A Qualitative Exploration of African American Womanhood: Implications for Counseling and Counselor Education

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A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMANHOOD: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING AND COUNSELOR EDUCATION

by

Nikita Murry

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A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMANHOOD: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING AND COUNSELOR EDUCATION

Nikita Murry, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2010

The disciplines of counseling and counselor education have expressed a commitment to greater multicultural competence. Existing research points toward greater study of Black American females; however, for some the call for equity and change in the societal perceptions of Black women has largely gone unanswered. For others, emerging research has started to change the perception of Black American women. Current counseling literature is limited in the exploration of gender identity development from a Black woman’s perspective. This study fills a gap in the literature concerning gender identity development for Black American females by exploring the phenomenon of womanhood and how Black American women have come to view themselves as women.

The study is comprised of two main parts: Individual interviews with Black women, followed later by focus groups of counselor educators/counselors who discussed the implications of the interview findings. All participants resided in an upper Midwestern state. Ten Black American females ages 35 and over engaged in two separate interviews that explored their views of womanhood, how they came to see themselves as women, and their perspectives on contemporary Black women. Phenomenological qualitative methods were used to analyze the interview data. The emergence of a womanhood identity occurred through motherhood, other lifecycle transitions, maternal
family influences, and by cultivating wisdom through life experiences and formal education. Qualities associated with womanhood included responsibility, independence, self-sacrifice, overcoming challenges and resilience, spirituality and faith, and sexuality. Contemporary views of Black women were influenced by societal messages that both uplift and weigh down, and participants were inspired by the presence of Michelle Obama as the nation’s first lady.

A total of six focus group participants addressed the implications of the findings for counseling and counselor education. Several themes that were relevant to both counselor training and counseling practice included: multicultural competence, viewing Black women in multiple dimensions of context, shifting from a deficit to strengths focus, effective use of counseling theory, understanding Black struggle and rethinking resilience, religious and spiritual resources, and tensions between race and/or gender. Implications for counseling practice and counselor education are discussed, and future research recommendations are made.
DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to Nora Bell and her girls, all of whom whether living or resting have set before me models of true womanhood. I also remember those who saw me begin this journey but now view its completion from the other side: my brothers, William E. Murry and Greek L. Murry, and my aunt Gloria Bernard Brown. Blessed be the ties that bind.
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Without God's wisdom, favor and demonstrated purpose for my life this journey would not have been. I am grateful for all He has done thus far, and look toward the future with great anticipation. The completion of this degree has been a great reminder of a very basic principle learned early in my life: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Phil. 4:13. Beyond that, I am thankful for the support I have received from a host of people. To thank everyone would be nearly impossible, and I pray that you each know your place in my heart. However, there are individuals whom I must acknowledge.

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Most importantly, I would like to thank my mother, Mamie Murry, and my nephew Andre Wright. You sacrificed as much as I did and, as such, I share this degree with you. Mom you possess more intellect and wisdom than you allow yourself to believe. This is your story, too. Your pride in my achievement of this
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degree will never match the esteem I have for you and what you embody as a Black American woman. Thank you for always sharing with me Nora Bell’s story. I hope to present before others the model of womanhood you have consistently shown me. Thanks Andre for standing in the gap when the dark times hit us not once, but twice. You have defied many obstacles as you emerged into a fantastic Black man. My prayer is that you will let God direct you toward the realization of your dreams. Sometimes the ride is wild and bumpy but it is so worth it. Believe.

Nikita Murry
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The African-American female has been marginalized and suffered through oppression for generations. History has constructed a persona of the African-American female using terms that are void of human characteristics (Clark Hine, 1989) and absent of qualities that define personhood. African-American females have been commonly considered for their earning potential and ability to procreate, meaning they have typically been viewed as the breadwinner, baby maker (White, 1987), and in some ways a social albatross (Lipsford-Sanders & Bradley, 2005; Moynihan, 1965). Jenkins (2007) in a comparative discussion about what she calls the “cult of true womanhood” noted the patriarchal ideology that has shaped the notion of feminine womanhood is complex when considering women in general. Further, the long-held notion of real womanhood as it pertains to majority women — i.e. White — is elevated by making comparisons to Black women. It was only when contrasted against Black female “non-women” that the concept of true womanhood crystallized during the early American and Victorian eras for White women. Jenkins noted the idea of “true womanhood” rests on the conceptual pillars of purity and virtue, the absence of which are considered unfeminine. This is to say, women perceived to lack purity are considered members of a lesser human order. To clarify the point, Jenkins posits the following:
Such a prescription makes clear that the cult of true womanhood was never assumed to include all women. Instead purity and sexual innocence, or the appearance of such, gained its bearers entry into a separate and privileged class. This select group of women retained their privilege, however, in contrast to and at the expense of that aforementioned “lower order,” a group made up primarily of enslaved black women. Because of the conditions of the enslavement ... black women rarely exemplified the fragility, gentility, or chastity required of “true women.” (p.7)

