, the researcher should be “alert to all possibilities for meaning and enters fully into life with others wherever the theme is being expressed or talked about—in public settings, in social context, or in professional meetings” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). As a HE staff advocate, I began to find themes of my own experiences and cultivated a critical perspective on this topic in my conversations, meetings, and readings about HE support staff, gender, race, class,

and age. I developed a heightened sensitivity to all topics related to support staff and intersectionality.

***Incubation.*** Moustakas (1990) explained, that “incubation is the process in which the researchers retreat from the intense, concentrated focus on the question” (p. 28). During this phase, researchers remove themselves from the immersion of the topic, “no longer absorbed in the topic” (p. 28) which allows them a period for growth to develop insight and perspective about the phenomenon. Concentrating on something else brings about awareness to the researched topic. After collecting and coding the data, I took a couple of weeks to think about my findings. This phase was a challenge for me; however, reading my memos and journal entries, helped to track my thoughts. While I took time away from the research, I continued to journal about my thoughts and illumination of the theory began to form.

***Illumination.*** During the fourth phase of illumination, the researcher revisits the data and begins coding. According to Moustakas (1990), within this process, there is a “breakthrough into conscious awareness of the qualities and a clustering of qualities into themes inherent in the question” (p. 29). Data analysis is significant to qualitative research for categorizing and finding patterns in the data. Using Charmaz’s (2014) constructivist approach to grounded theory, I began to cluster codes into subcategories and categories, breaking data apart, and delineating concepts and theories to create a story line of the theory for this study (Charmaz 1996, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the illumination stage is where the researcher shifts to generate theory and clears up any distortions of the data. This was a time for me to be in a “receptive state of mind without conscious striving or concentration” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 29) to allow understanding to emerge.

**Explication.** The fifth phase of the heuristic analysis process is explication. During this phase, the researcher begins to fully examine the “awakeness” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31) of the data. I conducted this stage with data sources that include a mixed questionnaire, interviews, and a job-profile document review. Moustakas (1990) explained that the researcher brings together the findings of “meaning and organizes them into a comprehensive depiction of the essences of the experience. Perhaps the most central focus of this phase is creating a space and discovering nuances, textures, and constituents of the phenomenon” (p.31) through indwelling. The researcher explicates the major components of the phenomenon, in detail, and is now ready to put them together to communicate the storyline of the data. A more complete apprehension of key elements is discovered (Moustakas, 1990); therefore, the theory was revealed in this grounded theory study.

**Creative Synthesis.** The last phase of the heuristic analysis process is called creative synthesis. In this phase, “the researcher entering this process and is thoroughly familiar with all the data in its major constituents, qualities, and themes and in the explication of the meanings and details of the experience as a whole” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31). The researcher is able to bring together the parts of the phenomenon to create meaning that invites “tacit dimension, intuition, and self-searching” (p. 31). Meanings of the multiple data were shifted through my world view and lived experiences as I made connections to the data of my respondents and co-researchers to generate theory related to sense of self. At this stage of creative synthesis, I created the storyline of the theory and explicated its various parts.

To recap, grounded theory and heuristic inquiry were two theoretical traditions that centered this study on African American female millennials’ sense of self in HE support roles. Both theoretical lenses were appropriate fits for this inquiry. As a heuristic

investigator, I applied six phases to the grounded theory process by: (a) becoming one with my research questions; (b) immersing myself in the world of data and experiences with support staff respondents and participants; (c) increasing my awareness of intuitive and tacit insights gained, (d) illuminating their experiences through understanding, explicating core subcategories and categories; (e) synthesizing data for theory development; and (f) creating the storyline of the theory. Further, I address the details of this experience in Chapter 5, where I report on the process of generating theory.

By focusing on my thoughts, experiences, and emotions, the subjective data provided depth to this qualitative study. First, generating new theory, the focal point of my research, adds to a thin body of literature associated with this phenomenon. Secondly, including my voice in this investigation offers deeper meaning and perspective to the study as my experiences closely relate to my respondents and co-researchers. Finally, the results uncovered sense of self for younger Black women in HE support roles and contributed to significant implications of the findings and future research highlighted in the concluding chapter.

The final section in this chapter will discuss limitations, validity and reliability, and ethical considerations and their relationship to my heuristic grounded theory study. Research must always be addressed with one's biases in mind to provide an authentic and true picture of data, the voices and experiences of respondents and co-researchers. Responsible conduct of research must be carried out in an ethical manner using Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines for protecting the rights and welfare of human subjects.

### **Limitations Including Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations**

Limitations acknowledge the partial and tentative nature of any research (Rossman & Rallis, 2003), specify the weaknesses of the study, and gives an opportunity for the researcher to explain imperfections of the study. Rossman and Rallis (2003) noted that “...findings are conditional, knowledge is elusive and approximate, and that our claims should be humble, given the extraordinary complexity of the social world we want to learn about” (p. 134). A common threat to qualitative research is bias. Maxwell (2013) defined bias as the “primary concern with understanding how particular researcher’s values and expectations may have influenced the conduct and conclusion of the study and avoiding negative consequences of these” (p. 124). Theoretical sensitivity was implored in this study to prevent personal bias. This was maintained by (a) the use of questioning; (b) the analysis of words, phrases, or sentences; and (c) further analysis through comparisons and waving the red flag. When I felt that my “biases, beliefs, and assumptions” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 98) may obscure the voices of participants, I waved the red flag. I posed the basic questions suggested by Corbin and Strauss (1990, p. 77) of: “Who? When? Where? What? How Much? And Why?” These questions promoted theoretical sensitivity and “enables [enable] the researcher to be sensitive to new issues and more likely to take notice of their empirical implications” (p. 12). Thus, practicing theoretical sensitivity, aided me in developing new theory of African American female millennials’ sense of self.

Additionally, to address the threat to bias, I submitted interview transcripts to the participants for member checking and wrote memos for self-reflection on my thoughts, feelings, observations, and the data collect process as a whole (Maxwell 2013; Patton, 2015). I also kept a journal of every phase of the research process and steps for generating theory.

As previously discussed, another common threat to bias is reflexivity, where the researcher is a part of the researched world and have power and influence on informants (Maxwell, 2013). This can be more of a threat conducting interviews due to researchers being a part of the world of individuals they are studying. To prevent bias, I minimized my influence on the co-researchers through not asking leading questions and creating a space of openness, confidentiality, and trust. I maintained an awareness of reflexivity, power and influence on the participants (Maxwell, 2013), previously explored in this chapter.

### **Validity and Reliability**

While illuminating one's biases as limitations to the study is significant to the research, an inquirer must acknowledge validity, which comes from a sense of trustworthiness embedded in the research. Creswell and Poth (2018) described validity, as "...an evolving construct with a broad understanding of both traditional and contemporary perspectives [which] is essential for qualitative researchers" (p. 254). Lincoln and Guba (1985) revealed that "since there can be no validity without reliability, a demonstration of the former [validity] is sufficient to establish the latter [reliability]" (p. 316). Kerlinger (1964) (as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985) described reliability as "synonymous with the terms dependability, stability, consistency, predictability, and accuracy" (p. 292). Reliability is a "precondition for validity; an unreliable measure cannot be valid" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 292). Therefore, validity and reliability together produce reliable measures to create a study that is sufficient, accurate, and dependable.

**Crystallization.** Principles of crystallization were applied to this grounded theory study. Ellingson (2009) described the achievement of crystallization as "strong themes or patterns supported by examples provide a wide-angle view of the setting or

phenomenon...crystallization provides one effective approach to richly describing our findings to marking both overt and subtle manifestations of power in analytic, narrative/artistic, critical genres” (pp. 10-11). Meaning crystallization brings together various dimensions of data sources and provides rich categories and patterns to support the research questions. The multiple data sources of a mixed questionnaire with quantitative and qualitative data, in-depth interviews, and job-profile document review supported the crystallization of findings.

As pointed out by Ellingson (2009), crystallization’s roots can be traced to the work of feminist methodologists by combining methods and genres from across the arts and science regions of the continuum, allowing for a deepened, complexed understanding of the topic. Ellingson (2009) proposed that crystallization “offers deep, thickly described, complexly rendered interpretations of meaning about a phenomenon or group” (p. 10). Thick descriptions allowed me to synthesize major categories to generate theory regarding perceptions of self for support staff as an under researched occupational group.

**Threats to validity and reliability.** For this inquiry, there were four threats to validity and reliability of the study:

1. There was a lower number of respondents and interview participants anticipated that may have been due to lack of interest and/or fear of participating.
2. The research was conducted at only two HEI’s in the Midwest and I used snowball sampling at a community college to increase the numbers of respondents and participants which presented dissimilarity in the contexts.

3. Feelings and perceptions related to sense of self for these women could have been influenced by recent/ongoing campus climate or cultural/political environment issues.
4. There may be bias of the interpretation of data collection from my perspective as the researcher, related to my former role as a younger Black female and support staff person.

First, the lack of interest or fear of participating was addressed by recruiting through criterion and theoretical sampling of HE African American female support staff to participate in a groundbreaking study for an opportunity to add their voices to the scarcity of literature in this area. I sent the mixed questionnaire to over 300 administrative support staff to avoid discrimination and to encourage self-identity disclosure regardless of race, gender, and age. Second, my research was conducted at two HEI's and a community college which widened my scope by increasing the research sites. Third, any recent/ongoing campus climate or cultural/political issues were addressed by allowing participants to discuss their feelings about important current issues, which may well have affected their perceptions regarding sense of self. Finally, as a Black woman and former HE support staff member, my experiences are closely related to my co-researchers; thus, to reduce the threats to validity, I submitted my transcriptions for member checking and conducted memoing to document my thoughts and observations.

Furthermore, delimitations imply what is not being studied as the conceptual discussion describes what the study is and how it is framed (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The aim of this study was to generate theory to contribute to the literature on African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles. Delimitations of this study include the

decision to obtain data from Black women who serve in HE support roles. In addition, since there is limited research on sense of self for this population of women, I selected research sites at two Midwestern HEI's and expanded my recruitment and sampling to a community college setting.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As a qualitative researcher, I must consider ethical considerations involving participants, issues I may be fearful of disclosing, establishing relationships with participants without labeling or stereotyping, acknowledging my voice in my study, and reflecting about who I am and the people I studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 54). The purpose of the Belmont Report (1979) is to provide general guidelines for the protection of human subjects in a research project. There are three basic ethical principles that are “relevant to the ethics of involving human subjects; the principles of respect for person, beneficence and justice” (Louisell, 1979, p. 14). These principles protect the participants’ autonomy, consider risk associated with participation, and are based on fair procedures and outcomes for the participants. The report further delineates the application of these principles and how informed consent is to be used in three requirements; information, comprehension, and volunteerism (Louisell, 1979). These requirements ensure: (a) participants have sufficient information about the research study; and (b) participants must understand the information, and their participation must be free from coercion and influence (Louisell, 1979).

For this investigation, ethical issues were addressed. These considerations included: (a) informing participants of their rights to report false information; (b) being aware of my influence on the participants, as I am a younger Black woman, with years of experience in a HE support staff role; and (c) understanding the privilege that I gained after hearing their

stories, which can deeply affect each individual personally or emotionally. These considerations can be a risk to the participants; however, I informed them that all information was confidential and will only be used for research purposes.

Additionally, the research university's IRB, mandated by the National Research Act (1974), guided my actions in conducting this research. The IRB is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of human subjects. They have the responsibility of being an advocate for research subjects and to review all protocols for research using human subjects, guided by three overriding principles: (a) inform subjects about the nature of the study, and to ensure that their participation is voluntary; (b) ensure that the benefits of the research outweigh the risks; and (c) ensure the risks and benefits of research are evenly distributed among the possible subject populations (Research & Economic Development, n.d.). I also passed the CITI Exam which tested my knowledge of research ethics and compliance training. Additionally, I obtained consent from participants, and informed them of all processes and procedures. I exercised confidentiality, by concealing their identity using pseudonyms to classify their statements provided to the study. As previously noted, all data, forms, communications, and notes are stored, locked, on a password-protected computer, in the principal investigators' office, for a seven-year period and then discarded.

### **Summary**

When all elements of the methodology are considered, this study is significant as it uncovered new theory on African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles. I provided a rationale for the use of qualitative research through the lens of heuristic grounded theory. Transparency regarding my role in this study helped me to be mindful of respondents and co-researchers throughout the conduct of the study. I was also careful to

communicate a clear design that included careful attention to data collection and analysis for maintaining an audit trail of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This heuristic grounded theory inquiry produced rich, thick description of data through the collection of multiple data. Using the data analysis process of constructivist grounded theory, I synthesized codes, subcategories, and categories to generate new theory on this under researched topic. The next chapter will provide a detailed overview of my findings as it relates to research questions that guided the conduct of this heuristic grounded theory study with the primary unit of analysis being younger Black women's sense of self in HE support roles.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this heuristic grounded theory study was to generate theory related to sense of self for African American female millennials in HE support roles. Grounded theory is a qualitative research design method that consists of systematic guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct new theory (Charmaz, 2014). Heuristic inquiry is a type of phenomenology research that Moustakas (1990) defined as the “internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis” (p. 9). As a heuristic inquirer, I share similar experiences with participants in this study, as an African American female millennial who worked in a HE support role. Together, these theoretical traditions were used to generate theory. The unit of analysis for this interdisciplinary study was the sense of self of African American millennial women in HE support roles.

For years, various types of oppression have disenfranchised and fragmented Black women (Abrams et al., 2014; Davis, 1981, 2011). Historical and cultural images have positioned Black women as Mammy’s, Jezebel’s, and Sapphire’s stereotypes, which have persisted and transformed over time (Abrams et al., 2014; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Owen, 2018; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016). Much of the research related to sense of self for African American women exists for older women in HE (Collier, 2018; Harris, 2007; Hatcher, 2007; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Patterson, 2004) with various studies concluding that sense of self is based on a strong support system. However, less is known about sense of self for a new generation of African American women in HE support roles (Brown et al., 2013; Henry & Glenn, 2009; Johnson, 2016; Robinson, 2012). Within the HE workplace, younger Black women may experience discrimination due to their racialized and gendered identities and occupational

statuses (Collier, 2018). These factors are likely to influence these younger women's sense of self in HE support roles.

Research questions help to focus and guide a qualitative study (Maxwell, 2013). The following central question and sub-questions were designed to generate theory about sense of self for African American millennial women.

Central Question: How do African American female millennials perceive their sense of self within higher education support roles?

- How do African American female millennials define their sense of self?
- What images and stereotypes from the larger society shape their sense of self?
- In what ways are their professional identities shaped by their sense of self?

Guided by these questions, this chapter presents the findings of the study related to generating theory regarding a sense of self for participants.

First, I will discuss the application of heuristic inquiry combined with grounded theory, which was a strategy employed to generate theory related to sense of self. This section will be followed by a report of the findings of the quantitative data of the questionnaire that also served as a sampling strategy to identify nine participants for interviews. Next, I examine documents that represented the job titles of the interviewees. Following an in-depth description of these two data sources, I describe the interview participants. Subsequently, the intent of the study is reviewed, the generation of theory using multiple data sets of quantitative and qualitative data from the questionnaire, in-depth interviews from participants, and job-profiles as documents.

The aforementioned four data sources support the crystallization of findings in multiple facets, resembling a prism to view the data from any angle (Ellingson, 2009; Patton, 2015; Richardson, 1994). Further, Patton (2015) suggested that the best way to support crystallization is to “be absolutely clear about what you did (and did not do) in producing your manuscript” (p. 690), which also contributes to the validity of a study. Finally, four categories and nine subcategories are the focus of the section, “Findings: Same, but Different Identity Theory.” I conclude with a summary of the theory and provide a more in-depth discussion of theory through answering the research questions in Chapter 6.

### **Heuristic Inquiry for Generating Theory**

Heuristic inquiry was used as an overarching lens for generating theory for sense of self. As a qualitative researcher, I found it necessary to integrate my personal experiences with the study of African American female millennials’ sense of self in HE support roles because I share a unique experience with my participants. This qualitative approach provided me the opportunity to participate in this creative self-process and to have a deeper understanding of those who also experience this phenomenon. The various phases of conducting heuristic inquiry served as the overarching framework for my study and consisted of Moustakas’ (1990) six phases of Initial Engagement, Immersion, Incubation, Illumination, Explication, and Creative Synthesis. In the subsequent sections, I will describe each phase as I collected and analyzed the data and interacted with the participants to generate theory.

**Initial engagement.** Initial engagement involved becoming one with the research question through self-awareness and self-knowledge (Moustakas, 1990). When I first began this project, I wanted to research how the nomenclature of job titles influenced the professional identity of support staff at HEI’s. However, once I began studying the literature,

I realized that taking this direction would not contribute to a critical examination of professional identity through job titles and their meanings for individuals. As I came to understand the social justice nature of qualitative inquiry and my unique position as a qualitative researcher to help “create a more socially just world” (Johnson & Parry, 2016, p. 7), I pursued my research in a different way. I approached this study from a sociocultural aspect and decided to critically examine the sense of self for African American female millennials for whom I shared an experience with as a HE support staff person.

Throughout this process, the research questions became the guide for creating the mixed questionnaire, interview protocol, and document analysis framework. Once the main question was identified, I created sub-questions that would allow me to understand how African American female millennials defined their sense of self, what images and stereotypes shape their sense of self, and how they defined their professional identity in HE support roles. My examination of relevant literature further stimulated my interests and led to my immersion in the project.

**Immersion.** Immersion is when the researcher becomes totally involved in the world of data and the experiences of participants. Moustakas (1990) asserted that the researcher lives the research question—in walking, sleeping, and even dream states. The researcher is aware of all possibilities of the meaning of the data, taking over their thoughts and interactions with others to contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon. I became immersed in the data during the theory construction stage of my research. The participants’ narratives spoke to my own experiences as a young Black women in a HE support role. I listened to their stories that dealt with racial and gender oppression, the need to connect to social supports, and their desires to advance in their careers. I became one with their anger,

frustration, and shock when listening to their experiences of discrimination due to their intersectional identities. Listening to them reassured me that I am not alone in my experiences, hopes, and fears (Reflective journal, February 18, 2020).

**Incubation.** The incubation phase is intense concentration or knowledge expansion through increased awareness, intuitive or tacit insights, or understanding. In this phase, the researcher is no longer absorbed in the topic in a direct way; yet growth is taking place (Moustakas, 1990). This period of incubation enables the researcher's inner tacit knowledge, while being involved in something else often brings awareness to understanding the phenomenon. Moustakas (1990) explained incubation is a process that gives birth to a new perspective that reveals qualities or creative integration of phenomenon.

Once I collected and coded the data, I reflected on the meaning of the data for a number of weeks. This phase was difficult for me and required abstract thinking to form ideas about the story of the data. During this phase, I read my memos and field notes and began carefully analyzing the data. Writing memos allowed me to record my thoughts and feelings and become instrumental in constructing the theory. I wrote the following in my journal (February 18, 2020) that:

*I was keenly aware of my struggles with making meaning of the data. I learned to trust my intuition, but put some steps in place to test my intuitive and tacit insights. I discussed these intuitive insights with a constructively critical friend, careful not to come to closure and allowed the data to speak to me for telling their stories.*

Deep reflection led me to the next phase of illumination where understanding of the data was captured.

**Illumination.** Illumination is an active knowing process to expand the understanding of the experience through a breakthrough. I suddenly became open to tacit knowledge with and beyond consciousness, which facilitated illumination at a deeper and subtler level of self-

knowledge and experiences (Moustakas, 1990). Intuition allowed me to see parts of a whole, integrating experiences and understanding. I grounded the data in the theoretical framework of the study and looked for gaps in the literature. Additionally, I sought research and empirical literature to support interpretations to generate the theory.

During this process, I was careful to check my biases which can be threats to the validity of the study (Maxwell, 2013). Reflexivity and reactivity are likely to present researcher bias regarding data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Since researchers are a part of the researched world, they may have power and influence on the participants, which is known as reflexivity (Maxwell, 2013). Berger (2015) opined that reflexivity, due to the positionality of the researcher, may occur throughout the research process from recruitment of participants to the development of the final manuscript. Milner (2007) cautioned researchers to work through “dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen in conducting research” as a result of “their own and others’ racialized positionality and cultural ways of knowing” (p. 388). Further, Berger (2015) explained that these dangers may include, “positionalities of race, affiliation, age, sexual orientation, immigration status, personal experiences, linguistic tradition, beliefs, biases, preferences, theoretical, political and ideological stances and emotional responses to participants” (p. 220). I prevented bias threat by minimizing my influence on the participant, such as not asking leading questions, and created an interview space of openness, confidentiality, and trust.