For generations, Black females have sought to create greater parity in how society views them as women. Research upholds that this call has largely gone unanswered across the course of history (Collins & Lightsey, 2001; Jones & Shorter-Gooden). During this point in modern history when personal and professional gains have continued to shape multiple identities for many White women, changes in the way many view the African-American female remain largely insignificant across the decades (White, 1987). Additionally, the African-American Women’s Voices Project (Jones & Shorter-Gooden) surveyed more than 300 Black women on an assortment of concerns, the first of which asked, “Do you think there are negative stereotypes about Black women?” In response, 97% of those queried affirmed their belief that Black women in the United States are negatively typecast. Furthermore, Sealey-Ruiz (2007) gleaned from the work of Black feminism theorist Patricia Hill Collins the importance of viewing the everyday occurrences of Black American women as essential ingredients to understanding a worldview that emerges from institutions within mainstream society where race, class, and gender help determine the opportunities one is afforded.

The call for informative research that explores Black American womanhood is not a new one. As early as 1973, Foster wondered when researchers would undertake the task of presenting the African-American woman in ways that identify her collective self.
Helms raised a similar question in 1979. Foster launched a call for interdisciplinary efforts to view African-American women beyond the homogeneous lens of sameness and consider the reality that while Black women may be united racially, they are not uniform in their ways of giving meaning to their life’s experiences and how that life is lived as a Black woman in the United States. In the counseling profession, few to date have asked about what it means to be a Black American female within the context of womanhood. That is to say, qualities of the sociopolitical and biological nature have surfaced in discussions about Black females, across multiple disciplines; however, the counseling literature is relatively void of positions that explore a Black woman’s worldview. More importantly, few scholars have asked Black women how they define themselves (Gushue & Constantine, 2003).

For example, a content review by this researcher of major journals of the counseling profession indicates that counselors have not produced literature that specifically speaks to the question of how Black women determine their womanhood, or what variables might serve as contributing influences of the development of a womanhood identity. An examination by this researcher of the Journal of Counseling and Development (JCD) over the past 10 years has yielded materials that speak to many deficit areas of Black womanhood; a similar review of the Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development appears to produce a similar result. Both journals addressed diverse measures issues concerning sexual orientation, career exploration, and the importance of multicultural competence in counseling the Black female. An interesting reflection arises out of a comparative review of the content of these two journals, the flagship peer-reviewed journal for the counseling professionals and the flagship journal
for multicultural issues with the counseling profession. Both of these peer-reviewed publications are products of the American Counseling Association; however the topic of Black womanhood has not been formulated as part of the discussion about counselor preparation or continuing education.

In an extension of this argument, Nilsson, Love, Taylor, and Slusher (2007) concluded from their content analysis of quantitative research articles published in the JCD from 1991 to 2000 that few articles focused primarily on people of color, and White participants comprised the majority of research participants in published articles. The authors suggested one possible cause for the lack of racial/ethnic representation in research samples was due to the demographics of the populations from which participants came. Nevertheless, Nilsson et al. recognized the lack of racial representation within scholarly research as an ongoing concern.

Moreover, there is an apparent lack of racial representation among potential researchers within the counseling profession. According to the National Science Foundation (NSF) 2008 Survey of Earned Doctorates, Black Americans accounted for 32 of the 215 doctorates awarded in counselor education/counseling and guidance; and 36 of the 418 doctorates earned in counseling psychology. Overwhelming, more Whites earned doctorates in those fields than any other racial group, with 275 and 129 degrees awarded respectively. Overall, for the same year Black American females accounted for .05 percent of the 22,496 doctorates awarded to women. Given the opportunity, Black female counselor educators can have a healthy impact on the counseling profession and its attitudes towards multicultural issues (Bryant, Coker, Durodoye, McCollum, Pack-Brown & et al, 2005). As faculty in counselor educator programs, Black women can contribute
to “the multicultural growth of the profession” by confronting stereotypes and myths, theory development and counseling practice. In order to access these opportunities openings are needed for Black female counselor educators to step into roles other than a nurturing figure for minority students (Bryant, Coker, Durodoye, & et al.) While women in general face considerable challenges in academia, African American women are noted to experience treatment that is different and more complex (Hill, Leinbaugh, Bradley & Hazler, 2005). Furthermore, African American counselor educators reported work dissatisfaction largely attributed to “toxic” or “negative” departmental climates (Holcomb-McCoy & Addison-Bradley, 2005). Alternatively, the outlook is encouraging for African-American counselors in the work environment. In this case, the primary reason for dissatisfaction is gender bias (Jones, Hohenshil & Burge, 2009). Points such as these are relevant to this study because they address the professional climate in which research is conducted by and about people of color, namely African Americans.

Gender Identity According to Black Women

The question of how African American females come to know themselves as women calls for an answer because the solution could provide a forward change in ways in which womanhood is conceptualized. Likewise, new information about how African American females develop a womanhood identity can help shape the research needs in this area for the counseling profession. These potential benefits are in line with a profession that promotes multicultural competency and desires to advance critical female issues for women who seek counseling services by establishing best practices for those who are training to help them.

The research literature about Black women has overemphasized depreciatory positions mainly concerning the deficiency and morality of their behavior (Jenkins, 2007;
Williams, 2005; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 2003). The common portrayal of Black American women is a caricature of one who is promiscuous, welfare-dependent, uneducated and/or poorly educated, unmarried, unhealthy, and diseased. A search by this researcher of the literature base in the social sciences, including the helping professions, most commonly produced results that talked about Black American females and topics such as teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS infection, sexually transmitted infection, unemployment rates, poverty, sexual behaviors, and domestic violence or other abuses—all of which carry overtones of perpetual despondency, and deficiency. Moreover, a preponderance of the counseling literature remains wedded to a vocational philosophy as evidenced by the wealth of research that addresses African American women, work, and workplace coexistence.

Further supported by the aforementioned perspective is the notion of the Black American woman as undesirable and inhumane (Clark Hine, 1989). Such examination has introduced topics that serve to initiate discussion about points of concern within the Black community, yet only allows a glimpse into a culture that is not monolithic in its thoughts, behaviors, or feelings. Scarce is research that centers on the positive aspects of being a Black American woman. There remains a need for scholarly literature within the counseling profession that embodies the varied and multifaceted voices of Black females. With the marginalized voices of Black women in mind, it may be helpful to consider an explorative journey into how she sees herself as a woman, much like the metaphorical dissecting of onion layers. In order to determine those things that ring dear and define her as a holistic being, it is first necessary to remove each layer in search of the identity that lies at the core, particularly the definition of womanhood. In essence, before well-trained
counselors can begin to conceptualize her strengths, deficits, and needs within a counseling context, it is important to understand the definition to which she ascribes and how it determines her identity as a Black American woman. Specifically, Williams (2005) noted the importance that therapists who counsel African American women recognize “the sociocultural genesis and impact of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia” (p. 280). Furthermore, Williams underscored the need for psychotherapists to recognize the dependent relationship between internalized oppression and personal context for African American women who seek therapy.

Counseling Literature and the Black Female

Fundamentally, counseling, as a practice and an educational form, appears in conflict with current training practices that emphasize multicultural competency, fidelity, and ethical behavior. As part of a larger conversation about the challenges and promises of becoming a culturally competent counselor, Arredondo, Tovar-Blank, and Parham (2008) discussed the need to confront personal and professional resistance to cultural inclusivity. In considering intimate elements of gender development, outside the lens of pathology, little else has been researched about the Black American female (Lipsford-Sanders & Bradley, 2005). Principal sources of scholarly work that seek to apply a pluralistic lens to connecting the topics of Black American women and mental health are in the fields of medical and health sciences, sociology, and psychology. While not considered scholarly, popular media that speak directly to a primarily African American mature readership have made broad attempts to address the matter of Black womanhood with accuracy, if not scholarship. When considering the specific topic of Black womanhood and counseling issues, the literature appears founded on a social construct
that focuses on race and dysfunction. Whereas White women have the luxury of defining their identity through Victorian morality and 1960s feminism (Laws & Schwarz, 1977), Black American women are forged from a more damaging construct rooted in violence that extends from slavery to the present day (Hudson-Weems, 2001; Jenkins, 2007).