I was also careful to become aware of reactivity which can become an issue because subjects know they are being studied. Paterson (1994) simply described reactivity as “the response of the researcher and the research participants to each other during the research process” (p. 301). When individuals are at the center of attention, they may change their

behaviors or ways of responding due to the presence of the researcher. Reactivity is inescapable during research; however, there are ways to reduce its effects, similar to those of reflexivity, through an awareness of positionality. I was attentive to “the importance of deep introspection, political consciousness, cultural awareness, and ownership of one’s [my] perspective” (Patton, 2015, p. 70). Merriam (2009) added to the importance of researcher self-awareness: “Investigators need to explain their biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken” (p. 219). To address the threat of bias stemming from reactivity, I submitted interview transcripts to the participants for member checking, kept a journal of my reactions to participants, and wrote self-reflection memos regarding my thoughts, feelings, observations, and the data collection and analysis processes as a whole (Patton, 2015; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

I used Charmaz’s (2014) process of grounded theory to identify subcategories and categories in the data through initial coding and focused coding. This process is further explained in the methods chapter and reiterated later in the text to emphasize steps for generating theory. I also used descriptive statistics through measurements of percentages of Likert items, yes and no statements, and multiple-choice items. Breaking through the process of meaning making and the excitement of understanding participants’ lived experiences was recorded in my journal. I wrote: *Data analysis led me to an ah-ha moment when I formed focused codes from the initial coding process that led to links between subcategories and categories for telling the story of sense of self for participants (Reflective journal, February 18, 2020).*

During the data analysis process, it became clear that the intersection of race, class, gender, and age oppression of previous generations persists today. I discovered the younger

generation of Black women's encounters with oppression, but their responses were different than their elders who had confronted a similar yet different context. In other words, oppression remains, but African American millennial women's responses may be different due to a technological society where they are exposed to and have access to a variety of social media tools. During this phase, my data began to speak to me, making connections to the past and the present.

**Explication.** Explication consists of reflective actions, a comprehensive construction, and depiction of the core categories and subcategories. Moustakas (1990) described the process of explication as when “the heuristic researcher utilizes focusing, indwelling, self-searching, and self-disclosure, and recognizes that meanings are unique and distinctive to an experience and depend upon internal frames of reference” (p. 31). In other words, the researcher comes to understand the data and its various layers of meaning in new ways. Key elements are discovered through focusing and indwelling, finding angles, textures, and features that develop core or dominant categories.

Once illuminating relevant categories, I recognized there was a connection to the past and present. During the coding process, I named several subcategories identified through focused coding, but the one that stood out was *Job Titles Matter* that felt familiar to me. Asking my participants if their job titles mattered and connecting to their sense of self led to the creation of this subcategory. This significant moment of discovering theory was captured in my reflective journal:

*I spent a couple of weeks reflecting on the meaning of my data. After struggling to tell the story of the data, one evening as I sat in the upstairs bedroom at my grandmother's house, I suddenly drew a connection to Job Titles Matter and the social justice movement of Black Lives Matter. (Reflective journal, February 19, 2020)*

Our lives are often connected to titles that are prominent and meaningful to our sense of self. As women of color, we continue to struggle in institutions where we often feel that we do not matter (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Henry & Glenn, 2009; Johnson, 2016; Stanley, 2006; Turner, González & Wood, 2008). The mantra of Black Lives Matter resonated with me and is explored more thoroughly later in this chapter.

The movement, grounded in intersectionality and Black feminist theory, is a member-led global network, co-founded by three young adult Black women and created in response to the acquittal of Travon Martin's murderer in 2013. Their mission is to build local power and to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes. This realization helped me to construct the core categories of the theory, Same, but Different Identity that comprised core categories of Black Work Matters, Black Self Matters, Black Titles Matter, and Black Support Matters.

**Creative synthesis.** Creative synthesis brings together and displays data artistically to show the patterns and relationships of the essence of the experiences. Creative synthesis is achieved through familiarity with the data, and through tacit and intuitive powers (Moustakas, 1990). The researcher is challenged to put the components into core categories and subcategories, which can take form as a story, poem, painting, or other creative output.

As I constructed the core categories, I developed a storyline using the voices of my participants' experiences. *Throughout this process, I maintained an awareness of theoretical sensitivity* (Reflective journal, February 22, 2020). I was sensitive to new issues and took note of empirical implications (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Theoretical sensitivity was supported by questioning how participants defined their sense of self, stereotypical images, and professional identities. I also raised what Corbin and Strauss (1990) labeled as the red

flag, when distracted from making meaning of the unit of analysis, sense of self. The Same, but Different Theory became grounded in the data, as I linked existing data with the voices of younger Black women. This process allowed me to compare patterns and relationships of experiences that contributed to the theory.

In generating theory, I used the six phases of heuristic inquiry, which aided an understanding of sense of self for me as the researcher and the nine participants, referred to as my co-researchers. This understanding began with the analysis of the mixed questionnaire and documents. In the next section, I report on each of these data sets individually. Collectively, the quantitative and qualitative questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and job-profile documents, were used to generate theory.

### **Reporting on Findings: Questionnaire**

The purpose of the mixed questionnaire was to identify attitudes about sense of self for African American millennials' sense of self in HE support roles. The questionnaire also served as sampling method for identifying and selecting interview participants. To initiate the study, an online, anonymous questionnaire (see Appendix D) was disseminated to a wide pool of employees in support role positions at two HE institutions. This questionnaire was sent to two universities, University A and University B, reaching potentially over 300 support staff persons in the Midwest region of the United States. To avoid discrimination, both human resources (HR) departments sent the questionnaire to employees classified in support role positions, regardless of race, gender, and/or age. Doing this allowed potential respondents to self-select their identity upon initiating the questionnaire. Using theoretical sampling, I designed the questionnaire to ask individuals to identify their race, gender, and age at the beginning. If they did not identify as African American (in whole or in part),

female, or within the 18 to 37 age group, I removed their responses from my data. In addition, I used snowball sampling, which involved asking people who knew younger Black women, who served in HE support roles at two-year or four-year institutions. Ultimately, this led to a total of 24 respondents who completed the questionnaire.

The 33-question questionnaire consisted of three sections: (1) personal/demographic and employment information; (2) closed-ended questions about their attitudes and beliefs, regarding being an African American woman and sense of self; and (3) open-ended questions about their experiences as African American female millennials in HE support roles. Based on the questionnaire, 100% of the participants identified as African American/Black (in whole or in part), female, and a part of the 18 to 37 age group. The demographics of the respondents were 29.16% employed at a 2-year HE institution, 70.83% employed at a 4-year institution, and 75.00% earned a bachelor's or master's degree.

The data from the questionnaire served as a baseline, and information regarding African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles, in addition to a data source and sampling strategy to identify interview participants. Upon the return of the questionnaire, seven participants indicated interest in being interviewed and provided their contact information. I used snowball sampling to identify others for interviews, which yielded an additional two participants, for a total of nine interview participants.

Tables 1 through 10 provide the findings of the 15 quantitative questions. These questions produced data used to generate theory about African American millennials' sense of self in HE support roles. Each table has different Likert-scale items as measures, and all data points are presented as percentages. A comparative analysis follows the listing of the

tables. Important to note that the qualitative section of the questionnaire (open-ended questions) was analyzed with the interviews.

Tables 1-10: *Sense of Self Questionnaire: Quantitative Data*

Table 1

*Question 9 (Numbers in %)*

Question	Cultural/Practices	Race/Ethnicity	Thinking/ Beliefs	Society's Perceptions of Me	Other (please elaborate)
Q9. Which description of sense of self most aligns with your thinking?	12.50	20.83	66.67	0	0

Table 2

*Questions 10-11 (Numbers in %)*

Questions	Parents/Family /Community	Past/Current Professional Experiences	Media Images/ Society's Perceptions	Spiritual/ Religious Beliefs	Other (please elaborate)
Q10. What has contributed most to your sense of self?	37.50	37.50	0	25.00	0
Q11. What has been most troubling/detrimental to your sense of self?	12.50	37.50	50.00	0	0

Table 3

*Question 12 (Numbers in %)*

Question	Affirming/ Positive	Harmful/ Negative	Both Harming and Affirming	Insignificant	Other (please elaborate)
Q12. Overall influences on your sense of self have been:	41.66	8.34	37.50	12.50	0

Table 4

*Questions 13-15 (Numbers in %)*

Questions	Mammy (caretaker, docile)	Sapphire (angry, aggressive, Welfare Queen)	Jezebel (hypersexual)	Strong Black Woman (independent)	Other (please elaborate)
Q13. What type of images of Black women have you seen most in your home/ family/community?	12.50	12.50	0	75.00	0
Q14. What types of images of Black women have you seen most in your workplace?	29.16	0.04	4.14	45.83	20.83
Q 15. What types of images of Black women have you seen most in the media/society?	0	20.83	20.83	45.84	12.50

Table 5

*Question 20 (Numbers in %)*

Question	Extremely Satisfied	Moderately Satisfied	Slightly Satisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Slightly Dissatisfied	Moderately Dissatisfied	Extremely Dissatisfied
Q 20. Are you satisfied with your overall work experiences at your institution?	20.83	37.50	12.50	0	16.67	12.50	0

Table 6

*Questions 21-23 (Numbers in %)*

Questions	Definitely Yes	Probably Yes	Might or Might Not	Probably Not	Definitely Not
Q 21. Has race ever influenced your work experiences?	45.83	31.84	17.25	5.08	0
Q 22. Has gender ever influenced your work experiences?	37.50	20.83	12.50	25.00	4.17
Q 23. Has age ever influenced your work experiences?	33.33	41.66	0.08	16.66	0

Table 7

*Question 25 (Numbers in %)*

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q 25. Has your job title influenced your professional identity?	0.04	33.14	54.16	0.08	0.04	12.50	0.04

Table 8

*Question 29 (Numbers in %)*

Question	Administrative Professional	Higher Education Administrative Professional	Office Assistant	Office Manager	Other
Q 29. What other job titles fit the work you do?	41.66	25.00	16.66	12.50	4.18

Table 9

*Question 30 (Numbers in %)*

Question	Much Better	Slightly Better	About the Same	Slightly Worse	Much Worse
Q 30. Since the 2016 presidential election, what are your feelings about the current political culture?	0	0	8.34	33.33	58.33

Table 10

*Question 31 (Numbers in %)*

Question	Positively	Somewhat Positively	Neither Positively nor Negatively	Somewhat Negatively	Negatively
Q 31. How have you responded to recent racist and sexist attacks on Black women in this country?	0.04	4.14	41.66	20.83	33.33

## **Quantitative Comparative Analysis**

A higher rate of respondents selected thinking/beliefs that align with their sense of self, more than cultural/practices, race/ethnicity, or society perceptions. A majority of respondents believed their sense of self was affirming/positive, compared to harmful/negative, both positive and negative, and/or insignificant. Respondents chose both parents/family/community and past/current/professional experience as overall influences on their sense of self. However, half of the respondents believed that media/society's perceptions of them was the most detrimental to their sense of self, more than family, professional experiences, and/or religious beliefs. In the same vein, respondents had the highest rating of viewing images of Black women as the SBW in the media, their communities, and in their workplaces, compared to the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire images. Abrams et al. (2014) confirmed these findings in their study on the SBW schema and found that the schema provides multiple forms of strength, racial/ethnic pride, embracing being every woman, and anchored in religion/spirituality.

When it came to participants' workplaces, respondents felt moderately satisfied with their work experiences at their institutions; however, a large percentage felt that race and gender definitely influenced their work experiences. Over half of the participants felt the political climate has become much worse since the 2016 United States presidential election of Donald Trump. In addition, a higher rate of women neither responded positively nor negatively about recent racist and sexist attacks on Black women. This is confirmed by Turner et al.'s (2008) findings related to the experiences of African American women in the academy. They found that women of color at PWI's often experience marginalization, subtle discrimination, personal and institutional racism, gender bias, and institutional sexism. The

mistreatment of Black women in the academy is subjected to gendered racism, which suggest they encounter discrimination based on their racial-ethnic identity and gender (Brown et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2013).

Lastly, nearly half of respondents believed their age influenced their work experiences, in addition to race and gender. Over half of the respondents agreed their job title, as support staff members, affected their professional identity compared to a lower rate of participants who believed it did not contribute to their professional identity. A large percentage believed that the *Administrative Professional* job title fits their job duties more closely, than *Higher Education Administrative Professional*, *Office Manager*, and/or *Office Assistant*. This finding connects to the Sebalj et al.'s (2012) study on the valuation of HE staff. Researchers found that the *Non-Academic Staff* job title was seen as a demeaning terminology because it did not describe the "breadth and depth of work roles or accountabilities nor critical thinking and analysis performed by respondents on higher salary levels" (p. 465). Researchers found the term *Professional Staff* was a more desirable working title, validating their level of expertise and staff feeling valued, visible, and recognized.

Together, these findings demonstrate respondents' beliefs and attitudes about their sense of self, images of Black women, their work experiences, feelings about the political climate, and their professional identities. These findings were combined with other data resources to generate theory for African American millennials' sense of self in HE support roles.

The second data source, participant job titles, aided the understanding of professional identity and the degree of satisfaction associated with their job titles. As noted above, over half of the participants viewed a job title as a source of professional identity and preferred a

more professional designation. This was not a surprising finding given that 75% of the respondents had either a bachelor or master's degree.

### **Reporting on Findings: Participant Job Titles**

The purpose of using a job-profile document review was to gain insight into job responsibilities and duties of HE support roles. Interview participant job titles are listed in Table 11. These job descriptions met the requirements of “official documents” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p.133) and were written to communicate to an internal and external audience, and used for public consumption (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As a source of data, they were analyzed for initial codes and focused codes to form subcategories and categories to ground the theory.

I selected six support staff job descriptions from the websites of two Midwestern universities and one community college. This selection was based on the job titles of the interview participants. Four of the nine participants had the same job titles; therefore, I was left with six job descriptions for analyses. First, I conducted line-by-line coding of the job descriptions, naming each line of the data to identify areas that depicted vivid meaning. From this initial coding step, I engaged in focused coding. During this second step, I made decisions about initial codes by sifting through the data because that made the most analytic sense (Charmaz, 2014). By doing this step, I developed the following focused codes: *professional staff duties*, *nature of work*, and *clerical duties*.

*Professional staff duties* is defined as having the ability to understand complex systems, perform multiple tasks and procedures in a fast-paced environment, to problem solve, to take initiative, and to exemplify leadership qualities. For example, the Office Assistant Support IV job description stated: “Ability to understand complex systems, perform

multiple task using multiple procedures at the same time.” Next, the *nature of work* focus code, which is a generic description, groups multiple levels of skill sets into the same job description. For instance, the overview of the Office Support Assistant III position stated: “The position is responsible for providing administrative office support as the assistant to a division, department, or unit, providing clerical support for professional staff.” The third focus code, *clerical duties*, is defined as tasks that include the incumbent to greet visitors, answer phones, provide general information, route calls, sort mail, and schedule meetings. For example, the Recruitment Support Coordinator position listed the following: “answer phones for on the behalf of the department, receive and open mail, scan or download electronic files, and schedule meetings, conferences, trainings, appointments, etc.” These findings were significant to forming subcategories and categories discussed in subsequent sections. The findings from the documents were used with the other three data sources to generate theory.

In the previous section, I provided an analysis of the mixed questionnaire which reflect data related to 24 respondents, outlined in ten tables. Findings represented their thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes about their sense of self in HE support roles. Job descriptions of the nine interviewees were mainly tied to clerical and administrative responsibilities and duties with three of the nine participants serving in executive and coordinator support roles. Next, I will discuss the profiles of the interview participants including their title, educational background, marital status, assignments, type of HE institution, and years of service.

### **Interview Participants**

The purpose of conducting interviews is to learn about the lives, feelings, and experiences of participants to gain meaningful insight into a phenomenon (Charmaz &

Belgrave, 2012). As a heuristic inquiry study, I refer to interview participants as participants and co-researchers, as I share a unique experience as a younger African American woman formally employed in a HE support role position (Moustakas, 1990). I conducted semi-structured interviews using Zoom Web Conferencing, with nine co-researchers, identified from the online, anonymous questionnaire. To protect participants of the study, respondents created a pseudonym near the end of the questionnaire. A secure link to a shorter survey requested participants to submit their contact information, opting-in for the interview portion of the study. This ensured that the HR departments would not be able to link their responses to their names or email addresses. Doing this second step added an extra layer of protection to the participants' identities. The questionnaire/interview data and identifiers were saved separately to maintain a distinct separation of data from identifiers. The questionnaire/interview data file was saved with de-identified codes (e.g., pseudonym). As the researcher, I was the only one who had access to the master list of the participants' information, data, forms, and communication, which was kept on a password-protected computer, stored on a network drive accessible by the researcher, in a locked office.

From the mixed questionnaire, originally 13 participants agreed to the second phase of the study; however, after several attempts, only nine responded to my follow-up email to schedule their interviews. All nine participants identified as African American and/or Black (in whole or in part), female, and between the ages of 18 to 37. Table 11 displays participants' age, education, marital status, job title, department/unit, years of employment, and type of HE institution.

Table 11

*Interview Participants*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Job Title</b>	<b>Years At Inst.</b>	<b>Department/ Unit</b>	<b>Type of Institution</b>
Bey	35	Married	Master's	Executive Support Assistant	2	Urban Leadership Office	2-year
Bria	37	Married	Master's	Recruitment Support Coordinator	2	Office of Admissions	4-year
Carol	35	Single	Master's	Office Support Assistant IV	5	Advising	2-year
Jaigh	34	Married	Master's	Office Support Assistant IV	2	Finance and Administration	4-year
Jasmine	30	Married	Master's	Undergraduate Recruitment Support	1	School of Business	4-year
Madison	37	Divorced	Bachelor's	Office Support Assistant III	6	Admissions	4-year
Queen	28	Married	Master's	Office Support Assistant IV	2	Recruitment	4-year
Rebecca	30	Divorced	Master's	Student Support Specialist	2	Student Development Office	2- year
Rene	37	Single	Master's	Office Support Assistant IV	9	College of Arts & Sciences	4- year

The ages of the participants ranged from 28 to 37, and three of the nine were 37. Five of the nine were married and the other participants were either divorced or single. Most had master's degrees (8 of 9) and one bachelor's degree. The majority of the HE positions were at the support level; ranging from office to student or recruitment support with one executive support position, six employed at four-year institutions, and three at two-year institutions.

The departments or units varied across the nine participants.

*I had previous working relationships with eight of the nine co-researchers, which served to established trust more quickly during the interview process* (Reflective journal, February 18, 2020). My acquaintanceship allowed me to implement semi-structured, conversational style interviews (Lintman, 2010) and create an environment where the participants could speak openly. As a part of the data collection process, I used an interview protocol to guide my interviews (see Appendix E). I reviewed the consent form with each participant before their interview session, and all nine participants agreed to be audio recorded. Each interview lasted between 60 to 80 minutes. After each interview, I transcribed the audio recording on the same day as the interview. Once documented, I submitted the interview transcript to each participant for member checking to ensure validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013). After I reviewed each transcript, I located participants' job descriptions to align with the job-profile document review, and to match the interview with questionnaire data.

As previously highlighted, the interview data from these participants were combined with the other three data sources of the quantitative and qualitative questionnaire and the job-profile document review to crystalize the data for generating theory. Crystallization supported my view of the data from multiple angles (Ellingson, 2009; Patton, 2015; Richardson, 1994) and aided the validity of data for generating theory.

### **Process for Generating Theory**

Following Institutional Review Board approval, the data collection and analysis phase of the study occurred over four months. As I pursued grounded theory, I applied Creswell and Poth's (2018) checklist for evaluating a grounded theory study. These features

were important for generating theory with a sense of authenticity and quality. Here are the ways that I applied Creswell and Poth's (2018) checklist within the context of my study:

1. Focus on a central phenomenon that may unfold as a process, action, or interaction among individuals. The interaction for this study included how African American millennial women conceptualize a sense of self within a context of historical and systemic oppression and discrimination.
2. A description of the data collection process and analysis to build a theoretical model, which in this study is the generation of the Same, but Different Identity Theory.
3. The figure of the theoretical model is composed of four categories of the Same, but Different Identity Theory: Black Work Matters, Black Self Matters, Black Titles Matter, and Black Support Matters. These are depicted in Figure 1.
4. An overall picture of the storyline of the study provides a springboard for future research.
5. A reflective journal was maintained throughout the study for capturing my reactions and the ongoing research process.
6. Reflexivity regarding my positionality as a researcher provided self-disclosure of possible bias and assumptions relative to the research process. I kept a journal of my thinking, feelings, and reactions.