In considering the holistic view of womanhood — that is, a worldview that takes into account variables such as spirituality, wellness, and emotionality — it is appropriate to consider the multiple factors that influence the value placed on research about Black females apart from Black males, as well as examine the perceptions of women, in general. History is just one pillar that supports that perceptual imbalance that helps define Black American womanhood. One might consider the inclusive plight of Black American women in the new millennium to launch an understanding of how womanhood is shaped. Variables such as race, socioeconomic status, gender bias, and age presently determine much of what larger society knows about Black women (Hays, 1996; Hooks, 1992; Parks, Carter, & Gushue, 1996; Patterson, 2004). For instance, the U.S. government estimated in its 2003 Census update that 13% of all women were poor, but Black women are more likely to live in poverty than Whites are, even though Black women were more likely than Black men to earn at least a bachelor’s degree. Furthermore, the government reported the poverty rate for Black women rested at 25%, which was more than twice that for non-Hispanic White women (9%). Fifty-eight percent of Black households are headed by single mothers who are raising children on earnings of less than $25,000 per year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Socioeconomic status remains a constant matter for Black American women in contemporary times that infiltrate other areas of life. Nilsson et al.
(2007) found that few articles published in the *JCD* from 1991 to 2000 reported demographics that address socioeconomic status or social class.

Research suggests that self-perception of individual success or failure in various roles can influence self-esteem (Patterson, 2004). For Black women, self-esteem is one of a few personality concepts consistently shown to correlate to socioeconomic status (SES). The income of Black American women has increased significantly for a majority of those who fill the primary support roles for their households (King & Ferguson, 1998; Patterson, 2004). In addition, there is disagreement among Black women about which of the many threats to her successful development of a female identity is most important — i.e., race, SES, or personal achievement (Jenkins, 1996).

**Rationale for This Research**

Contemporary theory rooted in feminism has helped to challenge counseling-related research in the area of womanhood (Gilligan, 1982). Specifically, the works of feminist scholars seek to provoke traditional theoretical frameworks that have established their foundations on the worldviews of White males. Emergent ideas that flow from relevant counseling literature centered on feminist models of therapy establish the presence of a womanist identity within the counseling profession. The evolution of a therapy model established foundationally upon the principles of feminism (Moradi, 2005) and the accompanying scholarship are tangible examples of the infusion of women's issues in counseling. Feminism is to women as the Civil Rights Movement is to Black Americans. Just as those two are distinct in their objectives, so is the line that separates Black women from the benevolence of the feminist movement. During the last three decades, multidisciplinary scholarship has discussed the demarcation between Black and
White women when it comes to issues of equality (Giddings, 1984; Hudson-Weems, 2001; Moradi, 2005; Reid, 2004).

What makes the discussion of feminism in therapy pertinent to this research study is its presence in the counseling literature, and even with contemporary discussions that seek to present Black women as part of the feminist agenda, a visible knowledge gap remains. Little is known about middle-aged Black women and non-college-educated women, and their respective identity development in general and apart from a feminist perspective. It appears presumptuous that the feminist agenda is representative of the lived female experience for all women. Sufficient literature on contemporary views of feminism, those being Black feminism (Collins, 1991; Giddings, 1984), womanism (Moradi, 2005), and Africana womanism (Hudson-Weems, 2001), all suggest otherwise. In brief, Collins and Giddings intersect race and gender as necessary partners when applying feminist ideology to Black women, along the way taking care to present a balanced picture of why feminism can work for Black women and where it misses the mark. Moradi offers womanism as an alternative to the perceived harsh and exclusionary perception of feminism. African womanism combines the intensity of feminism with a womanist perspective covered in a global framework for all women of an African experience. Discussion of each of these takes place thoroughly in the next chapter as part of a review of the literature.