The subsequent subsections describe data analysis used to generate the Same, but Different Identity Theory, including attention to validity and reliability followed by several sections that describe the formation of the theory including a figure of the theoretical model, the

storyline of the theory through multiple data sets, and a summary of the findings. The research questions are addressed in Chapter 6.

### **Data Analysis**

As a grounded theory study, I generated data collected from African American millennial female, support staff in HE support roles to develop new theory. The data analysis process for grounded theory consists of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to generate theory (Charmaz, 2014). The process compares data with emerging categories, moving back and forth between data and analysis (Charmaz, 2014). According to Charmaz (2014), the initial analysis step begins with line-by-line coding to analyze the data with the second step involving “focus codes to advance the theoretical direction of the work” (p. 138). To make analytic sense of the rich stories and experiences the researcher must identify what is happening in the data. Based on Charmaz (1996), some basic questions I used during this process were:

1. What is going on?
2. What are people doing?
3. What is the person saying?
4. What do these actions and statements take for granted?
5. How do structure and context serve to support, maintain, impede or change these actions and statements? (p. 38)

These questions allowed me to study emerging data and pay close attention to participants’ situations, attitudes, and lived experiences.

Next, I used focus coding for the second major coding phase. Charmaz (2014) stated, “These codes appear more frequently among your initial codes. In focus coding you use these

codes to sift, sort, synthesize, and analyze large amounts of data” (p. 138). Charmaz replaced axial coding, used by Strauss and Corbin (1998), with the language of subcategories and core categories, and made the connections between them. Some researchers use theoretical coding as a fourth step to hone the data. Hence, subcategories and core categories eventually take on substance through theoretical coding, which helps to theorize your data and focus codes.

However, Charmaz (2014) cautioned against using theoretical codes as an overlay to “avoid imposing a forced framework” (p. 155) on your analysis. Based on this advice, I have elected to use the language of subcategories and core categories, and to illustrate the link between them to theorize about the sense of self among African American female millennials. In the end, 48 focus codes were clustered into nine subcategories and four core categories. During this process, memo writing was a significant part of the generating theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Memo writing is an important aspect of grounded theory analysis. The process of the researcher writing ideas down becomes a developing part of the theory that helps to elaborate properties, actions, and assumptions among the codes. Memo writing helps to identify relationships, make comparisons, and go beyond individual cases to define patterns (Charmaz, 1996). I analyzed the core categories and subcategories, defined them, identified properties and characteristics, and looked for underlying assumptions to define both elements. Memo writing spurred implicit, unstated meaning of the data for theory construction and added validity to the study.

**Validity and reliability.** An important part of qualitative research evaluation is checking for validity and reliability. Validity and reliability were addressed through member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013). This is a form of an agreement with the

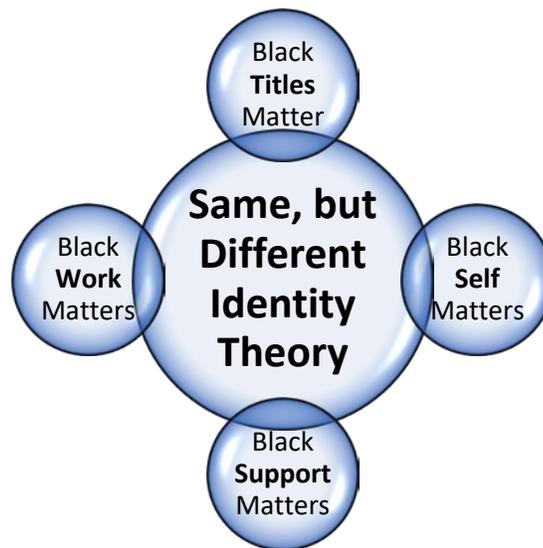
participants to allow them to check for accuracy of the descriptions, explanations, and interpretations of the interview transcript (Miles et al., 2014). I sent the interview transcriptions to each participant to ensure that I captured their responses correctly. All participants approved their transcript with little to no corrections. Maxwell (2013) stated “that member checking is one of the most important ways of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting meaning of the participants and identifying your biases and misunderstandings of what you observed” (p. 127). By addressing validity of the study, reliability is also addressed.

This investigation uncovered African American millennials’ sense of self in HE support roles. I have implemented a mixed questionnaire, conducted in-depth interviews, and performed document analysis of participant job titles. Through coding and data analysis, I generated the Same, but Different Identity Theory, which includes four core categories that relate to my central research question: “How do African American female millennials perceive their sense of self within higher education support roles?” The core categories were formed from several focused codes and grounded in the literature. The core categories are: Black Work Matters, Black Self Matters, Black Titles Matter, and Black Support Matters. Next, I will discuss the process of generating the theory.

### **Same, But Different Identity Theory Formation**

After collecting and coding the data, I noticed the subcategory of *Job Titles Matter*, had the highest number of occurrences in the category of Black Titles Matter. The majority of my participants stated that their job titles mattered when it came to scope of work, advancement, wages, and respect. *This focused subcategory played over and over in my mind, and I could not but help make a connection to the Black Lives Matter social justice*

*movement* (Reflective journal, February 20, 2020). As I reflected on my focus codes, using the Black Lives Matter mantra as a framework and inspiration for generating theory, I developed the core categories: (1) Black Work Matters, (2) Black Self Matters, (3) Black Titles Matter, and (4) Black Support Matters. These core categories framed the Same, But Different Identity Theory. The sense of self for younger Black women is connected to the same struggle of African American women of previous generations: racial and gender oppression. Even though younger Black women experience similar oppressions, this study uncovered the way in which they respond to it, and how it differs. For this reason, this theory was constructed to connect the past and the present experiences of Black women and to validate the sense of self for younger African American women in HE support roles. Figure 1 is a graphic illustration of the Same, but Different Identity Theory.



***Figure 1: Same, but Different Identity Theory***

With the advancement of technology and social media, Black women of the millennial generation have the opportunity to have their voices heard on a worldwide digital platform. Today, entire social and political movements have been started with a #hashtag. For example, one of the co-founders of Black Lives Matters, sent a message on Twitter,

expressing her anger, hurt, and disappointment of the acquittal of Travon Martin’s murderer. At the end of her message, she coined #BlackLivesMatter and overnight this hashtag went viral. This movement was expanded in 2014 when Mike Brown was murdered by Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson. The leaders of the Black Lives Matter project supported the people of Ferguson, by protesting and organizing community members to bring awareness and justice to that community. This event alone sparked a national movement by which leaders developed national chapters to organize and build Black power across the country. Thus, by virtue of the internet, six years later the Black Lives Matter movement is recognized worldwide.

Another example of the way younger Black women respond to oppression through the use of technology is the *Me Too movement* (#MeToo). In 2017, the #MeToo hashtag became viral following the Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse allegations. The Me Too movement was founded in 2006 by Twana Burke—a Black woman. She set out to create an independent grassroots organization to end sexual violence for everyone, while prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable marginalized communities. #MeToo is an online community for survivors, supporters, and allies to access resources and information to support healing and to build a robust and evolving digital platform. Both the #MeToo phenomenon and #BlackLivesMatter movements are grounded in intersectionality and the fourth wave of feminism known as the “call-out culture” (Munro, 2013, p. 2). The internet has become a tool of empowerment for younger generations of Black women, which provides a platform to challenge issues racism, sexism, misogyny, and dominate culture.

What is significant about both of these developments is that they were started by Black women and have been guiding forces for current social media interactions and to

provide a platform for young Black women to raise their voices to speak against injustices and oppression. Moreover, the #MeToo phenomenon and #BlackLivesMatter movements are Black female responses to racialized and gendered oppression, providing a backdrop to this study. Hence, the Same, But Different Identity Theory was generated to connect the past and present experiences of Black women to validate the sense of self for younger African American women in HE support roles. Next, I report on the findings that formed the theory related to African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles.

### **Storyline: Same, but Different Identity Theory**

As previously noted, the Same, but Different Identity Theory was generated from a multiple set of data sources and consists of four core categories, nine subcategories, and three subcategories with focus codes for Black Titles Matter identified in the document review.

Collectively, all four data sets of mixed questionnaire (quantitative and qualitative data), in-depth interviews, and document review of job titles were used to generate the Same, but Different Identity Theory. The first of the core categories was Black Work Matters, which had two subcategories of *Professional Identity* and *Young, Black, and Talented*. The second of the core categories was Black Self Matters with subcategories of *Empowered Struggle* and *Fighting Stereotypes*. The third core category was Black Titles Matter with three subcategories: *Job Titles Matter*, *Doing the Dirty Work*, and *Promoted with Disrespect*. Within the subcategory of Job Titles Matter, there were three focus codes: *professional staff duties; nature of work; and clerical duties*. The fourth core category was Black Support Matters with two subcategories of *Girl, I Need to Vent* and *Coping: How to Deal*.

For the purpose of clarity and the order that document analysis transpired in the research process, Table 12 displays major categories, subcategories, and focused codes for

the subcategory of Black Titles Matter presented in the documents. The reporting of the findings begin with the most frequent core category.

Table 12

*Participants Categories, Subcategories, and Focused Codes*

	<b>Bey</b>	<b>Bri a</b>	<b>Car ol</b>	<b>Jaig h</b>	<b>Jasmin e</b>	<b>Madiso n</b>	<b>Quee n</b>	<b>Rebecc a</b>	<b>Rene</b>
<b>Black Work Matters</b>	M	W	S	S	S	M	M	M	S
<b>Professional Identity</b>	S	S	S	S	S	S	M	S	M
<b>Young, Black, &amp; Talented</b>	W	W	M	S	S	M	M	M	S
<b>Black Self Matters</b>	S	S	W	M	S	M	S	S	S
<b>Empowered Struggle</b>	S	S	W	M	S	M	S	S	S
<b>Fighting Stereotypes</b>	S	M	M	M	S	W	S	S	S
<b>Black Titles Matter</b>	S	M	W	S	M	S	M	M	S
<b>Job Titles Matter</b>	S	W	W	S	M	S	M	M	S
• <b>Prof. Staff Duties</b>	M	S	W	M	S	W	W	W	W
• <b>Nature of Work</b>	M	M	M	W	M	M	W	M	M
• <b>Clerical Duties</b>	M	M	S	S	M	S	M	S	M
<b>Doing the Dirty Work</b>	W	W	W	S	S	S	W	W	S
<b>Promoted w/ Disrespect</b>	W	M	W	W	M	S	W	W	W
<b>Black Support Matters</b>	M	M	S	S	M	W	M	W	S
<b>Girl, I Need to Vent</b>	M	W	M	S	M	W	M	W	S
<b>Coping: How to Deal</b>	M	W	M	S	M	W	W	W	S

*Note.* S = Strong, occurring 20 or more times; M = Moderate, occurring 10 to 20 times; W = Weak, occurring 10 or less times.

As I report on the storyline, it is important to again note the terms participants and co-researchers are used interchangeably. Introduced in the methodology, individuals who

completed the mixed questionnaire are considered respondents in this study, but co-researchers are also respondents because initially they completed the mixed questionnaire.

### **Black Work Matters**

Black Work Matters is the most evident category present in the data and describes the varying work experiences for younger Black woman in HE support roles. This category provides insight into the day-to-day work experiences, colleague interactions, thoughts, and feelings of participants in their work environments. This category includes two subcategories: *Professional Identity* and *Young, Black, and Talented*.

**Professional Identity.** *Professional Identity* is the strongest subcategory present in the data and describes the way younger Black women see themselves. They defined their professional identity as confident, prideful, ambitious, hard-working, student-centered, and collective. As revealed in the questionnaire, more than half of respondents are satisfied with their overall work experiences at their institutions. Furthermore, 37.50% of respondents stated that past/current professional experiences contributed most to their sense of self. This higher response rate is supported by research on workplace discrimination based on their intersectional identities including race, gender, age, and other identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Stanley, 2006; Turner et al., 2008). These experiences shaped their self-concept due to their early career experiences (Holmes et al., 2007). A large percentage are satisfied with their jobs, which indicates a level of appreciation for work they do and their institution, thus this finding adds to the body of literature for this topic.

The *professional staff duties* focused code found in the job-profile document review is defined as having the ability to understand complex systems, perform multiple tasks and procedures in a fast pace environment, able to problem solve, take initiative, and possess

leadership qualities. This connects to the *professional identity* and *proving their worth* focused code from the qualitative portion of the questionnaire, defined as viewing themselves with a positive professional identity, but feeling they must work harder than others to prove their worth. Participants perceived others to view them as incompetent, unqualified, and inexperienced, although they excel in their roles and take pride in their work. One questionnaire respondent defined her professional identity:

I think it is tough...one no one believes that I am intelligent, or that I possess the capability to be professional. If I am not smiling from ear to ear every single minute of the day, then I have an attitude. It is a constant fight to try and prove myself in everything. It is why we have to be strong because we have to work way harder to prove that we are worthy for the positions or titles we hold.

Several interview participants validate these findings. For instance, when asked to describe her professional identity, Jaigh quickly responded:

I have pride in the work I do, and I have a great work ethic. Not to toot my own horn or anything, just being honest, so I show up every day, and do the work that I am supposed to do. All of my annual reviews are great. They did some shifting in departments and I have to do somethings that are not on my job description. Again, I show up and do the work I was supposed to do, and even has gotten to the point where students would say, "I actually want to talk to Jaigh," or "I want to talk to her because she helps me out, she understands, she gets it." And then aside from that, not only do I show up every day, do this job, but I get paid to do a job so, I put my feelings aside in a bad environment. I gotta do my job.

In her interview, Rebecca shared how she was questioned about her qualifications of receiving her new role:

The assumption that I have gotten the most is the "I'm not qualified" one, and I think that has to do with my skin color. So when I first started, I got a lot of questions about, "So what did you do prior to here?" And it kind of seemed like it was them trying to justify why I was in this newly created role that was highly sought after. There were discussions about, "Oh her boss is Black, so she probably got hired because she was Black." So I got those different types of side comments about "only getting a position because of the color of my skin."

Madison talked about how she defined her professional identity:

And my ultimate goal is to be that backbone for someone that may need it, to not push people away. If I know it, then you know it. I'm not trying to hide anything. I don't care who knows how to do my job. I don't feel intimidated by that. I want everybody to be able to shine. So I'll tell you everything that I know, I have nothing to hide because I'm not in any competition. I feel like we should be, if they're saying a workforce to work together, that's what we should be doing. No one should be trying to keep something from you because they think that you're going to take their job, or they think that you're trying to move them out of the way. I feel like as a professional, everybody should know how to do everything in that office.

The data demonstrate how younger Black women in HE support roles, see themselves in the workplace. They do their jobs with excellence and with a sense of pride. In addition to these findings, 45.83% of respondents, chose SBW as the type of images of Black women they see most in their workplace. The higher rating of SBW confirms Taylor-Lindheim's (2016) findings of younger Black women accepting the SBW stereotype as being a role model to their families and community, a responsibility that can lead to stress, a way to combat negative stereotypes, and a strategy of empowerment to conceal weakness to imply strength. This finding is salient to the development of younger Black women as strength is crucial to the shaping of their sense of self (Abrams et al., 2014; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Mullings, 2006; Woods-Giscombe', 2010). Additionally, this finding is supported by Abrams et al.'s (2014) study on the SBW phenomenon that found Black women possess self/ethnic pride in spite of intersectional oppression. This means that cultural pride and strength is passed down from previous generations to combat negative societal perceptions of Black women (Thomas & King, 2007). The participants viewed their professional identities positively as hard workers, student-centered, and collective.

This finding contradicted my earlier assumptions that younger Black women in HE support roles may have a low professional identity due to the "interlocking systems of oppression" (Combahee River Collective, 2015, p. 210) (Reflective journal, February 27,

2020). However, research has confirmed that Black women have higher levels of self-esteem to combat forms of discrimination associated with race, gender, class, and other identifying classifications (Brown et al., 2013; DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter 2000; Garrin & Marcketti, 2018; Patterson, 2004; Thomas & King, 2007). In Rebecca's case, she perceived that others attributed her success of earning her new position to favoritism of having a Black supervisor, rather than earning it on her merit, intellect, and skill (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This threat can lead to stigmatization and discrimination against people of color in mainstream settings and in the workplace (Major & O'Brien, 2005; Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003; Steele & Arson, 1995; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002).

Interestingly, some of the participants reported being seen as a threat to their non-Black colleagues, especially when participants began to advance in their job roles and campus committee positions. Participants shared how they felt their White female colleagues/supervisors were jealous of them. In her interview, Queen shared how the boundaries of her job became restricted once she started to participate in staff leadership groups on her campus:

Yes, the range of autonomy [was taken away] and it wasn't overt, you know, they weren't about to make it super obvious. It was definitely covert, and it was, uh, some implicit biases going on in there that maybe they didn't even realize. But, what was taken away like for instance, three of my colleagues wanted to do things at the women of color conference, like we had a whole two to three month debate with our leadership about it. It was well outside of our 8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. hours, but that was viewed as a possible conflict of interest. Like we have to struggle to be involved in the women of color conference and that is not okay, especially when it's a staff-led type of type of event...we should not have to fight tooth and nail to prove why we should be involved. But, we had to fight for that, and it was just like when the White folks have interests or ideas that they wanted to pursue, it didn't appear to be such a battle or a struggle. And so I would agree that our level of autonomy started to be micromanaged more by our supervisor.

Queen's experience aligned with the research on the decades of tensions between academic and non-academic staff within HE (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Bonk et al., 2006; Dobson, 2000; Sebalj et al., 2012; Szekeres, 2004; Whitchurch, 2009). Many of the HE support roles are what Whitchurch (2008) considered as bounded professionals, meaning staff members who are governed by rules and resources of the organizational structure, in other words, hyper-surveilled. However, Queen's experience is multi-burdened because of her identity as a Black woman. Her seeking opportunities within the university led her to lose autonomy within her job role. Queen's experience is an example of the many challenges Black women face in the academy as it is uniquely based on our race and gender identities (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Gregory, 2001; Harley, 2008; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Johnson, 2016; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Stanley, 2006; Turner, González, & Wood, 2008).

**Young, Black, and Talented.** This subcategory of Black Work Matters is defined as participants' work experiences that relate to race, gender, and age. Many younger Black women in HE support roles have experienced racism, sexism, and ageism in their workplaces. The questionnaire data revealed that 45.83% of respondents believed race influenced their work experiences, and 37.50% believed that gender influenced their work experiences. Since the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump, some participants noticed an increase of blatant racist comments or negative experiences regarding race or gender in their HE workplaces. For instance, 58.33% of respondents feel the current political culture has gotten much worse since the 2016 election. Since the election, the cultural and political climate has reached a resurgence of overtly racist, sexist, and oppressive attacks toward Black women. This finding is important for generating theory.

Historically, HE was established for the colonial elite—rich White men (Thelin, 2011). College and universities were institutions that exhibited the intertwining of racism, sexism, and classism and continue to do so in various ways. As a whole, the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education institutions are more inclusive to women, people of color, individuals in the LGBTQ+ community, people living with disabilities, and first generation students. The institutions have made efforts to recruit diverse faculty and staff; however, White supremacy in this country has been emboldened by President Trump. By the participants' accounts, the past has become the present, and younger Black women are facing increased racism, presenting new challenges.

*Challenges and barriers.* As previously discussed, Black women have encountered racial oppression in the workplace for decades (Holmes et al., 2007). Studies have found that racial and gender barriers have prevented advancement and promotion opportunities (Harley, 2008; Turner & González, 2011; Turner et al., 2008). In the questionnaire data, the “Challenges/Barriers” focused coding connected to the Young, Black, and Talented subcategory in that younger Black women encounter various challenges and barriers in HE related to: (a) advancement opportunities (Bryant et al., 2005; Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008); (b) being undermined and ignored (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016; Sue et al., 2007); (c) often being silenced and fearful of speaking up (Johnson, 2016; Sebalj et al., 2012; Shahjehan & Yasir, 2016); and (d) facing discrimination based on their intersectional identities (Abrams et al., 2014; Crenshaw, 1989). For Black women, our experience is connected to intersectional identities including race, gender, class, and sexuality as lived experiences of domination that simultaneously affect our everyday lives (Boler, 2007; Crenshaw, 1989; Dall', Alba, & Barnacle, 2005; McLaren, 2007, Rose, 1993). Catalyst (2004) reported, “White women

frequently reference the ‘glass ceiling’ as blocking their advancement up the career ladder,” while “women of color often characterize the barriers they encounter as comprising a ‘concrete ceiling’ – one that is more dense and less easily shattered” (p. 3). This aligned with what the majority of respondents shared regarding how race and gender influenced their overall work experiences.

One respondent stated her greatest challenges at her institution was “having my time unappreciated (because I’m a millennial), having the physical toll my work takes on my body contradicted (because I’m Black), and having my voice invalidated (because I’m a woman).” These sentiments are identified in the following accounts. Madison shared a conversation from a one-one-one meeting with her White, female supervisor:

There are so many scenarios that I can tell you about my workplace. Sometimes, I think to myself “I can’t believe you just said that” in regard to the racist comments that are said to me. I had my first one-on-one meeting in my new role. I was told how I’ve done so many great things and [my supervisor] has received emails from other department heads about how the transfer credit process is working so smoothly now. My supervisor ask me, “Do you have some type of voodoo magic?” You heard what I said? That’s exactly what she said. That is bull shit. You know, I can’t have skill, but I can have voodoo magic? I couldn’t believe it. I was like, “She did not just say that to me.” I said “No, I seem to think to call it skill.” I couldn’t believe it. Really, I was like, she did not just say that. How can you say that’s okay? That is very disrespectful.

Carol shared her story about experiencing microaggressions in her workplace:

I’ve never really worked with other Black women before. And there was a girl who was a couple of years younger than me, and I did not realize how much I needed her until it happened. She moved up and it’s been a year since she left and it’s been really hard. But I didn’t realize how much I needed that and how actually angry I was about a lot of stuff that I just can never talk about it. Because you just can’t ever talk about it. That was rough...But I see a lot of weird microaggression stuff that is really annoying. Like students will call me “Girl”—like, I don’t know you. Don’t be like as soon as I meet you, you’d be like, “Hey girl!” I don’t know you. You wouldn’t call the 40-year-old White lady girl, but I can’t say that. So you’re like, okay, let it go. Or

if people are like, “Oh, is that your hair?” Microaggression stuff,--I don’t want to talk to you about nothing.

Rebecca shared her experiences about being treated differently by upper-level administration because she is a woman:

Gender definitely plays a role when I’m interacting with upper-level administration, who are men. I often feel like if a counterpart of mine would have said the same information that was a man, it will be taken differently. And to actually see that happen in conversations...there’s four of us total at different campuses, two women and two men. And so just to know that it was not just happening to me, but it was also happening to other women, but not happening to the men, I was like, okay, this might not be a race issue.

Black women have overcome many challenges and barriers including discrimination based on the double jeopardy of racism and sexism (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Stanley, 2006; Turner et al., 2008); and including microaggressions within the HEI environment (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Sue et al. (2007) defined racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to target a person or group” (p. 273). Madison, Carol, and Rebecca demonstrate how microaggressions can diminish one’s self-esteem (Sue et al., 2007).

### **Black Self Matters**

Black Self Matters is the second major category present in the data. Younger Black women define their sense of self as self-loving, strong, and confident; however, participants recognized the struggle, hurt, and pain that come with being a Black woman. Therefore, this category has two subcategories: *Empowered Struggle* and *Fighting Stereotypes*.

**Empowered Struggle.** This subcategory is defined as an identity that is emerging, moving, constantly forming with each life experience. Younger Black women come to know who they are through their lived experiences. The data show, participants at some point, move from shifting who they are in their work environments to leading with their values, their voices, and empowering themselves and others. The questionnaire found that 41.66% of respondents believe their overall influences on their sense of self were affirming/positive. However, 37.50% chose both harming and affirming. The data from the qualitative portion of the questionnaire supports this finding, in that the focused code of *empowered struggle* suggested participants feel empowered and believe there are benefits of being a Black woman. They love themselves as a group, however, this empowerment does not come without the understanding of being a young Black female. The higher rating of affirmed sense of self confirmed research that despite racial and gender oppression, Black women tend to have higher levels of self-esteem, due to relational and familial environments (Brown et al., 2013; Patterson, 2004).

Moreover, DeFrancisco and Chatham-Carpenter (2000) found that Black women “develop survival strategies that prevent them from internalizing negative messages from the larger culture and at the same time maintain a strong inner sense of self” (p. 76). One questionnaire respondent expressed: “Yes, I love being a Black female. It is painful and tiresome at times. But I am proud to say that I am a Black female. I am misunderstood, but I can inspire and lead when needed.” Several participants echoed this sentiment and identified with having an ever-evolving self—developing who they are over time, with each lived experience.

***Imposter phenomenon.*** Queen shared her experience with an identity crisis that was caused by valuing superficial accomplishments (e.g., moving away from home, earning college degrees, and landing a job right out of college). However, in her transition from student to professional to mother, she expressed feeling lost and confused. It took her leaving her previous role and connecting with others who valued and supported her during a momentous life-stage to find herself:

I was lost a lot in my previous role because I had just stepped away from the institution that I've known, that brought me to this city. I've been at the institution for seven to eight years. So all of my connections, all of my circles, my friends, and my whole being of being in this city was connected to being at the university where I got my degrees and job from. So my sense of self was also very confused and lost. I felt isolated when I stepped out of the protective bubble of the university and into this bigger city...And so, I know I dealt with identity crisis as it relates to the imposter syndrome. My resolution for 2019 was to advocate for civil rights...and that was [inspired by] the birth of my son. He was born in 2018, and I became connected with this nonprofit organization [in the city], which is all about uplifting the voices of Black mamas. And their vision is essentially for every baby, a healthy family for every family. [I received] a lot of encouragement and it just primed me with who I am as a woman, as a mother, and the value of that. And so it starting in 2018 being pregnant and having my son. I began this journey of wanting to be grounded in who I was, as a woman and as a Queen that I call myself.

Queen shared her recent evolution in coming to know herself as a woman and mother.

However, before this enlightenment, Queen felt the effects of imposture syndrome. This phenomenon “represents characteristics and behaviors of individuals who do not attribute their success to their own intellectual abilities and prowess” (Patterson-Stephens & Vital, 2017, p. 5). This can be detrimental to communities of color, especially Black women who live under intersectional systems of oppression. According to Cokley, McClain, Enciso, and Martinez (2013), individuals that embody the imposture phenomenon, second guess themselves, have feelings of self-doubt and are fearful they will be identified as fraudulent.

Particularly, for underrepresented populations, we tend to overanalyze how we show up in predominantly White spaces, and wrestle with a sense of belonging and negative stereotypes (Clance & Imes, 1978; Cokley et al., 2013). For Queen, she may have attributed her confidence to her educational attainment, which led to an identity crisis entering the HE workforce. However, she did not fully come to know herself until she became connected with a maternal support group. In my reflective journal I wrote the following:

*I can relate to Queen's account of experiencing self-doubt and fear. In my very first doctoral course, I remember being in class, looking around and seeing that I was the only younger Black woman there. I was in a room with educational professionals—teachers, principals, administrators, and I was the only support staff person—I felt that my acceptance to the program was a mistake. I remember calling my then-husband on the break and saying that I do not belong there. It would not be until three years later, after passing my doctoral comprehensive exams that those feelings of fear and self-doubt began to fade away. (February 27, 2020).*

Amos Wilson (1978) explained this type of socialization as assimilation of group expectations, values, and norms translate to having feelings of oneness and belongingness to a particular group. For African American women, an intrinsic sense of identity is derived from self-knowledge while connected to their cultural communities (Davis, 2018; Ogbar, 2019). Thus, African American women's sense of self are based on values, beliefs, and norms that connect to cultural communities.

***Knowing thyself.*** For centuries, Black women have been told what to do, what to think, and who they are (Walker, 1983; Williams, 1987). Despite this suppression, U.S. Black women have managed to create an African American intellectual tradition. Collins (2009) defined Black feminist thought as “[r]eclaiming and constructing Black women’s knowledges...providing a community...for activism and self-determination” (pp. 4-5). For this study, I define sense of self as one’s personal self-worth, knowing your true self, grounded in beliefs, values, and experiences (Collier, 2018; Hatcher 2007). Furthermore,

Collins (1986) explained that “self-definition and self-valuation is critical to Black women’s survival” (p. 18) by advancing the empowerment of Black women through self-definition. She also emphasized the importance of rejecting “internalized, psychological oppression” and challenging the images of dehumanization and exploitation of Black women (Collins, 1986, p. 18).

When asked which description of sense of self most aligned with their thinking, 66.67% of respondents chose thinking/beliefs. The data showed that participants embody this definition through constant shaping of coming to know themselves through being grounded in their values, personal growths, and life experiences. In other words, younger African American women’s sense of self is not static, but rather it is moving, ever-evolving throughout their lived experiences.

For instance, Rebecca shared how she has grown to a place of self-awareness. Her lived experiences have shaped her sense of self, finding the balance between being a student, managing a full-time job, and being a mother:

I would say my sense of self is ever-evolving. This year, I will say it’s a relearning year for me as far as who I am...At some point you realize you need to work yourself. Things that you need to address within yourself in order to make you better and how all of those things work together. I feel like I’m understanding the full gamut of who I am as an employee, as a grad student, as a mom, and trying to find a balance of how all those things work together...One of the things I need to work on is finding a balance between me being completely direct, and coming off rude versus too nice. I’m working on finding that middle. And so, I haven’t found it yet. I don’t know how to, I’m hoping I’ll get it; that’s my 2020 goal, but it’s kind of difficult.

Rebecca demonstrates her self-awareness and how it is vital to her development. There is a constant learning and relearning as we move through life as young Black women.

Belenky et al., (1986) conducted a seminal study on women’s ways of knowing, and found that women see the interrelationship between a specific piece of knowledge and

various systems, disciplines, and experiences (Belenky et al., 1986). Thus, while knowing thyself and remaining true to self may be more complex for African American women, shaping a sense of self was apparent in the data of these young women.

For Bria, knowing self helped her to navigate the HE workplace and through the process to remain true to herself:

What has shaped my sense of self is going back to my values and seeing those that I admire and seeing how those traits can help me in the end, especially if it's higher education in particular. I have reached out to individuals whose leadership qualities I admire. Also, I take notice of qualities that I don't like in others and don't see as think if you look at both sides and look at yourself, you're able to navigate that path a little bit easier. I would say to others, don't let go of who you are. I feel like it's hard to do sometimes, because you do have the pressure of wanting to do it all, and wanting to do it perfectly, but I overcome those thoughts with knowing it's okay to be who you are.

Bria's sentiments are rooted in knowing thyself, regardless of pressure from environmental influences. In other words, this way of being helps to capture women's understanding of their experiences and worldviews (Freeman & Coll, 1991), which moves from self-doubt to empowerment.

*The desire for liberation.* Collins (2000) identified one of the tenets of Black feminist theory as validation of lived experiences is a legitimate source of knowledge and truth. In addition, hooks (1989) called on Black women to fully engage in liberation. Thus, the goal of Black feminist theory is to educate the masses to explore and understand the oppression of sexism, and work toward strategies for resistance and advancement of women, while challenging the system of oppression created to silence the Black female voice (Collier, 2018). Participants expressed a desire for liberation of racial, gender, and occupational oppression; however, the system of intersectional oppression was prevalent in the data. For instance, Rene has a strong sense of self and understands the value that she brings to her

department. She aspires to advance her career and refuses to be limited by her HE support role:

I don't want to be boxed in, number one. Number two, I know what I have in my toolkit. Now it's up to administration and leadership and those I report up to, to be willing to see that...I think this is a thing, I think this is probably the thing that makes my blood boil the most: there's this assumption that you *have* to be here and there's nowhere else for you to go, and we don't. There's not room for advancement and I'm like, well, if there's room for these other people to do these things, why is there no room for women who look like me?...Over the course of the time of being in higher education, I've had mentors that have helped me to truly understand my sense of self and worth what I bring to the table. And, am I going to exhaust it all here and not be recognized nor received? No, I'm probably not. You know, when I can go elsewhere and it's, and it's a win-win for both the institution and myself. And that's been the problem.

Intersectionality helps us to understand the multi-oppressive social conditions of Black women's lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). Rene desired to be liberated from the constraints of systematic oppression due to her multi-burdened identity. She recognized her own value and believed she was ready to move beyond her support role; however, she was aware that Black women are not afforded the same opportunities as others. Intersectionality approaches can be used to accurately capture the experiences of racial/ethnic identity and gender identity at their intersections (Juan et al., 2016), as I was able to identify in Rene's struggles.

For these participants, their sense of self is formed over time, with each lived experience. During this evolution process, participants are confronted with oppression due to their racial and gendered identities. Younger African American women have self-love and are strong; however, this strength does not come without a fight.

**Fighting Stereotypes.** As previously mentioned, the forming of African American women's sense of self is influenced by historical and cultural images that originated from the

slave period, which have passed down through the generations and perpetually depict Black women as subservient, hypersexual, and aggressive (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2013; Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Ross & Coleman, 2011). The Fighting Stereotypes subcategory is defined as participants knowing and understanding historical and sociocultural milieu and being mindful of their perceived behavior in the HE workplace. Many participants shared how they must be conscious of how they appear, speak, behave, and react. However, the data showed that participants embrace the SBW stereotype, but reject the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Angry Black Woman stereotypes. The data from the questionnaire showed that 75.00% of respondents chose SBW as images they have seen most frequently among Black women in their home/family/community. Additionally, 45.84% selected SBW as images they have seen in media/society. The higher ratings of SBW aligned with Taylor-Lindheim's (2016) findings of younger Black women accepting this SBW stereotype as (a) being a role model to their families and communities; (b) accepting responsibility, which can lead to stress; (c) combating negative stereotyping; and (d) using empowerment strategies to conceal weakness, communicating strength. These findings are salient to the development of younger Black women, as strength is crucial to the shaping of their sense of self (Abrams et al., 2014; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Mullings, 2006; Woods-Giscombe, 2010).

The data revealed that participants want to be seen as strong, independent, and confident, but did not want to be associated with being loud, ghetto, or angry. The questionnaire data connected with the focused code, *intersectional stereotype*, which is defined as respondents seeing a mixture of stereotypical images of themselves from caretakers of work and home, to SBW, to angry Black women. One respondent explained:

I've had a tough journey throughout my 25 years, as I've encountered these various images of Black women in my community, in my workplace, and in society as a

whole. I've responded in a multitude of ways: rage, acceptance, sadness, shame. For a long time, I thought that in order to be respected in a professional role, I had to fit one of the images and be an archetypal "caretaker" or "Strong Black Woman." I've now grown into a space where I feel it's okay for me to be me and for my identity to be fluid and incorporate some of these images, as well as negate some of them. I feel that these images can often negatively dictate how people view me, but they can't take away my own internal power.

This participant described how she fought against the negative stereotypes and defined who she was for herself using her internal power. A few participants shared this battle within self. Bey expressed how the SBW and Mammy stereotypes troubled her in how society perceives Black women. She explained how she mentally fought against being seen as the Angry Black Woman:

I feel the characteristics of the Strong Black Woman is like a double-edge sword because it's like you want to be strong. But I feel like a lot of the times Black women are not able to be vulnerable. We're not able to show any kind of signs of weakness because of the fact that we always have to be the strong images, and these image bearers of being a Strong Black Women. I almost feel like that leads into the stereotype of the Angry Black Woman and the stereotype of like the Jezebel, like the promiscuous like Black woman... So I feel like those images, and of course, like the caregiver, Mammy, we take on the responsibility of every child, everyone's children, everyone's problem. We're this nurturer, we're this disposable caregiver, to our own fault, to our own detrimental of our health and our well-being.

Bey continued:

I think it's just the biggest one that always stands out to me is the one I'm always fighting, which is the Angry Black Woman. And I feel, like, the weight of that a lot of the times. So if I have to correct someone, I always have to think, like, correct them in love. So they don't think that I'm this Angry Black Woman or if I correct someone or tell them about our ethnicity or culture. And I always feel like I'm the one who is representing and that's exhausting.

Bria also shared fighting against the Angry Black Woman stereotype, but appears to humanized herself by validating her feelings:

I feel like it's hard to do sometimes because you have the pressure of wanting to do it all. You have the pressure of wanting to be perfect and when they think you're the angry Black person, and in that moment you might be, and it's hard to combat that, but it's also like, no, I need to be who I am. If I'm angry right now, it's okay for me to be angry. I just have to figure out how I distribute that, or let that be known. But at

the same time, if one of your values is being a professional, again, if you need to step out just, say I'm sorry, I need to step out for a minute versus, reacting irately.

Bey expressed her mental exhaustion of fighting against being perceived as the Angry Black Woman and admitted that she wants to be vulnerable, but felt like she had to be strong all the time. Bey felt the weight of having the responsibility of educating others about her racial "otherness." Audrey Lorde described this with the idea of (1984) *otherness* as an outsider, never able to completely blend in (Ilmonen, 2019). I recorded in my journal (Reflective journal, March 1, 2020):

*Bey educated others in love when misinformed about Black culture, but does a tiptoe to not be perceived as angry, which exhausted her. Bey also felt she had to be a caretaker for everyone. Bria shared how she fought against negative stereotypes, and does so by acknowledging her emotion, recognizing what she feels and communicating that to those around her.*

This type of coping mechanism allows an individual to isolate the emotion and deal with it separately, which is referred to as armoring or setting boundaries (DeCuir-Gunby, Johnson, Womble-Edwards, McCoy & White, 2019). The data aligned with Haley's (2008) findings on Black women in HE, in the sense that burnout, psychological stress, and spiritual bankruptcy are symptoms of the maid of the academe syndrome, which is brought on by heavy workloads, and demeaning, deprivileged treatment at PWI's.

Half of the respondents chose media/society's perceptions of me, in response to the question: what has been most troubling/detrimental to their sense of self. For Queen, the Jezebel stereotype troubled her the most because she believed that stereotype dishonors Black women's bodies and perverts their beauty. Due to her shapely figure, Queen expressed having to be mindful of the way she dresses at work to avoid being oversexualized:

*This troubles me because our bodies are so beautiful, so dope, and dynamic. There are all these other cultures appropriating our bodies and our images. But when our natural beauty can be big butts and big lips, we're looking at ourselves like we're*

ugly and we're going to get butt injections and lip injections, but we already got it. We don't validate our body until the Whiteness validates it...At work, I was very aware of like, my butt. I have a bigger butt, and big hips and I know I have privilege in my beauty and my skin tone. I can be easily oversexualized depending on how I dress. And also because I'm young, there's privilege in my youth. So being a caramel skin, Black girl, I can come off younger than what I am. Every morning I am looking at myself, okay, is my butt sticking out too much? I am aware, very cognizant if I wear a wig and or these, these big earrings or this head wrap, will it be too much?

The Jezebel is another controlling image of Black women constructed during a period of slavery, which portrayed female slaves as hypersexual and seductive, forcing the slave owner to engage in sexual relations with her (Jewell, 1993, 2012). However, the modern Jezebel has persisted and transformed throughout history and is very prevalent in media. The millennial generation is the first to always be connected as we are savvy with digital technology and social media (Bolser & Gosciej, 2015). Thus, the data show that younger Black women are bombarded with images of oversexualized Black women on television and social media exposure. Unfortunately, the historical and cultural images have contributed to viewers holding comparable beliefs about Black women (Coleman et al., 2019; Jerald et al., 2017). However, this study's data confirmed that younger African American women with higher levels of education are more likely to reject the modern Jezebel images given the understanding of the oppressive, gendered, and racialized stereotype (Brown et al., 2013; Thomas & King, 2007). Perceptions of Black women reflected in media images/societies e confirmed research on how repeated media exposure to historical and cultural images, (Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire), have contributed to Black women holding comparable beliefs about themselves (Coleman 2019; Jerald et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2004). Thus, negative stereotypes persist and influence how younger Black women see themselves.