Black American women who are older than age 29 and have not attended college are noticeably absent from this particular discussion in the literature (Moradi, 2005). What makes this position significant is that it introduces the need to study Black American females within the context of womanhood development, and then examine the
ways in which that development or lack thereof influences mental health. In general, research that examines the development of positive characteristics in the development of Black American womanhood is absent from the literature in a meaningful form that would inform counselor educators and counselors in training. Moreover, Black American women are not consistently included in the research about womanhood in ways that are affirming and holistic.

Purpose of the Study

This project attempts to address a demonstrated need that exists for research that focuses exclusively on the definition applied to womanhood development. Thus, the primary purpose of this study is to examine the meaning of womanhood for Black American females ages 35 and older. Specifically, this study seeks to explore the ways in which multiple lifestyle factors such as parenting messages, socioeconomic status, sexuality, educational level, emotional health, or chronological age possibly contribute to the development of a womanhood identity for Black American females. Qualitative interviews were conducted with Black women who met the inclusion criteria. Findings from the interviews and qualitative analyses were shared with counselor educators who assembled in a focus group format to discuss the implications of the findings for counseling and training. Data collected through this study can provide the counseling profession with knowledge and awareness necessary to improve the delivery of psychotherapy to Black American females.
Role and Perspective of the Researcher

My role in this study is solely that of a researcher. As the author of this study, I am an African-American female who has chosen to focus on multicultural and lifespan issues as clinical and teaching specialties. Throughout the course of pursuing a doctorate in counselor education and supervision, it became obvious that my voice and the voices of others like me appeared absent from the counseling literature. Most salient was the absence of counseling literature that examined the lived experiences of African-American females across older generations. I am a middle-aged female who has explored the influences on my development as a woman. Subsequently, it is seemingly impossible to go without wondering about the ways in which other African American females, particularly those in prior generations, come to know themselves as women. As an African-American female, it is incumbent upon me to create opportunities that increase the professional understanding of my community. Through my role in this study as a participant observer, I was able to facilitate and experience this discussion with empathy necessary for understanding the experiences of another person while maintaining my own experiences as both an African-American woman and a researcher. Although I have biases that may be inherent to my race and gender, I considered them while conceptualizing this study and address my biases in the next chapter. It is my responsibility and intent to confront any personal biases and assumptions during the execution of this study.

Research Design and Questions

This study employed a qualitative research methodology that would drive the researcher toward uncovering answers to the question of how African American females
describe themselves using the construct of womanhood. More specifically, this study used phenomenology to help determine the context and events that help create an identity that Black American females come to experience as womanhood. Phenomenological qualitative research is appropriate when exploring the life experiences of those individuals under examination and understanding the worldview and context in which they live (Hatch, 2002). The intent of this study is to examine the ways in which African American females assign meaning to the life experience known as womanhood. Data was collected through in-depth interviewing, a process that combines life history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing to create informed assumptions drawn from phenomenology (Seidman, 2006). This study also made use of focus group sessions with counselor educators to discuss the implications of the research findings on counselor preparation and practice.

Detailed discussion of the research questions, selection criteria for participants, instrumentation, procedures, and proposed data analyses takes place in the following chapters. Overall, this study examines the ways that adult Black American females make decisions about who they are as women. In addition, this study seeks to uncover a personal definition of womanhood for Black Americans by understanding the following:

1. How do adult Black American females ages 35 and older identify the time in which they became a woman?

2. How have various life experiences, events, and milestones contributed to the development of a concept of womanhood for Black American females ages 35 and older?

3. How do adult Black American females determine what it means to be a woman?
4. Comparatively, how do Black American females ages 35 and older currently view themselves as women?

5. How can common examples of lived experiences among Black females contribute to the body of knowledge in the counseling profession?

Answers to these research questions could yield a broader view and more in-depth understanding of the ways Black American females define womanhood. Further, as the experiences of womanhood for Black women in this study are considered by counselor educators, the findings may lead to improved counseling strategies and enhanced multicultural training that are sensitive to the needs and experiences of middle-aged and older Black women.

Further discussion and support of the study takes place in chapter 2 with a selective review of the counseling literature, specifically focusing upon those areas that address counselor training, multiculturalism and diversity, sociopolitical factors, demographics, and relevant counseling theory. Chapter 3 describes the qualitative methods used to analyze the ways Black American women come to know themselves as women, as well as the implications of these findings for counseling and counselor education. Chapter 4 offers the findings that result from this qualitative study and discuss in detail how Black American women construct their own ideas about womanhood. Finally, chapter 5 examines the research findings, salient measures, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future directions in counseling, counselor training, and research in this area.