Queen illustrated how the Same, but Different Identity Theory applies to younger Black women. "We have been conditioned to amend our appearance, attire, and hairstyles to

fit in predominately White work environments.” This has been an area of contention and discrimination for decades (Garrin & Marcketti, 2018). In 2019, The CROWN Act, which stands for “Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair,” is a law that prohibits discrimination based on hairstyle and hair texture. California was the first state to ban discrimination against Black students and employees over their natural hairstyles (CBS News, 2019, July 4). This groundbreaking legislation found that hair is an extension of one’s race, which is legally protected. The CROWN Act has been passed in eight other states and is growing. Although predominately White workplaces are evolving into diverse settings, Black women still experience racial and gendered discrimination. For survival, we shift to accommodate other people’s expectations of us.

*Shifting.* Due to this looming consciousness, passed from generation to generation, participants shared how they felt like they had to combat this stereotype by shifting to fit into the HE workplace. Rebecca described being a new professional in HE and feeling the pressure to change the way she spoke and presented herself:

I used to leave crying like all the time because I used to struggle with how to articulate myself. So then, that caused me to stutter over my words. As new professional, I would constantly battle with, “This is how I normally talk or how I’ve been talking, but that’s not good enough for you”... You guys want me to sound a certain way, look a certain way, dressed a certain way. And it became literally exhausting. So I had a meeting with the department chair, at the time, and she said, “Okay, well we need to make sure that when you’re doing this or you’re sending these emails, send them to me first so I can make sure they’re not too”... what was the word she used... “informal or loose.” And granted, I’ve never sent anything that’s completely grammatically incorrect. That was not the case, but she said, there’s too much of my personality in my email and when I do presentations, so it was like, what is that?

Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) introduced the term shifting to describe the ways in which Black women change their tone, behavior, or attitude to make others or White people feel

comfortable around them. The Same, but Different Identity Theory connection is made clear here. The same form of identity shifting continues to be practiced among younger Black women. Rebecca's experience described the sentiments of Harris-Perry (2011) of Black women being bombarded with warped images of themselves, not being able to tell who they really are. For Rebecca, she was having an internal conflict of coming to terms with being forced to codeswitch, which did not come natural to her. The shifting is a form of survival for Black women that has been passed down from generation to generation.

Madison shared how her co-workers expected her to be a stereotypical loud Black woman who was unprofessional and incompetent. Madison talked about how she made sure she behaved in a professional manner and executed her job with excellence:

I think some of the people in my workspace assume that all Black women are loud—they're all boisterous. I don't think they were ready for me because I'm not that way. I'm always on time. I take care of business. I am not in everybody else's business. I'm not worried about what other people are doing. I take care of what I'm supposed to take care of, so I think the initially, they assumed that I was going to be something different than what I was. I think that stereotype kind of gave them a run for their money because I'm not that person, you know. I am very professional when I'm at work, so I don't know what they were expecting and what they've seen in the past.

In Madison's account, she seemed to wrestle with the historical and cultural images of Black women as loud, aggressive, and incompetent (Collins, 1986; Harris-Perry, 2011; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016). The Sapphire character is angry, disrespectful, and abusive (Nicol, 2012; West, 1995). This stereotype has transformed into the modern Sapphire, which is the Angry Black Woman who is sassy, mean-spirited, verbally assaults others, and comes off violent or mean (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Cade-Bambara, 1970; Fontaine, 2011; Jewell, 1993).

Additionally, Madison fought against the idea that Black women are intellectually inferior (Schoene, 2018). Madison said, “I take care of what I’m supposed to take care of, so I think the initially, they assumed that I was going to be something different than what I was.” This negative perception perpetuates Black women as susceptible to underperforming in academics and in the workplace and connects to stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Collins (2000) asserted that Black women are treated differently based on being Black and a woman, and often are deemed intellectually inferior. This notion of intellectual racial differences is a falsehood that was foundationally established among individuals. This effect creates isolation (Johnson, 2016) and undermines a sense of belonging (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Whitchurch, 2008). Therefore, participants felt they must work harder to prove their intelligence. Madison felt she had conquered this stereotype by excelling in her job, while being conscious of her behaviors and work ethic.

Many participants began their professional careers unsure of themselves, weighed down by the influences of a predominately White work environment. Empirical literature and theoretical works suggested that Black woman, as students and professionals, are often made to think they must demonstrate their worth by being overly concerned with proving their intelligence (Collins, 2000, 2009; Noguera, 2008; Patterson-Stephens & Vital, 2017; Schroer, 2013; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Sue et al., 2007; West, 1995). For support staff, their job titles may not control their sense of self, but it influences how others perceive them.

### **Black Titles Matter**

The next major category present in the data was Black Titles Matter, which demonstrated the participants’ experiences, thoughts, and feelings about the significance of their job titles and their job roles. As shown in the questionnaire, 41.66% of respondents

chose the Administrative Professional position title that best fit their job duties. In other countries, studies have found a growing discourse by HE staff regarding their professional practices and identities (Graham, 2009; Szekeres, 2006, 2011; Whitchurch, 2010). This finding confirmed participants preferred their title to be evaluated as Professional Staff (Sebalj et al., 2012), having their job title accurately reflect their work duties.

**Job title terminology.** The focused code of *nature of work* found in the job-profile review supports this category, defined as a generic description, which groups multiple levels of skill sets into the same job description. For example, both of the Office Support Assistant III and Office Support Assistant IV descriptions stated: “Provides general/routine administrative and office support that includes a broad range of duties.” These duties range from secretarial/clerical task to professional complex job duties. Participants believed their current job titles did not accurately reflect their work, leaving core functions of their daily workflows out of their job description and titles.

However, the Association for Tertiary Education Management (ATEM) first adopted “professional staff” to solely identify HE staff instead of using multiple terms (e.g., non-academic, general staff, administrator, manager, etc.) (ATEM Secretariat, 2009). Nevertheless, noted Whitchurch (2008), administrative support staff are not considered professional staff. She found that the Higher Education Staff Development Agency (HESDA) definitions of professional are executive/administrative/managerial, faculty (instruction and research,) and other professionals. While nonprofessional ranks include technical/paraprofessional, clerical/secretarial, skilled crafts, and service/maintenance. Participants stated that their *Job Titles Matter* and are related to their current job duties, career advancement, and respect.

Black Titles Matter category emerged from the data, which includes three subcategories: *Job Titles Matter*; *Doing the Dirty Work*; and *Promoted with Disrespect*. The *Job Titles Matter* subcategory refers to the demeaning, limited position of the HE support role. Job titles like Office Support Assistant, Administrative Assistant, Student Support Coordinator, and others are restricting and lack paths for advancement. Black women in these roles are often overqualified, exceeding the minimum educational background requirements and experience. The focused code of *clerical duties* in the job-profile review is defined in the document as tasks that include the incumbent to “greet visitors, answer phones, provide general information, route calls, sort mail, and schedule meetings.” The document outlined the technical aspect of all Office Support Assistant roles, despite the range in responsibility, education, or experience. All roles are reduced to these basic job functions in the documents.

For some participants, the job title does not actually reflect the work of the support staff person. Most of the participants describe their work as doing high level administrative, human resources, student-centered duties, far above the general clerical, menial task listed on their job descriptions. Moreover, due to their limited job titles, colleges and university HR departments are able to classify them at the lowest pay scale level, with little to no room for negotiation, raises, or promotions. For instance, Jaigh explained how her job title does not adequately describe what she does on a daily basis and how it kept her from advancing:

Working titles and HR titles matter. I say it matters because my HR title said I was the Office Support Assisant IV, however, my working title is Cashier’s Supervisor. I was not going to put Office Support Assistant IV on my resume because that’s not going to get me the job that I want. So of course it did matter. If it didn’t matter, I wouldn’t have changed it on my resume. It would have spoke for itself, which it didn’t...I am putting human resource supervisor. Again, that is going to give me the job I want. And I am not lying or anything, or making up this title, I am just stating what I do in a more conscise way and set myself up for the future.

Bria described how she advocated for her job title change in her recent promotion:

I would say job titles matter in higher education because when I served as Recruitment Coordinator, our associate director left and our director left, I stepped in. And at that time the title they had given me was Interim Assistant Director and I pushed for Associate Director. I feel like it would have made things easier when dealing with campus partners and the respect that came with the title, and they gave it to me. To me, I don't have to have a title, but it matters when I'm trying to push things forward and get things done, then yes, I have a respectable title and makes a difference.

Rene described her irritation with her job title and being referred to as secretary by a White male faculty member in her department:

I got called secretary all the time and it just irritated the mess out of me—*my* secretary. I think it was because it was possessive. It's the possessiveness in the wording, and that did not sit well with me. I feel I want to say, "I'm not your slave!" It limits me to a title and not to who I am. And also to say that if we think how these positions evolve honestly, to be the catch-all without the pay. You're devaluing me, you've already devalued me monetary wise, but now you're doing it symbolically, and that's not okay.

Rene shared her passion using her position at her university to earn an education and seek opportunities that advanced her from the support role:

I never looked at that this role as a job I had to do. I knew that it wasn't a career path. I don't see it as a career path. I know that there are associations for administrative professionals and things like that, but I was never a part of any of those things. One, because I didn't know where I wanted to be. And so my goal for entering higher education was strategic in regard to educational attainment, but I can understand that others might see it as a profession. I think that Black women shouldn't relegate themselves to an entry-level position as a career path. I think we just have so much more that we can obtain and have. I think it can be a stepping-stone in the higher education realm, to achieve much more. But I don't think that Black women should be entering into those roles in their early twenties and retiring out of them in their mid-fifties and early sixties.

These job titles often reflect tensions between support staff and academic faculty in higher education environments.

For decades, there have been tensions between academics/faculty and non-academic staff (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Bonk et al., 2006; Dobson, 2000; Sebalj et al., 2012; Szekeres,

2004; Whitchurch, 2009). Faculty are valued for their educational attainment, expertise, research, teaching, and service efforts. For support staff, we are invisible, perceived as the silent workers (Johnson, 2016). As a result, faculty versus staff tensions form among workers (Dobson, 2000). The devaluation of non-academic staff occurs as a result of being perceived as secondary to the academic staff within HEI's. Szekeres (2004) found that the role differentiation comes with different kinds of power and that the traditional role of staff does not capture the complexity of their roles today, with the ever-changing HE environment.

**Support staff role.** This study's data supported Costello's (2012) research finding that women in support roles are perceived to perform unimportant, menial tasks, invisible to the organization. In addition, Iverson (2009) supported the data in that women in support positions get caught in the *loyalty trap* staying in one place too long due to fear of career advancement or organizational climate, culture, and structure. Subsequently, support staff trapped in these roles have *sticky floor jobs*, meaning individuals employed in a job that is low-level and invisible, include clerical staff, administrative support workers, and paraprofessionals (Costello, 2012; Harlan & Berheide, 1994).

Co-researchers described experiencing barriers to advancement, but strategized other ways to advance. Many participants earned their degrees while taking advantage of reduced tuition expenses as a staff member at their institutions. This allowed them to attain their education for career advancement. Although Black women have rising levels of educational attainment (BLS, 2018), a majority of Black women are often hired in lower level positions (BLS, 2018). For Black women in HE, their occupational role conflates their intersectional identity. Rene illustrated this multifaceted-ism feeling devalued, discriminated, and disrespected. She said:

I feel I want to say, “I’m not your slave!” It limits me to a title and not to who I am. And also to say that if we think how these positions evolve honestly, to be the catch-all without the pay. You’re devaluing me, you’ve already devalued me monetary wise, but now you’re doing it symbolically, and that’s not okay.

Compared to White women, Black women are more likely to be segregated, hired into less desirable, lower-paying jobs, such as domestic helpers, health aids, and cashiers (Rosette et al., 2019). Of the Black women hired into administrative service occupations, their pay rate is significantly lower than that of their White female counterpart. Black women earned \$0.63 for every dollar of White men, which is significantly less than the \$0.79 that White women make for every dollar earned by White men (Catalyst, 2017; Rosette et al., 2019).

The intersectional oppression often exists through the stereotypical image of the Mammy. This study’s data confirmed the research that Black women are expected to be the servants of HE. Women of color take on large workloads, receive less pay, and experience a “concrete ceiling” (Davidson, & Davidson, 1997; Johns et al., 2019) as a barrier to advancement (Harley, 2008; Turner & González, 2011; Turner et al., 2008). Jaigh refused to put her support staff job title on her resume because she wanted to advance in her career. She explained why:

I was not going to put Office Support Assistant IV on my resume because that’s not going to get me the job that I want. So of course it did matter. If it didn’t matter, I wouldn’t have changed it on my resume.

This study’s data aligned with Hite and McDonald’s (2003) research and found that non-managerial women benefit from career planning to help them explore ways to maximize their potential, whether they stay in their current jobs or choose to move on. The data demonstrated the Mammy caretaker stereotype is embedded in the support role for Black women in HE, as there is an unspoken expectation to do the dirty work.

**Doing the Dirty Work.** *Doing the Dirty Work* is the second subcategory in the Black Title Matter core category. *Doing the Dirty Work* is defined as participants having the unspoken expectation to perform menial and janitorial duties, such as making coffee, cleaning the office kitchen area, and firing other employees; they are also often discredited for their work. Doing such tasks minimize the participants' skill levels and undermine their talents. The focused code *other duties as assigned* found in the job-profile document review is defined as a statement for administrative support roles owning responsibility for other duties not listed in their job descriptions, but serves a catch-all statement for undefined duties. According to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, the Classifier's Handbook describes "other duties as assigned" as "minor duties that are usually unimportant to the work operations, and change frequently" (p. 19). This means that incumbents are expected to assume responsibility for other duties as assigned, regardless of the skill level, background, or time one is given to complete these unnamed tasks, in addition to their stated job duties. This code connects with *Doing the Dirty Work* subcategory in that institutions are able to justify work duties that may be considered non-desirable work task. For instance, Rene described feeling pressured to cleaning-up after faculty members and make coffee:

So there's this expectation to make coffee and I was not a coffee drinker. So my first couple of days, one professor came into the suite and walked back and forth past the coffee maker and he would stop and look at it. He would take it off the top, look at it, and look at me. He never said anything to me. He did this for two or three days and then he would go into the main break room area and get his coffee. And so after about the third day, he came over and asked me about it and I said, well, I don't drink coffee, so why would I make coffee? I don't know how to make it. And nobody said anything to me about there needs to be coffee percolating over there. I assumed if you drink coffee here, then you know how to use it. So I guess it also goes back to the Mammy thing because it's this assumption too. Like they would eat their lunch in the staff area. We had the sink area and all of that. They would put their dishes in the sink and just leave them there. And I only wash dishes at my house. So that's stopped real quick because I am not washing the dishes nor making coffee.

Rene continued and described her frustration of the lack of advancement to her support role, and provided a historical rationale for the reason why Black women are treated so poorly:

You know, I can go elsewhere to be appreciated and it's a win-win for both the institution and myself. And that's been the problem—that's the history of Black women in White American society. You want us to raise your kids, nurse your children, deplete all of our natural physical body, as well as our talent. And then we can't go and expand those same things on ourselves and on our own families. And I'm at a point of no, it ain't gonna happen.

Jaigh shared her experiences of being a new hire and being asked to fire three employees.

She was not sure if she was asked because she was a Black woman, but she felt uneasy firing three people her first week at her new job:

When I first started, there were already three people that were on management's radar to fire. Guess who they sent in to fire those people? I was the young Black women and they were all White people that needed to go. And they sent me into fire them. They needed to be fired, but they didn't do it. So I came in and I had to do their dirty work. They whole entire staff was different less than a year of me being there...I don't know if it was just because I was the lucky one to get the position and get it or because of who I was. But the whole environment was completely toxic. It was right out the gate, it wasn't something that...you know how you start a new job and you are like oh okay, it may take me a few months to realize this is not for me? No, I pretty much realized right out the gate that it was a bad environment.

Jasmine shared how her White male supervisor constantly took credit for her work. She realized she was enabling him by covering for his poor work ethic.

There was an interesting dynamic that my former supervisor had. I felt like I was fine with him taking credit and running with my ideas. I just completely became tired of it. I started claiming my own ideas, speaking to leadership within the school about it. It caused conflict between me and my supervisor, because oftentimes he would not be prepared and he would not double-check things. He wanted to appear that he was leading, even though he was the reason why everything wasn't running smoothly. He didn't give me credit where credit was due. And so finally, when I stopped double-checking his work, and started speaking out, it caused conflict. I did not want to work under those conditions, because I felt like he was taking all credit for what I'm doing.

Their stories reflect how the Mammy stereotype is embedded in the African American female support role. A previously mentioned, the Mammy archetype originates from slavery

and depicts enslaved Black women as a trusted advisor and confidant, exclusively in service of White families while neglecting her own (Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Patton, 2004; Radu, 2013; Schroer, 2013; Seo & Hinton, 2009). The Doing the Dirty Work subcategory is appropriately titled as Rene, Jaigh, and Jasmine explained how they are expected to perform unspoken tasks that are demeaning.

Their experiences mirror the research that Black women in HE are often devalued in the academy with African American women metaphorically referred to as the maids of academe (Harley, 2008). The mistreatment of women of color in HE is subjected to gendered racism, and discrimination based on their racial-ethnic identity and gender (Brown et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2013). Thus, justifying African American women as organizational ‘mules’ going above and beyond their normal job duties (Johnson, 2016).

**Promoted with Disrespect.** One of the weaker subcategories, *Promoted with Disrespect*, was linked to the Job Titles Matter core category; nevertheless, its nuances merit discussion. Previously mentioned, participants reported having limited access to opportunities for advancement. Of the questionnaire respondents, 54.16% agreed their job title influences their professional identity. While this topic is under-researched in U.S. higher education environments, this finding is significant for generating theory. This is an indication that *Job Titles Matter* when it comes to sense of self for younger Black women in HE support roles. Although many participants had a difficult time being promoted, there were a few cases where participants were able to advance above the support role level.

The *Promoted with Disrespect* is defined as being recently promoted, due to a sudden vacancy or need in the department caused by other employees leaving the college or university. During this time, department leaders seek out support staff to take on an

additional workloads. Co-researchers stated that being given the extra workload is an unspoken expectation that they must accept. Additionally, this subcategory includes instances of participants being disrespected because of race, gender, and age. For instance, Jasmine received a recent promotion as the Assistant Director of Business School Programs at her institution; however, because of her age and appearance, one of her new colleagues assumed she was not competent:

I was brand new to the university and in a meeting where they made the assumption that because my outward appearance of looking young, they thought I was not experienced. And so I thought that was very interesting, but it's also disheartening to be in a situation like that. I had to assert myself and say, no, "I actually *do* know what I'm doing." And obviously in a professional way, but I had to assert that I *do* know what I'm doing.

Madison had been in her support role for six years. She was asked to fill a position that was suddenly vacant in her department in admissions. This department came under scrutiny of the university leadership for taking weeks to process student applications, as a result, losing applicants to other schools. Madison shared how she was promoted to a new position with disrespect:

I don't think they were expecting it, but my colleague just left. I mean she just said she was done, and I was the next up in that position. So my supervisor showed me everything that I needed to know and I was shocked that they asked me if I wanted the position. I just felt like if she wouldn't had left, they would've never promoted me. And that's what I told them when I got the promotion. I said, "I want to be honest and I really feel like you've never would have promoted me if she never would have left." And then the biggest slap in the face is [that in] the position that I left, they hired this person as the exact same promotion that I got. And I told them, "You know what? This is bullshit," and I told him that. I said, "So you're, pretty much telling me I wasn't shit." This is actually what I said to her. I said, "This is what you're telling me. So you're hiring somebody in the position that I was in, that I just got a promotion in? And you are telling me that is right?"

Madison explained once she started her new role, she learned it very quickly, within two weeks. She had been doing this work for the last six years in her support role all along, but

was never expected to do it until now. She explained how her supervisors and department reacted to her doing a great job so early in her new role:

And what's funny is they're like, "How did you do all this by yourself?" I'm like, I've been doing it really. And I told them, I said, "I feel like I should have been promoted a long time ago" and they're starting to see it. They're starting to see it now that all of the things that I was doing, I had already been doing before, and I had to learn another job. And I guess the feedback that they're getting from all the offices are, well, where was she before? ...When I say that it doesn't take me long to learn things, they were shocked at how I went into that role and mastered it. And like I said, I'm getting feedback from offices of how great I am. They're like, "Oh my God, you are so amazing." I can show you so many emails of these people are like, "Wait a minute, how is this? Where has she been?"