Operational Definitions

*Afrocentricity* – The means by which people of African heritage are re-characterized historically, economically, politically, socially and philosophically. The
term is not color-conscious, and the emphasis is on culture as it relates to “centeredness.” This way of thinking is referred to as “afrocentric,” and those who embrace it are “afrocentrists” (Asante, 2003).

**Black American** – Self-identified as an American born citizen whose parents are descendants of African-born slaves brought to the United States. Black American is used at times synonymously with African American.

**Black Church** – The Black Church refers to an institution that includes any Black Christian person who is a member of a Black congregation (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Adkison-Bradley, Johnson, Lipford-Sanders, Duncan, and Holcomb-McCoy (2005) extend this to mean, "Even if the congregation is part of a predominantly White American religious denomination" (Plunkett, 2009).

**Spirituality** -- The means by which individuals search for meaning and purpose in their lives (Stanard, Sandhu, & Painter, 2000).

Secondary Definitions

**Africana womanism** – An afrocentric ideology that considers the “historical and cultural” experiences of Black women in America as support for rejecting traditional feminist tenets. It makes the argument that concern about gender issues does not necessarily make one a feminist (Hudson-Weems, 1994).

**Black American Woman** – For the purposes of this study, a Black American woman is a female of African heritage age 35 and older.

**Black feminist thought** – Makes the argument that Black women’s intellectual tradition rests with institutions outside the academy, and as such includes an

*Womanism* – A theoretical concept mainly applied to African American females who are concerned with the welfare of both Black women and men. Womanism is considered an alternative to feminist thinking, and is open to women of other races.

*Womanist* – A person who is “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male or female.” In essence, one who supports the “solidarity” of humanity, and not separatist ideas (Walker, 1983).

*Womanhood* – The composite of qualities deemed appropriate to or representative of women (The American Heritage College Dictionary, 1997).
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the initial chapter, the rationale for a study of the ways in which African American women ages 35 and older develop their identity as women is based on a collection of historical and sociopolitical factors, such as slavery, momentum behind the Civil Rights movement, socioeconomic status, educational progress, sexuality, and racial identity. Of these variables mentioned, no single factor has been identified to contribute more heavily to the phenomena under question. This chapter presents a summary of the evidence supporting the need for further research that explores the nature of womanhood development for African Americans. Additionally, to help place this study in the current research context, literature will be reviewed that speaks to the areas of race and counselor education, identity development in women, critical race theory, and critical theory. These areas surfaced from a broad examination of literature across multiple disciplines, which in turn highlighted critical areas of exploration that shaped the research questions for this study. The literature in these areas provided this study with historical and theoretical contexts that lend themselves to the study at hand. The researcher found no other studies that specifically addressed the phenomenon of interest supporting the value in accessing the voices of Black women about the development of their sense of womanhood.
Substantive Framework

Identity Development in Women

Two prevailing approaches are highlighted here which have been used to conceptualize women clients in a therapeutic setting. The most longstanding finds affinity in feminist concepts, while the second, based on womanist ideology, emerges as a more inclusive alternative to the study of womanhood. In general, much of the research within counseling relating to identity development was conceived primarily from the perspective of White males (Gilligan, 1982; Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Culturally biased counseling theories and interventions have the potential to produce ineffective, harmful, and potentially detrimental results within the professional setting (Pack-Brown, Thomas & Seymour, 2008). Advocates for corrective measures that utilize multicultural and social justice perspectives for the past 40 years have called for a shift in the thought paradigm that supports theories and practices believed harmful to other cultures (Pack-Brown et al; Sue & Sue, 2003).

One such way in which the profession has sought parity for women is through the implementation of feminist models. Initially presented to fit all women, the classic feminist ideology of the 1960s and 1970s has expanded into postmodern or diversity feminism that strive to address gender concerns within the context of contemporary issues, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Enns, Sinacore, Ancis & Phillips, 2004). Feminism as a movement has evolved from a concept focused on equality and empowerment for women through political engagement into a form tailored toward differing goals among women. Herlihy and Corey (2005) noted at least three waves of feminist perspectives with each shift providing a response to expanding needs of women
represented. Early feminist therapy confronted the oppression of women and largely mirrored the worldview of middle-class, White females. Modern feminism shifted the emphasis toward multiculturalism and multiple forms of oppression, while current feminists accept that gender and other forms of identity oppression are partners in the quest for emancipation (Herlihy & Corey, 2005).