This confirms that HEI's rely on Black women to be the work-mule (Harely, 2008; Turner et al., 2008). As revealed in the questionnaire, over half of the respondents believed age had an influence on their work experiences. For the first time in history, millennials are the most diverse generational cohort (Crumpaker, 2007; Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Strauss & Howe, 2000). In the U.S., millennials already occupy the largest percent of the workforce (Sengupta, 2017). However, studies on Black female millennials are limited and their experiences are often grouped within the larger cohort. Black millennials may be susceptible to serving as office "pets" (Thomas et al., 2013, p. 276) rather than professionals in predominantly White environments (Thomas et al., 2013). They may be embraced for all the wrong reasons as pets are beloved, cared for beings, but are not seen as competent skilled in their area of expertise. Both Jasmine and Madison experienced this pet-tokenism status that may represent employees of color as superficial representations of diversity in their departments (Dickens et al., 2018; Holder et al., 2015). As younger Black women, these types of experiences shape our sense of self. Having a support system is vital for our survival and strength to keep moving on.

## **Black Support Matters**

The final category presented in the data is Black Support Matters. When asked what contributed most to their sense of self, 37.50% of respondents chose parents/family/community. Black Support Matters is defined as creating a sense of belonging through creating community support from other Black women in the HEI's. This category includes two subcategories: *Girl, I Need to Vent* and *Coping: How to Deal*.

**Girl, I Need to Vent.** This subcategory is defined as participants creating a sense of community by connecting with other Black women on their campuses. Participants shared the importance of being able to connect with other staff members and affinity groups, such as Staff Councils, staff associations, diversity committees, campus volunteer groups, and professional development activities. These campus support groups allowed participants to establish mentorships, friendships, and allies to help navigate their HE careers. This type of support system enables younger Black women to connect with others for a safe space to talk, vent, and share their experiences. Social support provides a sense of community for younger Black women who are often the *only-one* (e.g., only Black person, Black woman, young person, etc.) in their HE workspaces. For instance, Jaigh experienced feeling a sense of belonging once joining Staff Council. Being a part of a staff group allowed her to make connections with other people on campus:

Being in Staff Council is the only reason I met certain people. Otherwise, I would have never been in a space to know the people that I met. And thinking of those people in Staff Council, is where I'd seen those Black strong women leaders. So again, having to have to put myself out there to even be in that space to bump shoulders with those same people because again, higher education is so siloed, and the it's obviously a PWI, on top of that. It's just like more layers that is not allowing me to move forward to progress to where I am at.

Bey shared how mentorship helped her navigate the HE system by being involved on campus and making connections:

My advice for other younger Black women in support roles, is don't allow your role to limit the amount of professional development that you get. So for example, I didn't want just professional development or want to learn how to be a good assistant. I wanted to move from that role, I'm not staying in this role. And I knew even though I already knew how to operate a calendar, I needed to know more of the political system and more of the higher educational system. So I would say to others get involved with staff association, get involved with roles that don't box you into your current role. So I worked in groups like staff association, the diversity committee, those kind of things helped me. It helped people to see me beyond my role and have mentorship. I'm a huge advocate for mentorship, having a mentor, sponsor, or coach like I'm huge on that.

The data indicate that in order to combat racial disenfranchisement, Black women in the academy should form mentorships and empower themselves through networking (Henry & Glenn, 2009). Lawless (2017) found that support staff members who may be alienated and experience exclusion benefit from connecting with other colleagues. I also found most of my participants benefited from these types of connections.

Historically, a sense of shame and loneliness has been passed down from slavery, resulting in Black women being orphaned and abandoned (Patterson, 2004). Black women relied on each other by creating a sense of community as a means of survival. Group identity creates a sense of belonging (Nobles, 1973) and was developed as a coping mechanism that shaped Black women's sense of self in Patterson's (2004) study. For some of my participants, who are often the only Black woman and/or youngest person in their departments, a struggle over one's identity can lead to feelings of isolation (Burden et al., 2005; Fenelon, 2003; Hegedorn & Laden, 2000; Johnson, 2016). African American's women self-esteem is associated with strong social supports (Patterson, 2004). This racial-ethnic esteem is based on a collective identity, belonging to a racial-ethnic group (Brown et al.,

2013). Jaigh and Bey demonstrated having a sense of belonging once they connected to others Black women at their institution.

**Coping: How to Deal.** Co-researchers cope with racialized and gendered oppression within their HEI environments and *Coping: How to Deal* is key to their survival. As stated previously, some participants reported on experiencing microaggressions and blatant racist comments from co-workers and supervisors. Against the backdrop of the U.S.'s current political climate, respondents and co-researchers described how overt racism is revealed in the HE workplace. To cope with this climate, many ignored any political conversation as a form of protection. When asked how they reacted to recent racist and sexist attacks on Black women, 41.66% of the respondents chose neither positively nor negatively. Some respondents and participants refused to watch the news to avoid becoming angry or emotional.

The *coping* focused code identified in the questionnaire is defined as participants ignoring information about negative, racist, and sexist incidents as a form of protection. One respondent stated: "Black women are under attack; however, I feel like if I focus too much on it all the time I will be in a constant negative state of mind; I block it out of my mind." This sentiment was common amongst the participants. This is another way the younger generation of Black women differ from older generations. Some chose to ignore the negativity as a form of protection. However, some of the respondents and co-researchers are informed about the current political climate, and it angers them when they hear the latest racist, sexist headlines.

Subsequently, in dealing with racist or sexist comments, co-researchers connect with mentors, workgroups, and friends to help navigate the politics of HE. Bria experienced age discrimination and disrespect:

When I first started out, I would go to some of the leadership meetings. I'd be the only Black person in the meeting, and not only the only Black, but the only Black woman in the meeting. In one meeting, there was myself and another colleague [who] were on the same level, and our director wasn't there, but there was a PR person in the room that served in a leadership role in a different academic unit and he would not talk to us until the director stepped in the room. And so it was just like, wow, you answered the questions that that person had. I ended up answering my director and, she kept deferring to me. And I think race, title, and age had to do with everything.

Carol opened up about not realizing how angry she was until she worked with another Black women where they were able to talk and share with each other about their work experiences:

When I first started this job, I've never really worked with other Black women before and a girl who's a couple of years younger than me joined our team and we got to know each other and would talk...I did not realize how much I needed that until it happened. And then she moved up and since left and it's been really hard. But I didn't realize how much I needed that and how angry I was about a lot of stuff that I just can't ever talk about...because you just can't ever talk about it. That was rough.

Carol also found support with two older Black women in her college that would pray with her when negative comments were made about race.

I've had students that are like, "Why do we need African American history?" Like in my face. So they're saying blatantly racist stuff that I can't really talk about because people may accuse me of pulling the race card. So I usually go upstairs to the two Black ladies where I work, and talk to them about it, who are in their in their sixties, and they pray with me and I go back downstairs because I'm like I can't.

Madison coped by listening, but not reacting to racist or negative comments in her work environment:

I'm more observant and I listen more now instead of reacting because I can still see that there are some people who are politically and socially biased in a lot of the things. And I think me being quiet and not reacting when they say certain things is better, as long as they don't say anything too derogatory. I keep my mouth shut to

listen in and think, okay, they'll get it, but it's not just going to be from me. You know, I don't react to everything I hear.

Coping is a process that involves determining the meaning of the situation, assessing one's coping resources, carrying out the coping strategy, and evaluating its effectiveness (Hall et al., 2012; Smith & Carlson, 1997). African American women are able to overcome the oppression of racism, sexism, and economic exploitation resulting in a survival mentality and multiple consciousness (Byng, 1998; Collins, 1990; Gordon, 1987; King, 2016). When working with another Black female, Carol realized she was carrying repressed emotions; having someone to relate to her lived experiences was helpful. Coopers (2018) suggested that we are angry because we understand the pain of the Black women's struggle. Therefore, we hide; we mask and bear the burden of our silent struggles and invisible heartache (White, 1999). Carol also connected with two older Black women who are a part of the Baby Boomer generation. Carol found comfort venting to them and sought support through prayer. Relying on support from other Black women is also known as intergenerational survival, which is a womanist strategy that encourages mothering, dialogue self-help, and spirituality (Collins, 1998; Linday-Dennis, 2015).

***Mentoring.*** Forming mentoring relationships is another coping mechanism to combat issues around race, gender, and advancement. African American women experience mentoring differently, due to their double-oppressed identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Holmes, Land, & Hinton-Hudson, 2007). Holmes et al. (2007) contended that the historical legacy of race and gender oppression surrounding Black women in society and in higher education have been prevalent for decades, thus, finding that formal and informal mentoring relationships are beneficial for African American women in HE. Participants have benefited from mentoring relationships in various ways. For instance, Bey shared her experience:

I feel like as a younger professional, you really have to learn the politics of higher education. You have to learn the do's and don'ts. It's like you gotta play the game and if you don't play the game...I've seen it. I've seen people shoot themselves in the foot, especially young professionals. I've seen people interview for different positions three or four or five times because they even said something, they just didn't understand the concept of the higher educational political system...You then ticked off the wrong faculty member or you rubbed somebody the wrong way, who's higher up. Like it's just the reality of what you have to deal with, I'm sure in a profession, but especially in higher education. So I feel like that mentorship has been beneficial. I appreciate being mentored...I appreciate being mentored by these top level people, because they teach you the rules of the game. They teach you how to navigate that system.

Having a mentor benefited Bey because she received advice, avoided mistakes, and learned how to navigate through the HE political system. I too, have benefited from mentor relationships in similar ways. I have found that having several mentors addresses the many facets of my professional and personal life.

The data from this study confirmed the strong support systems that build African American women's confidence, leadership skills. Positive examples for living are established based on other women in the community who demonstrated how to deal with certain aspects of life (DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000). For African American women, affinity groups are sacred spaces to share, mentor, and connect with other women of similar backgrounds and experiences. Affinity groups promote diversity and create an inclusive organizational culture (Douglas, 2008). Together, these findings generate theory for African American millennials sense of self in HE support roles.

### **Summary**

Overall, the findings from this study generated new theory for African American millennials' sense of self for HE support roles. The Same, but Different Identity Theory revealed that many younger Black women deal with racial and gender oppression from the larger society, similar to the older generations; however, this cohort of diverse women

respond to oppression differently. Younger Black women have a variety of experiences that shape their sense of self, but come to know themselves with each experience. They empower themselves, acknowledging their strength may come with struggle, hurt, and pain. Their identity is not beholden to their job title, but strengthened by their strong sense of community. This qualitative study bridges the gap of the literature in several areas including, Black feminist theory, intersectionality, culture and identity theory, HE management, and generation theory. The next chapter will answer the research questions, report the implications of the findings, provide recommendations for future research, and conclude with final reflections.

## CHAPTER 6

### IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This heuristic grounded theory study was undertaken to generate theory related to sense of self for African American female millennials in HE support roles. Historical and cultural images of the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire have portrayed Black women as caretakers, hypersexual, and aggressive (Abrams et al., 2014; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016; West, 1995). Rooted in slavery, the notion of silence and masking pain was a part of the Black female slaves' lived experiences, which was subsequently passed down through generations and entered the mindsets of young Black women of today (Davis 1981, 2011; Harris-Perry, 2011; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016). Nevertheless, the spirit of survival and resiliency has been passed down from generation to generation. Black women stand at the intersections of race, class, gender, and other differences such as sexuality which may affect their lives. In this study, I examined African American female millennials and how these images and memories shape their sense of self in the modern-day HE workplace.

This interdisciplinary study adds to the literature on African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles. The results from this study generated new theory for sense of self for younger Black women in these roles. The Same, but Different Identity Theory includes four core categories, in the order of their frequency in the data:

1. Black Work Matters
2. Black Self Matters
3. Black Titles Matter
4. Black Support Matters

These major categories provide a lens for illuminating the sense of self for this diverse group of women. The focus of this chapter will answer the research questions, report on the

implications of the findings, provide recommendations for future research, and conclude with final reflections related to my research journey.

### **Answering the Research Questions**

Each question was addressed through an online mixed questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a job-profile document review. Through the use of quantitative and qualitative methods, I analyzed the data to generate new theory related to female African American millennials' sense of self in HE roles. The research questions guided the inquiry process and were useful in generating theory and identifying areas for future research. A synopsis of these findings aligned with the central question and sub-questions, is presented in this section. I first answer the sub-questions which subsequently address the central question: How do African American female millennials perceive their sense of self within higher education support roles? References to the 24 respondents reflect the open-ended questions from the mixed questionnaire. The nine interviewees are either referred to by their pseudonyms or as participants/co-researchers. Once the respondents consented to the interview phase of the study, they became co-researchers or participants. I was also able to trace co-researchers' participation in the mixed questionnaire and used their data, so sometimes co-researchers or participants are respondents as well.

#### **Sub-question One: How do African American female millennials define their sense of self?**

Black Self Matters and Black Support Matters addressed the first sub-question. The major category of Black Self Matters defined participants' sense of self as strong, confident, and loved; however, this self-valuation of the participants recognized the struggle, hurt, and pain that comes with being a Black woman. This core category indicated that overall

respondents and co-researchers take pride in possessing strength, innovation, and creativity.

Participants described their confidence in being a Black woman, but recognized that

deprivileges fuel their creativity. One respondent wrote:

There's nothing better than being Black and female. We've literally influenced style and culture and bring flavor to everything we do. We make things happen. I think because women have influence and Black women don't have privilege, so we have to be resourceful. They always say, "If you want something done, put a Black woman in charge."

As a reaction to this respondent, I recorded the following in my reflective journal:

*I too, take pride in being a Black woman. I am inspired when reading literature about my history and how my ancestors were leaders and innovators, all while overcoming oppression. This inspiration gives me confidence in knowing a spirit of resilience was passed down to me. Learning about my history grounds my sense of self, knowing I come from a strong people. (March 2, 2020)*

Yet, some participants shared that they experienced an identity crisis, unsure of who they are, propped up by superficial accomplishments. Other respondents wrote about the importance of being authentic to self. Rene wrote:

My definition of my sense of self is not just how I see myself, but also, prospectively where I want to be. There's elements I think of professionalism, as well as personal identity entangled in that...I have to be who I am. I have to be who I am showing up, in professional spaces, in order for me to organically and effectively have an impact...So sense of self for me requires having those elements of personal identity of my authentic self-reverberate through in order to not feel burnout.

In addition, the core category of Black Support Matters and the subcategories, *Girl, I Need to Vent* and *Coping: How to Deal* align to these varied experiences. By creating a sense of belonging through building a community of other Black women in their institutions, participants were able to find a support system to help navigate the HE system. Being connected to a community of other Black women grounds us in our identity and provides a safe place to be ourselves, speak our language, cry, laugh, and pray, and return to a world filled with many obstacles. Researchers have found that Black women tend to have higher

levels of self-esteem due to relational and familial environments (Brown et al., 2013; Patterson, 2004) and benefit from having a strong community base and social supports (Brown & Valk, 2010; Brown et al., 2013; Finnegan, 2018; Griffiths, 2010; Johnson, 2016; Thompson, 2017; Walker, 1983).

The core categories and subcategories were often consistent with literature on self-definition and self-valuation (Collins, 2000, 2009) and Black women's self-esteem (Bewley, 1977; Brown et al., 2013; DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000; Patterson, 2004; Simmons, 1978; Simmons et al., 1978; Simmons et al., 1973; Thomas & King, 2007). Overall, participants had a positive sense of self, yet recognized the challenges that come with being a Black woman in the larger society.

### **Sub-question Two: What images and stereotypes from the larger society shape their sense of self?**

The subcategory of *Fighting Stereotypes* found within the Black Self Matters core category was significant for shaping the participants' sense of self. These 15 respondents and nine co-researchers, who were also respondents for a total 24 women, embraced the SBW stereotype, but rejected the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire images of Black womanhood. I found that the SBW image served as a shield of protection from the other negative perceptions of Black womanhood. The SBW image depicts Black women as strong, independent, and confident. However, the mask of being strong does not allow us to show our vulnerabilities, weaknesses, or emotions. One respondent of the open-ended questionnaire stated:

Most of the female influences in my life are identified as Strong Black Women. I think they're a reflection of how I choose to move and identify in my adult life as they've taught me to always be able to stand on my own two feet and not ever depend on anyone else to provide my preferred lifestyle or make things happen in my career.

Another respondent wrote about how she fought against negative stereotypes:

For a long time, I thought that in order to be respected in a professional role, I had to fit one of the images and be an archetypal ‘caretaker’ or ‘strong Black woman.’ I’ve now grown into a space where I feel it’s okay for me to be me and for my identity to be fluid and incorporate some of these images as well as negate some of them. I feel that these images can often negatively dictate how people view me, but they can’t take away my own internal power.

The expectation of being strong can be motivational, but it can become harmful to our mental health and overall well-being (Abrams et al., 2014; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Mullings, 2006; Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Being comfortable with who we are, regardless of our environment is how we gain access to our internal power.

There is an assumption that Black women are not intelligent, competent, or capable of leading (Collins, 2009; Lorde, 2012; Noguera, 2008; Steele, 1990). These perceptions are rooted in racist stereotypes originating during the enslavement period (Abrams et al., 2014; Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016; West, 1995). While the data demonstrated that participants reject the Mammy, the Jezebel stereotypes, I found the stereotype they most often fought against was the Angry Black Woman. This stereotype originated from the Sapphire stereotype and depicts Black women as angry, aggressive, and abusive (Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Nicol, 2012; West, 1995). Respondents and co-researchers battled this stereotype in several ways. They shift their tone, body language, and/or attitudes to fit societal expectations. Making these adjustments can diminish their sense of self, masking who they truly are, which can become mentally exhausting.

Respondents and participants believe if they work harder, they will be acknowledged as professionals and perceived in positive ways. Many support staff claimed they work harder, attempting to prove to their colleagues they are professional, which lead to negative

outcomes like burnout (Harley, 2008) or being silenced (Johnson, 2016; Sebalj et al., 2012; Shahjehan & Yasir, 2016). Collectively, Black women understand that we must work hard and strive for excellence in everything that we do, because we are expected to fail.

Although, we understand how negative stereotypes may influence how others perceive us, each generation learns to adapt, resist, and ‘talk back’ against the dominant White culture (hooks, 1989, 2015). Scholar, bell hooks (1989, 2015), coined the term *talking back* as an expression of a liberated voice, speaking as an equal to those in power. A culture of resistance is often used by marginalized groups and operates under a combined set of values that differentiates from the dominant culture. Subsequently, African American women of the millennial generation experience oppression due to their intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1989), and the data revealed how they respond to adversity.

With the advancement of technology, younger Black women are able to raise their voices in online community spaces, which promote unity and a sense of belonging. As discussed in Chapter 5, the core categories of Black Work Matters, Black Self Matters, Black Titles Matter, and Black Support Matters were inspired by the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements, which are examples of how Black women can lead a generation by “talking back” (hooks, 1989, 2015) and liberating their voices. A respondent wrote about Black women’s collective voice:

Yes! I believe we are the strongest beings. We have never been shy about using our voice, our pen, our bodies, and our minds to get things done. Those traits were passed down from our ancestors like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Maya Angelou, and others like them.

Younger Black women have learned from the tragedies and triumphs of our foremothers and forefathers, and have created new ways to respond to oppression. Some choose to disengage

as forms of protection from being hurt, fearful, or judged; however, many elect to speak up, set boundaries, and work to improve conditions for themselves and others.

Their expressions and experiences related to sub-question two were consistent with the literature related to recognizing and combating stereotypes (Abrams et al., 2014; Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016; West, 1995), practicing resistance (hooks, 1989), and using our voices (Johnson, 2016; Sebalj et al., 2012; Shahjehan & Yasir, 2016). Most respondents and participants found ways to fight against being stereotyped; however, many claimed to embrace the more positive aspects of being a Black woman. Through the analysis of the multiple data sets, it was apparent that both accepted being strong, but acknowledged that this expectation can be harmful to their overall well-being. However, younger Black women are comfortable using their voices in new ways to speak up against oppression.

**Sub-question Three: In what ways are their professional identities shaped by their sense of self?**

Black Work Matters through the subcategory of *Professional Identity* and the core category of Black Titles Matter addressed the third sub-question. The data indicated that younger Black women's professional identities are shaped by various experiences. They view their professional identities as positive, hard-working, collaborative, and student-centered. As previously noted, many of the participants voiced that their identities are shaped by home/family/communities, and others are shaped by their past and current work experiences. When asked how they define their professional identities, most participants mentioned their professional identities are closely related to their personal identities. Bria shared her thoughts about her professional identity as connecting to her sense of self:

When it comes to being a leader, my credentials doesn't necessarily play a part, but to me it's the experiences and how I lead, and how I serve. And so that's similar to who I am as my sense of self...I am inclusive, I'm very transparent...and that's how I try to lead, which is by example.

Black Titles Matter appeared to shape the participants' experiences, thoughts, and feelings about the significance of their job titles and roles. Researchers have found millennials to be well educated (Fry, 2014; Singleton, 2018) and Black women to have rising levels of educational attainment (BLS, 2018). The questionnaire data supported this finding in that 100% of the co-researchers earned a college degree or beyond. Most had earned master's degrees. However, Black women's advancement opportunities are often limited due to systematic racial and gender oppression (Catalyst, 2004; Collier, 2018; Harley, 2008; Turner, & González, 2011; Turner et al., 2008).

Younger Black women support roles in HE may not influence their sense of self, but the impact of being constantly denied opportunities for advancement may be significant to their identity. Sebalj et al. (2012) found that higher support staff titles were often demeaning terminology and their job descriptions did not describe the breadth and depth of work roles or accountabilities nor supported critical thinking and analysis work tasks. Similarly, many respondents and participants confessed that their job titles were demeaning and did not encompass their professional work duties and limited them in pay and career opportunities. As a result, this leaves both stuck in low-level positions and/or considering leaving HE altogether. The document review revealed that the majority of the nine participants performed clerical duties, but their education exceeded the required minimum educational background for these low-level positions. One questionnaire respondent wrote about her work experiences: "Black women are always the ones taking notes at meetings, offering to

clean up office space, or being the unofficial caretaker of a space (i.e., me being ‘in charge’ of keeping the print room clean).” Another respondent recorded:

I feel like there is room to grow and thrive at work, but that rarely translates into actual growth and opportunities. I feel ignored and fear speaking up in meetings because I am so “different.” Most of my colleagues are Caucasian and from the area where I live. I am a foreigner and Black. I speak differently, and I fear to bring my true self to work. I see other peers (Caucasian and Asian) being listened to and given better opportunities although they have the same qualifications as I do.

The lack of advancement opportunities intertwines, compounded by complex issues of race, class, and gender (Crenshaw, 1989; Eck, 2018; Fontaine, 2011; Harris-Perry; 2011; Jewell, 1993, 2012; Patton, 1994; Turner & González, 2011; West, 1995). Many of the day-to-day work experiences of interview participants include experiencing microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007; Holder et al., 2015). The data showed that interviewees perceived the political climates of their institutions were worse since the 2016 U.S. Presidential election of Donald Trump, and they had experienced blatant racism more than ever before in their lifetime. The Same, but Different Identity Theory reinforces this claim as older generations have battled these issues, and have found ways to cope, survive, and thrive. However, a large number of the younger generation, specifically millennial African American women, are experiencing oppression for the first time in an overt manner, and respond to it differently, ranging from ignoring it to starting worldwide social campaigns.

The findings for sub-question three were consistent with the literature on demeaning job titles commiserate with low-level tasks and how they influence career advancement (Colbeck, 2008; Sebalj et al., 2012; Hall, 1996), in addition to racial and gender oppression (Catalyst, 2004; Collier, 2018; Harley, 2008; Turner, & González, 2011; Turner et al., 2008). These core categories and subcategories provided a new perspective on how this group of younger Black women define their sense of self in HE support roles. The Black Work

Matters category was formed from data that suggested younger Black women in HE support roles are hard-working, desire advancement in their careers, and will use their voices to combat oppression.

How do African American female millennials define their sense of self? What images and stereotypes from the larger society shape their sense of self? In what ways are their professional identities shaped by their sense of self? These three sub-questions helped to address the central question of the study captured in the next section.

**Central Question: How do African American female millennials perceive their sense of self within higher education support roles?**

Younger Black women have an ever-evolving sense of self. Their various experiences shaped their self-concept with influences from family, community, and strong social supports (Brown et al., 2013; Garrin & Marcketti, 2018; Patterson, 2004). African American women's identities are shaped as a collective ethos and create culture (hooks, 1991). In other words, their collective identities serve to connect with larger social movements, bounded together by a shared identity and cultural events (Garrin & Marcketti, 2018; Whittier, 1997).

Respondents and participants shared their experiences about what it means to be Black and female, demonstrating strength and pride. Nevertheless, they recognize their lived experiences as Black women are often entangled with hurt, pain, and struggle (Cooper, 2018; Davis 1981, 2011; Harris-Perry, 2011; Taylor-Lindheim, 2016). Having a community base gives these women a sense of belonging where they can draw strength and support.

The core categories and subcategories culled through initial focus coding discovered support staff as well educated, competent, and efficient in their roles. Respondents and co-researchers viewed their professional identities as positive, hard-working, and collaborative

with many going above their job expectations and excelling in their roles. In addition to their skills and talents, many respondents and participants desired to advance in their careers, but were often met with racial, gender, and/or occupational barriers to advancement opportunities. Being involved in staff groups, networks, and mentorships allowed respondents and participants to navigate the politics of HE more easily. However, the way younger Black women respond to their adversity is different as revealed in core categories and subcategories. This revelation guided my generation of theory captured in my journal:

*As a result of theorizing, I was able to generate the Same, but Different Identity Theory that captured the sense of self for younger Black women and their connection to similar struggles of previous generations of Black women, who endured racial and gendered oppression, along with classism. (March 2, 2020)*

This theory has four core categories, nine subcategories, and three focused codes. The first core category is Black Work Matters with two subcategories of *Professional Identity* and *Young, Black, and Talented*; the second core category is Black Self Matters with two subcategories of *Empowered Struggle* and *Fighting Stereotypes*; the third core category is Black Titles Matter with three subcategories of *Job Titles Matter*, *Doing the Dirty Work* and *Promoted with Disrespect*. Focused codes are included in *Job Titles Matter* subcategory; the focus codes were *professional staff*, *nature of work*, and *clerical duties*; and the fourth core category is Black Support Matters with subcategories of *Girl, I Need to Vent* and *Coping: How to Deal*. The Same but Different Identity Theory implies a number of ways HEI's can provide leadership for supporting the growth and development of African American millennial women through transformational leadership and key strategies for change.

### **Implications of the Findings**

This study sought to uncover the sense of self for African American female millennials in HE support roles. The storyline of the Same, but Different Identity Theory

discussed in Chapter 5, and the concluding responses to the research questions in the previous section illuminated important implications for younger Black women's sense of self in these roles. I provide implications of the findings for HE administrators that can improve career choices and lived experiences of this diverse group of women. Implications of the findings, communicated through the storyline of the theory, suggest transformation of the HE culture to support excitement and energy within these institutions. I have identified six key areas based on the findings: (1) transformational leadership; (2) understanding sense of self for African American millennial women; (3) valuing and reclaiming their voices; (4) removing obstacles to advancement; (5) establishing mentoring relationships; and (6) identifying support strategies.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Burns (1978) coined the term transformational leadership to entice leaders in the corporate and business world to question traditional hierarchical forms of leadership and power and consider more democratic forms of leadership that reflect values and beliefs, a sense of mission, and giving attention to individual needs. Transformational leadership was taken up by others in the educational community and applied to PreK-12 schools (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Hallinger, 2007; Johnson, Uline, & Perez, 2017; Sergiovanni, 2000, 2007), but have significant implications for post-secondary schools. The transformation of institutions of HE begins with its leaders. In order to change the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of the organization, there must be a reflective process around organizational culture. Sergiovanni (2000) asserted:

To create transformation change within organizations leaders must step outside of the situation, make sense of it, and reframe... This reframing results in a cognitive shift that provides an opportunity for leaders to change their actions plans as a better way to understand the problem. (p. 121)

He also viewed management literature as conceptualized by and for males that focus on “internal criteria for excellence and individual success rather than community building” (Sergiovanni, 2007, p. xii) exposed by feminist literature. He explained in an interview, “Well as a group, women tend not define success and achievement that way. They are more concerned with community and sharing” (p. xii).

Further, Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) described transformational leadership as including the following activities for organizational learning and change: (a) Setting direction by instilling a shared vision and compelling goals; (b) Promoting a trusting and caring work environment and culture; (c) Holding high performance expectations and developing individuals through direct and indirect support; (d) Developing the organizational conditions, (structures, processes, and culture), to facilitate teaching and learning; and (e) Developing collaborative decision-making structures. Collectively, these activities help educational leaders reflect on the change process and take actions. Transformational leaders foster a level of higher intrinsic motivation, instill loyalty among followers, and create new visions for the future (Sadeghi & Pihie, 2012). Thus, transformational leaders are vital to the success of the organization including individuals. Successful colleges and universities must address the needs of their most vulnerable populations of young Black females as rising leaders within the organization. I describe implications for change beginning with sense of self.

### **Sense of Self for African American Millennial Women**

A major implication of the findings is that younger Black women have an ever-evolving sense of self. Participants take pride in who they are, and are empowered as a collective group. However, respondents recognize the struggle and pain that comes with being a Black woman. Nevertheless, with each experience, younger Black women’s sense of

self evolves, transforming into strong and resilient women. Many respondents and participants shared feelings of being connected to the survival of their foremothers, and looked to their resistance, leadership, and creativity as inspiration.

My interactions with the words of respondents and co-researchers raised several feelings about my own survival. I recorded these feelings in my reflective journal and wrote:

*As a researcher who identifies with my participants, I found that many of their experiences closely related to mine. In my definition of sense of self, I have evolved into a woman who recognizes the power of my strength. I use my power to establish rules of engagement, setting boundaries for myself and others as a standard of mutual respect. This is a recent evolution after my experiences of being in, and getting out of, a controlling marriage. At the time, I was not aware how I allowed another person to control my decisions and my voice. Once becoming a mother, I realized that my voice was my power, and it was necessary for survival. One day, I took it back—I left with my young child and found strength and bravery inside of me. The lessons learned from this experience stay with me—in every space I enter. (March 9, 2020)*

Therefore, I frame my sense of self in strength and courage—I will never allow anyone to take my voice again.

### **Valuing and Reclaiming their Voices**

Another key implication is the way younger Black women continue to be silenced in predominantly White workspaces such as HEI's. Audre Lorde (2007) explained the lived experiences of Black women in larger society as insider versus outsider phenomena and discussed oppression as a barrier within the intersectional construction of difference in their lives (Collins, 2000). With support from a community of others concerned with their success, they can reclaim their voices.

In my experience as a support staff member, I worked in a department where I had the freedom to create, improve, and implement workflow processes that benefited the unit. I supported ten faculty members who were predominately Black and female. These influential women made it their effort to include me in meetings and important discussions that would

affect the department. I felt supported, encouraged, and validated. The data showed that respondents and participants were overall satisfied with their work experiences at their institutions. One respondent wrote, “I bring a unique perspective to my team. I like to think (I’m probably in denial because I’m 30 now), that I’m not too much older than our students, and also I’m Black. I’m often a voice for both.” Yet, for many respondents and participants, this was not the case.

A few respondents and participants described experiences of being silenced, not taken seriously, disrespected, and relegated to menial tasks. One respondent stated, “I experience feelings of being invisible and unheard. If I do speak, I have to be ready to defend EVERYTHING because my co-workers will definitely ‘rip’ any ideal I have apart.” Although a few shared how they speak up to their supervisors and leaders, a majority of support staff do not. Some respondents and co-researchers were met with opposition when trying to get involved with campus committees, and staff groups. A few support staff claimed experiences of hyper-surveillance by their non-Black supervisors and colleagues, monitoring their time at work more closely. Others were told they could not participate in campus activities outside of their offices. Although support staff may be satisfied in their positions, some are often silenced, while others are able to speak out.

### **Removing Obstacles to Advancement**

Younger African American women are confident in who they are, but are often met with systematic oppression, due to their intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1989). These barriers can create obstacles to career advancement. Johnson (2016) conducted a study of African American staff experiences at a PWI’s and found that participants experienced obstacles to advancement, due to lack of career opportunities, isolation, and discrimination.

Questionnaire data revealed all of the respondents and interview participants possessed either Associate in Arts degrees, bachelor's, or graduate degrees, were overqualified for their positions, and desired career advancement in HE. During the interview phase of this study, I met three participants who were recently promoted to positions above the support role. Two were promoted to associate director positions, and the third participant was promoted to Student Support Specialist. However, these three women expressed they were met with jealousy from non-Black colleagues and were discredited for earning their positions. They felt people perceived that their positions were unearned and/or that they had been promoted because of their race and affiliations with higher level administrators.

My journal entrée reflected connections to their experiences of being promoted and how my mentors supported my educational and career goals.

*I found it important to include the experiences of support staff who were recently promoted; however, the majority of participants remain in their support roles. For these women, many feel undervalued, invisible, and ignored. During the time of this study, I too have since been promoted from my support role to an Associate Director position. I would have not been able to obtain this position without earning educational credentials and having the support of mentors. (Reflective journal, March 13, 2020)*

Mentoring is a powerful strategy for supporting the goals and aspirations of African American millennial women. Sometimes this requires multiple mentors.

### **Establishing Mentoring Relationships**

The importance of establishing mentoring relationships with others, who are knowledgeable and share similar interests, is significant to the success of younger Black women. In my grounded theory study, both respondents and participants were positively influenced by developing mentor relationships. Some expressed having older Black women as their mentors, providing them support that was familial and encouraging. This finding is

consistent with the research of Collier (2018), and the Catalyst report (2004) that both suggested mentoring as a support to overcome difficulties for African American women in predominately White work environments. In search of professional and personal support, respondents and interviewees shared examples of how they formed support systems, mentoring relationships, and friendships with other support staff and professionals. One respondent wrote, “I always find a mom or mentor who is willing to show me the unwritten rules of an organization.” McCarther et al. (2012) suggested that mentoring relationships foster feelings of safety, trust, and accountability. These relationships establish a strong support system to navigate the HE system. Mentoring must also be a two-way function within the organizations. Young Black women should consider being mentors to other staff members or students. African American women must be responsible for one another and provide a network of support.

### **Identifying Support Strategies**

Since the 2016 U.S. election of President Donald Trump, a large number of respondents and interview participants stated that the political climate has been much worse. For example, in 2018, President Trump, publicly insulted three African American journalists, Abby Phillip, April Ryan, and Yamiche Alcindor, during a White House briefing. He referred to their line of questioning by name-calling, using terms like “stupid,” “loser,” and calling their questions, “racist.” He insulted the youngest of the three, Abby Phillip, age 29, stating, “She doesn’t know what the hell she is doing” (Farhi, 2018, November 9). This disrespectful and racist behavior may embolden others to behave the same way, thus creating negative cultural and political environments within their institutions.

For the first time in their lives, millennials are experiencing blatant racism and discrimination at new levels. For African American women, we survive by coping with systematic oppression in many ways. One of these coping mechanisms is to build social support networks. Researchers have found that Black women benefit from social support through communities of Black women, as well as other men and women of color (Barker, 2007; Davis, 2018; Garrin & Marcketti, 2018; Ogbar, 2019). They also benefit from White allies who have helped to pave the way for them (hooks, 2003; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004; McCarther et al., 2012; Stanley & Lincoln, 2005). Joining professional organizations, affinity groups, campus committees, and volunteering within the community can also help to build support strategies for navigating the HE environment. Creating these spaces can assist younger Black women to identify support strategies that instill confidence, leadership skills, and a sense of belonging. Moreover, they are able to establish safe spaces to discuss their experiences with others who share their identity and lived experiences and have their interests at heart.

Conversations with co-researchers offered several additional support strategies for advancement within higher educational institutions.

- Ensure you take advantage of educational benefits, professional development programs, and other growth opportunities afforded to you as an employee.
- Find someone you trust to help navigate the HE system which is pivotal to your professional development and career advancement.
- Consider ways you can be creative in your role. Request to work on projects of interest outside your normal work duties.

- Engage in job shadowing in other areas of your institution and work on research projects or organize faculty, staff, or students for philanthropic causes to enhance your skill set.

If implemented, these key areas suggested by the findings, understanding sense of self for African American millennial women, valuing and reclaiming voices, removing obstacles to advancement, establishing mentoring relationships, and identifying support strategies may transform the climate and environment for African American millennial women in HEI institutions and have implications for other communities of color.

Overall, the theory generated from this study, Same, but Different Identity Theory, provides unique perspectives of a diverse group of women who have struggled to define their sense of self in HE support roles. The study uncovered new theory that bridges the gap of the literature on Black female millennials' sense of self. HEI's can learn from this study in that younger Black women are capable, competent, and desire to advance beyond menial support roles. Several recommendations are offered to transform the climate and work environment for these women and other women of color who also may struggle with being valued within dominant White HEI's.

### **Recommendations for Transforming Climate and Culture**

Given the unit of analysis of sense of self for African American millennial women in HE support roles, I have identified six recommendations for transforming the climate and work environment that will hopefully lend to satisfaction and goal attainment for support staff. The recommendations may lead to more inclusive environments for this diverse group of women other communities of color.

### **Recommendation 1 - Enhancing Hiring Practices/Job Postings**

Studies have shown that African American women experience racial and gender barriers in career advancement (Catalyst, 2004; Harley, 2008; Johnson, 2016; Turner, & González, 2011; Turner, González, & Wood, 2008). Enhancing hiring practices can increase the number of African American women to advance from their support roles. The job postings should include inclusive language to welcome a diverse pool of applicants. Posting should also acknowledge education and/or professional work experiences as viable considerations to remove barriers during the selection process (Dimmitt, 2004; Johnson, 2016; Mertz, 2011; Smith, 2010).

### **Recommendation 2 - Creating Inclusive Environments**

Institutions of HE can benefit from creating inclusive environments. Douglas (2008) found that everyone in an organization should have the same advantages including: (1) a voice that is heard; (2) access to the information necessary for success; (3) productive links to other co-workers and management; (4) the chance to contribute; and (5) the opportunity to advance professionally. Creating inclusive environments will allow ongoing discussions around equity, diversity, and inclusion in departments and units. The HR and diversity offices can partner in launching an inclusive dialogue forum, where facilitators lead sessions to discuss courageous topics and issues around race, gender, class, implicit biases, microaggressions, homophobic behavior, xenophobic racism, and generational differences (Glass, Wongtrirat, & Buus, 2015; Mishchenko, 2013; Strange & Banning, 2001).

### **Recommendation 3 - Millennial Career Advancement Program**

By 2025, millennials will compromise nearly 75% of the world's workforce (Sengupta, 2017). In the U.S., millennials already occupy the largest percent of the workforce

at 79% (BLS, 2018; Sengupta, 2017). As emphasized in the literature review, Black millennials, ages 21-36, are overrepresented in domestic, clerical, and health care services at 73% (BLS, 2018). For office support administrative positions, young White women at ages 21-36, occupy 76% percent of these positions (BLS, 2020). HEI's should consider creating a career advancement and leadership development program, specifically for young women of color in HE support roles who may experience occupational segregation. In addition, African American support staff often times become stagnant in their roles, and have little to no advancement or promotion opportunities (Catalyst, 2004; Harley, 2008; Johnson, 2016; Turner, & González, 2011; Turner, González, & Wood, 2008). To address this problem, a career advancement program can provide a clear path for younger support staff to be promoted beyond their support role.

#### **Recommendation 4 - Affinity Group/Networking Opportunities**

Studies have shown that African American women can benefit from social networking by participating in affinity groups that can reduce feelings of isolation at their institutions (Briscoe & Safford, 2015; Johnson, 2016). Many HEI's have established affinity groups/network opportunities for their staff and employees. However, younger Black women in support roles, are often the “glue” of their departments and may not be *allowed* to take time away to join affinity groups or networking opportunities (Costello, 2012; Rosette et al., 2019). To this point, HE administrators should encourage support staff to be a part of the larger campus community as it provides a sense of belonging for women of color who may work in predominantly White workspaces.

### **Recommendation 5 - Mentorship Programming**

Henry and Glenn (2009) found that Black women in the academy should form mentor relationships to combat racial discrimination and oppression. They also suggested that participating in mentor relationships fosters professional development and empowerment of one another (Henry & Glenn, 2009). HEI's should implement formal mentorship programs to promote peer relationships amongst staff members. Campuses often have mentorship programs for faculty and students (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; McCarther et al., 2012). In the same way, support staff should have a formal mentorship program that will cultivate professional relationships with staff, teach the unwritten rules of the campus, and build a support to help navigate the HE system.

### **Recommendation 6 - Supervisor Training**

For the first time in history, millennials are the most diverse generational cohort (Crumpaker, 2007; Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Strauss, & Howe, 2000), and are increasingly the largest percent of the workforce (BLS, 2018; Sengupta, 2017). This diverse population of workers includes African American women. Due to this increase of young professionals, HEI's should create a mandatory supervisor training on cultural diversity. The purpose of this training is for supervisors to become more knowledgeable about the experiences of people of color. This should be required for all faculty and mid-level staff who supervise support staff. This training can be required for new supervisors and all supervisors, every two years. This program can provide incentives for supervisors and faculty who complete this ongoing training.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study uncovered the sense of self for African American millennial women in HE support roles. While the data shed light on this topic, there is certainly a need for more research related to HE support staff, especially for younger African American women and their sense of self. There are several studies on African American women faculty, students, and administrators (Aguirre, 2000; Collier, 2018; Davis, 2009; Guiffrida, & Douthit, 2010; Harley, 2008; Henry & Glenn, 2009; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Jones, Dawkins, McClinton, & Glover, 2012; Manley, 2015; Robinson, 2012); yet, these studies can be enriched by including the voices of younger Black women in HE support roles. This study helped me discover the sense of self for African American female millennials in these roles; however, there is a need for future studies that can be enhanced by:

- Investigating other aspects of younger Black women's sense of self and their intersectional identities as it relates to their gender identity, sexual orientation, and individuals living with a disability and/or mental illnesses, among other identities.
- Increasing the number of participants, by opening up the study to other job roles in HE, in addition to broadening the geographical research location to areas where there is a denser population of Black people. For example, conducting a study in the southwest or southeastern regions of the U.S.
- Conducting a comparative analysis study on sense of self of younger Black women in support roles at historically Black colleges or universities (HBCU) compared to younger Black women at PWI's.
- Increasing the number of qualitative research studies adding to the body of knowledge of younger Black women in HE support role. This could include

observations of support staff in their natural settings or/and a series of focus group interviews, where participants share their experiences with each other.

### **Final Reflections**

There is a lack of research conducted on African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles. As a heuristic qualitative researcher, I share a unique experience as I viewed my participants as co-researchers. By engaging in this research, I have uncovered the sense of self for my respondents and participants, but also I reflect on my own sense of self. Born and raised in Southern California and moving to the Midwest as a young adult, I have a different positionality from some of my participants based on geography. However, I closely identified with their experiences being a younger Black woman with similar influences of sense of self, having been raised by loving parents, maternal and paternal grandparents, and supported by a host of other Black women, family members and friends. I share with them feelings of self-love, empowerment, and being nurtured by mothers, grandmothers, and other positive female figures in my life. Like my co-researchers, I have experienced racial oppression, microaggressions, and self-doubt. Similar to them, my sense of self is ever-evolving with each life experience, whether it's earning a degree, living on my own, getting married, starting a new job, experiencing pregnancy and birth, or leaving an abusive home. With each of these experiences, I had women who supported me along the way to validate experiences and my voice (Collins, 2000), all connected to sense of self.

Like other younger Black women, I feel a kinship with them for advancing the culture, becoming strong in who we are as a collective. With the social media hashtags #BlackGirlMagic #MelaninPoppin, and evolved images in the media of Black womanhood, such as, awkward Black girl, Black women in science, technology, engineering, and

mathematics (STEM), among other areas—we are telling our own stories. We must continue to promote ourselves in this light to remind each other how remarkable we are. Our collective identity is crucial to the development of an individual sense of self. We are a people of rich culture, and in many ways African American millennial women are advancing that culture, making it acceptable for younger generations to celebrate their full authentic selves.

Finally, conducting this research has changed me in many ways. Throughout this process, I struggled with self-doubt. I doubted my abilities, intellect, and commitment to the process; there were many days I wanted to give up. Evolving into a Black feminist qualitative researcher was someone I never expected to become. I initially wanted to conduct a study on support staff professional identity which felt safe and less vulnerable. However, after guidance from my mentors and reading the literature on Black feminist theory, a fire was ignited in me, and I knew I needed to study younger Black women's sense of self.

Understanding how Collins (2009) explained self-definition and valuation, supported by faith beliefs, providing confirmation through a biblical scripture, “a man thinketh, so is he”—or should I say *She*? Reading Patricia Collins, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and many others Black feminist scholars for the first time, felt like coming home. I cried reading the painful experiences of Black women in slavery; yet at the same time, looking internally, I realized the strength and resiliency that has been passed down to me. Knowing this, empowered me to rid my mind of self-doubt and uncertainty regarding my skills. I grew intimately and quietly, feeling like a pregnant woman knowing her time. It is my time. I have my voice. I have my knowledge. I have my life. This experience has led me to this point of knowing myself, accepting who I am—I am Black. I am a woman. I am strong. I am loved. I am empowered.

## APPENDIX A

### Definition of Terms

To define the study's scope and provide clarity on African American female millennials' sense of self in HE support roles, it is necessary to define key terms in the context of this investigation.

The following terms are defined for the reader:

**African American or Black:** Occurs interchangeably in this study and describes a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as Black or African American (Census. gov., 2020).

**Higher Education Institutions:** "Four-year institutions that award Bachelors, Masters and Terminal degrees...This term might be used interchangeably with colleges or universities" (Johnson, 2016, p. 17).

**Lived Experiences:** Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014) explained that lived experiences are, "the result of any transaction between people and the world, emphasizing the subjective significance of the situation on the person....the subjective side of culture – mediates and organizes behaviors" (p. 33).

**Millennials:** Also known as Generation Y and come from the cohort group of children born between 1982 and 2005 (Singleton, 2018; Strauss & Howe, 2000; Tulgan, 2009).

**Professional Identity:** One's identification with an occupational group as it relates to their association with labels for social positions or roles (Burke, 2003).

**Sense of Self:** One's personal self-worth, knowing their true self, grounded in their beliefs, values, and experiences (Collier, 2018; Hatcher, 2007).

**Support roles:** Individuals employed at higher education institutions as administrative support in the areas of academic administration, student administration, finance, human resources, marketing, public relations, business development, library, information technology, capital or property supporting students, faculty, and administrators; non-teaching and non-research roles (Johnson, 2016; Szekeres, 2004).

## APPENDIX B

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

#### **Concise Summary**

In general, we would expect that to satisfy § \_\_.116(a)(5)(i), the beginning of an informed consent would include a concise explanation of the following:

- (1) the fact that consent is being sought for research and that participation is voluntary;
- (2) the purposes of the research, the expected duration of the prospective subject's participation, and the procedures to be followed in the research;
- (3) the reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts to the prospective subject;
- (4) the benefits to the prospective subject or to others that may reasonably be expected from the research; and
- (5) appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to the prospective subject.

As a general matter, a brief description of these five factors would encompass the **key information** most likely to assist a reasonable person (or legally authorized representative) in understanding the reasons why one might or might not want to participate in research, as required by § \_\_.116(a)(5)(i) and § \_\_.116(a)(4).

#### **KEY INFORMATION**

You are being asked to take part in this research study because you are employed in a support role at a higher education institution. Research studies are voluntary and only include people who choose to take part. The purpose of this research is to generate theory related to sense of self for African American female millennials in higher education (HE) support roles. The total amount of time you would be in this study is 1-2 hours. During your participation you will be involved in an interview on topics of sense of self, race, gender, age, and identity and job satisfaction. Taking part in this research involves the following risks or discomforts: emotional and/or mental discomfort. Taking part in this study includes no benefits to you for taking part in this study. You have the alternative of not taking part in this study.

Please read this consent form carefully and take your time making your decision. As the researcher(s) discusses this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words

or information you do not clearly understand. Please talk with your family and friends before you decide to take part in this research study. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below.

#### WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

The purpose of this study is to generate theory related to sense of self for African American female millennials in higher education (HE) support roles. You are being asked to be in this study because you may identify a Black/African American female employed in a support role at an higher education institution in the Midwest and are born in the millennial generation (1982-2005).

#### HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

There will be up to 30 participants who will be a part of the study. All 30 respondents will participate in the anonymous survey and 10 participants may be interviewed to further discuss their experiences as a younger Black women in a higher education support role. Also, participants will be from 3 Midwestern higher education institutions.

#### WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THE STUDY?

You will be asked to complete an anonymous Sense of Self survey using an internet based questionnaire. The survey will take 15-20 minutes to complete and you may complete them from your home computer or in a private location. At the end of the survey, you will be asked to opt-in to be contacted for an interview. For your protection, you will create a pseudonym (fake name) and will click a link to a second survey to fill out your legal name, email, and phone number. You will then be contacted to participate in a 1-2 hour interview in a private office or conference room with the Secondary Investigator. The interview will be audio recorded and all recordings will be discarded as soon as it is transcribed. After the interview, you will be contacted to review the written transcript of the interview and edit as necessary. This is known as member checking.

#### HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THIS STUDY?

This study will take about 4 months. You may be contacted for a follow-up interview to clarify information given at the initial interview. Your participation will be complete upon receipt of your feedback of the transcript.

#### WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?

There are no physical risks associated with this study. There is, however, the potential risk of loss of confidentiality. Every effort will be made to keep your information confidential; however, this cannot be guaranteed.

Some of the questions we will ask you as part of this study may make you feel uncomfortable. You may refuse to answer any of the questions and you may take a break at any time during the study. You may stop your participation in this study at any time. This

research presents risk of loss of confidentiality, emotional and/or psychological distress because the surveys involve sensitive questions about your work habits.

#### ARE THERE BENEFITS TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?

You may not get any benefit from being in this research study, however, the benefits to society may include better understanding of sense of self for younger African American women in higher education support roles.

#### WILL MY INFORMATION BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

*The research site, Authorization No. 00-018 requires research data to be retained for 7 years after the final report.*

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. The data will be stored on a password-protected computer and electronically on a secure server and will only be seen by the research team during the study and for 7 years after the study is complete. The master pseudonym list will be destroyed after member checking is complete.

The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as group or summarized data and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

#### WHAT ARE THE COSTS TO YOU?

There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

#### WHAT ABOUT COMPENSATION?

There will be no compensation for participation in this study.

#### **WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU HAVE A PROBLEM DURING THIS RESEARCH STUDY?**

Your well-being is a concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

If you would like to seek professional help please contact Counseling Services and/or the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

**Counseling Services:** (phone number: day and evening; address)  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline – 1-800-662-HELP (4357) SAMHSA's National Helpline is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-

day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

WHAT ABOUT MY RIGHTS TO DECLINE PARTICIPATION OR WITHDRAW FROM

#### THE STUDY?

You can choose to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which you are entitled. However, if you decide to stop participating in the study, we encourage you to talk to the researcher first to make sure it is safe to do so.

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (“withdraw”) at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the researcher(s) or with the research institution (list others as applicable).

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

#### WHOM DO I CALL IF I HAVE QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study related questions, please contact the researcher(s) listed at the beginning of this form.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, or to discuss problems, concerns or suggestions related to your participation in the research, or to obtain information about research participant’s rights, contact the research site Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office

- Phone:
- Email:

#### STATEMENT OF CONSENT

The purpose of this study, procedures to be followed, risks and benefits have been explained to me. I have been allowed to ask questions, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been told whom to contact if I have questions, to discuss problems, concerns, or suggestions related to the research, or to obtain information. I have read or had read to me this consent form and agree to be in this study, with the understanding that I may withdraw at any time. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

APPENDIX C  
REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATION

Dear Colleague,

My name is Breann L. Branch and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri-Kansas City pursuing a Ph.D. degree in Educational Leadership, Policy and Foundations and Social Science. I am seeking your participation in my dissertation research exploring the sense of self of African American female millennials in higher education support roles.

You have been selected to participate based on your staff position within your institution. Your participation will be kept confidential and is strictly voluntary. This study will help define the sense of self for younger African American women from your perspective.

At the end of this email is a link to an informed consent form followed by a brief survey. The survey should only take 10-15 minutes to complete. If you would like to participate, please complete the survey no later than Friday, November 1, 2019. Should you have questions or need additional information, please email me at [branchb@umck.edu](mailto:branchb@umck.edu).

Thank you,

Breann L. Branch

**\*You may open the survey in your web browser by clicking the link below:**

[https://umkc.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_eEsYxrmPUMurcWh](https://umkc.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eEsYxrmPUMurcWh)

## APPENDIX D

### SENSE OF SELF MIXED QUESTIONNAIRE

#### Part I: PERSONAL INFORMATION

##### Biographical Data/Personal Data:

- 1) Do you identify as Black or African American (in whole or in part)?  yes  no
- 2) Do you identify as female?  yes  no
- 3) Age Range:  18-21  22-25  26-30  31-37
- 4) Marital Status:  Single  Married  Widowed  Separated  
 Divorced
- 5) Educational Background: (*Please check all that apply*)  
 None  High School/GED  Associates  Bachelors  
 Masters  Doctorate  Other (Please list): \_\_\_\_\_

#### Part II: POSITION DATA

- 6) Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Years in current position \_\_\_\_\_
- 7) College/Academic Unit: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Part III: SENSE OF SELF and IDENTITY

- 9) Which description of “sense of self” most aligns with your thinking?
  - a. culture/practices
  - b. race/ethnicity
  - c. thinking/beliefs
  - d. society’s perceptions of me
  - e. other (please elaborate)
- 10) What has contributed most to your sense of self?
  - a. parents/family/community
  - b. past/current professional experiences
  - c. media images/society’s perceptions
  - d. spiritual/religious beliefs
  - e. other (please elaborate)
- 11) What has been most troubling/detrimental to your sense of self?
  - a. parents/family/community
  - b. past/current professional experiences
  - c. media images/society’s perceptions
  - d. spiritual/religious beliefs
  - e. other (please elaborate)
- 12) Overall influences on your sense of self have been:
  - a. affirming/positive
  - b. harmful/negative
  - c. both harmful and affirming
  - d. insignificant
  - e. other (please elaborate): \_\_\_\_\_

- 13) What type of images of Black women have you seen most in your home/family/community? (Provide examples)
- Mammy (caretaker, docile)
  - Sapphire (angry, aggressive, Welfare Queen)
  - Jezebel (hypersexual)
  - Strong Black Woman (independent)
  - other (please elaborate): \_\_\_\_\_
- 14) What type of images of Black women have you seen most in your workplace? (Provide examples)
- Mammy (caretaker, docile)
  - Sapphire (angry, aggressive, Welfare Queen)
  - Jezebel (hypersexual)
  - Strong Black Woman (independent)
  - other (please elaborate): \_\_\_\_\_
- 15) What type of images of Black women have you seen most in the media/society? (Provide examples)
- Mammy (caretaker, docile)
  - Sapphire (angry, aggressive, Welfare Queen)
  - Jezebel (hypersexual)
  - Strong Black Woman (independent)
  - other (please elaborate): \_\_\_\_\_
- 16) How have you responded to images of Black women that have been portrayed over your lifetime?
- 17) How do you personally feel about being a Black female and a millennial?
- 18) Do you see any benefits to being Black and female? If so, what are they?
- 19) Do you see any barriers/challenges to being Black and female? If so, what are they?
- Part IV: WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES (Open and Likert-scale items)**
- 20) Are you satisfied with your overall work experiences at your institution? Please provide examples.
- Extremely satisfied
  - Moderately satisfied
  - Slightly satisfied
  - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
  - Slightly dissatisfied
  - Moderately dissatisfied
  - Moderately dissatisfied
  - Extremely dissatisfied
- 21) Has race ever influenced your work experience?
- Definitely yes
  - Probably yes
  - Might or might not
  - Probably not
  - Definitely not

22) Has gender ever influenced your work experience?

- a. Definitely yes
- b. Probably yes
- c. Might or might not
- d. Probably not
- e. Definitely not

23) Has age ever influenced your work experience?

- a. Definitely yes
- b. Probably yes
- c. Might or might not
- d. Probably not
- e. Definitely not

24) What challenges are you confronted with as a younger Black woman support staff member at your institution?

**PART V: PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY (Open and Likert-scale items)**

25) How do you define your professional identity?

26) Describe your professional identity working in your institution.

27) What are the differences in your job description from your daily workflow?

28) Has your job title influenced your professional identity?

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Somewhat agree
- d. Neither agree nor disagree
- e. Somewhat disagree
- f. Disagree
- g. Strongly Disagree

29) What other job titles fit the work you do?

- a. Administrative Professional
- b. Higher Education Administrative Professional
- c. Office Assistant
- d. Office Manager
- e. Other \_\_\_\_\_

**PART VI: CURRENT POLITICAL CULTURE (Open and Likert-scale items)**

30) Since the 2016 presidential election, what are your feelings about the current political culture?

- a. Much better
- b. Slightly better
- c. About the same
- d. Slightly worse
- e. Much Worse

- 31) How have you responded to recent racists attacks on Black women in this country?
- Positively
  - Somewhat positively
  - Neither positively nor negatively
  - Somewhat negatively
  - Negatively
- 32) How do you cope with recent and ongoing current events related to gender and racism in the workplace?
- 33) How does your race, gender and/or age influence your political views?

## **PART VII: INTERVIEW SURVEY**

Welcome to the research study! I am interested in understanding African American Female Millennials' Sense of Self in Higher Education Support Roles. You will be asked to enter your contact information to be interviewed for this study. Please be assured that your information will be kept completely confidential.

The study should take you around 3 minutes to complete. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study, for any reason, and without any prejudice. If you would like to contact the researcher of this study, please email Breann Branch at [branchb@umkc.edu](mailto:branchb@umkc.edu) or by phone.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that your participation in the study is voluntary, you are 18 years of age, and that you are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation in the study at any time and for any reason.

Please note that this survey will be best displayed on a laptop or desktop computer. Some features may be less compatible for use on a mobile device.

Thank you!

- I consent, to be a part of the study and to be contacted for an interview
- I do not consent, I do not wish to participate in the interview portion of this study
- Legal Name (first, last)
- Phone Number
- Email Address

Adapted from Collier (2018)

## APPENDIX E

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### **Research Questions**

Central Question: How do African American female millennials perceive their sense of self within higher education support roles?

1. How do African American female millennials define their sense of self?
2. What images and stereotypes from the larger society shape their sense of self?
3. In what ways are their professional identities shaped by their sense of self?

#### **Interview Protocol**

1. Tell me about your current or former higher education support role.
  - a. Personal History – age, education, family influences
  - b. Professional History –training, skills, positions
2. The unit of study for this research is “sense of self.” How would you define “sense of self”?
3. Over your lifetime, what images have you seen society associate with Black women and which of these images has been most troubling for you? Why?
4. How has society’s images and perceptions of Black women manifested in your work place, and what was your response?
5. Do you feel race, gender or age influences (or influences) your work experiences?
6. How has the current political climate influenced your life and/or work experiences?
7. Describe your experience as a support staff member working at Midwestern higher education institution.
8. How do you define your professional identity in the workplace?
9. How does your job role shape your sense of self or professional identity?
10. Does it matter what you are called or referred to? (Secretary? Non-faculty, administrative assistant? Professional staff member?) Why or why not?
11. What advice would you offer to other Black women in HE support roles to help a positively shape their sense of self.

Adapted from Collier (2018)

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## VITA

Breann LaJune (Norwood) Branch was born on March 23, 1989 in Los Angeles, California. She was educated in the Los Angeles public school district and graduated from the Music Academy of Alexander Hamilton High School, in 2007. She began her college education at California State University Northridge in Northridge, California, from which she completed two years of college. After her time at a state university, Ms. Branch applied to Howard University in Washington, DC and received a full-academic scholarship, and completed her college education. She attended Howard University for three years where she graduated with a Bachelor's in Communications and Culture, in 2012.

After moving to Kansas City to work for Cerner Corporation, as an IT health Delivery Consultant, Ms. Branch completed her master's degree in Organizational Development Psychology from Avila University, in Kansas City, Missouri and was awarded the Graduate Student of the Year, in 2014. Ms. Branch entered the higher education field as an Office Support Assistant in the School of Education at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) in 2014. Since that time, she served as Staff Council Secretary in 2015 and Vice Chair of the Staff Council in 2016 and participated in various campus committees. In 2016, Ms. Branch was awarded the Staff Council Dedication Award for her commitment to Staff Council and being an advocate for staff on the UMKC campus.

Ms. Branch began work toward her Ph.D. at UMKC in the Fall of 2015. Upon completion of her degree requirement, she plans to continue her career in higher education, pursue her research interests, and continue to advocate for African American women staff in the workplace. Today, Ms. Branch has relocated home to California, where she is the newest Associate Director of the Women in Engineering at the UCLA Samueli School of Engineering at the University of California, Los Angeles.