In one counselor training text, eight different feminist views are acknowledged on the feminism continuum (Herlihy & Corey, 2005): liberal feminists, cultural feminists, radical feminists, social feminists, postmodern feminists, women of color feminists, lesbian feminists, and global-international feminists. Though women of color are considered collectively, Black feminist theory specifically was not among those cited. Given the broad focus, it is apparent there is not a single, unified feminist theory. As a result, this study will not focus in depth on feminism in order to remain focused on determining those qualities Black American women identify as salient contributors to their identity as women. This study acknowledges the position of feminist theory as one of several lenses through which multiculturalism within the counseling profession is addressed.

It is also necessary to acknowledge the work of Gilligan (1982), who offers one of the most notable critiques on the developmental differences between men and women by challenging Erikson’s stage theory of identity development over the lifespan. It is here where a developmental portrait of women is painted that establishes them as relationally oriented, morally driven, and valuing mutuality, respect, and caring. These, Gilligan argued, are at the core of women’s existence, compared to men, who value individuation and separation. Efforts to correct the existing theoretical knowledge about development
to include research focused on women have emerged to secure a position in the
counseling literature, though such advancements also are limited as they rely on data
extrapolated from White female sample groups (Williams, 2005).

As historical context is inextricably linked to this discussion on womanhood, it is
imperative to acknowledge Helms' (1979) recognition some 30 years ago that few
scholars of any race — whether practitioners, theoreticians, or researchers — had written
about the “unique” challenges experienced by Black women who seek counseling.
Outside of work in the areas of feminism or womanist identity development, little else
has generated ways that explain how African Americans across the lifespan perceive
themselves as women. African American women have a history that is unavoidably
defined by centuries of slavery, oppression, and various forms of violence. Within the
goal of providing counseling intervention that is ethical, appropriate, and beneficial, two
questions arise: How can the impact of dehumanization based on race go ignored as an
experiential factor with the potential to affect Black American female psyches?
Moreover, how can the methods by which Black women demonstrate resiliency go
unexamined if the counseling profession sincerely desires to conceptualize African
American women in the most complete ways possible?

Black Women and Identity Development

Existing literature guides contemporary articulations about identity development
shaped by gender (Moradi, 2005). Present-day applications of feminist, womanist, and
other gender-specific literature on female identity development in some ways flow from a
similar source focused on the empowerment of women. More specifically, Moradi
maintained that womanist identity development is characterized by evolution from an
external to an internal definition of womanhood. This characterization is consistent with literature on gender identity development, which implies healthy development of identity involves movement from external and societal descriptions of womanhood to internally created definitions (Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992 as cited in Moradi). The position stated seems counter to that suggested by Peterson (2000), who postulated that African American women reject the female component of identity development at an early age. Other factors beyond feminine traits can contribute to the development of identity across the lifespan for Black women, namely achievement, family of origin, and self-determination (Peterson).

What appears missing from the counseling literature as it addresses preparation and practice is research that specifically explores the individual process African American females use to develop an identity (Williams, 1999). Accordingly, Williams posited that theories intended to circumvent the damages caused by racism and sexism at times have become dualistic and dogmatic in their execution, thus potentially negating any forward-moving advancements toward change. Even Afrocentric theory proves problematic for providing a vision of conceptualizing the lived experiences of Black American women as it “fails to distinguish the experience of Black women from that of the ‘generic’ African American — i.e. men” (Williams, p.4).

The centrality of what defines a womanist is open to individual interpretation and application. Moradi’s acceptance of the conceptualization offered by Ossana et al (1992) is different from that embraced by Black scholars who likewise explore its applicability. In its initial appropriation, Walker (1983) described a womanist as a Black feminist or feminist of color who loves other women sexually and/or non-sexually, and who seeks
the wellbeing of all people regardless of gender. For Walker (1983), a womanist is someone who desires the solidarity of humanity. The deconstruction of this definition by Collins (1999) highlights embedded contradictions that lie in implied universality, pluralism, and racial integration by women. According to Collins, current debates about whether Black women’s standpoints should be named womanism or black feminism further complicate the challenge of accommodating diversity among Black women. “The name given to black women’s collective standpoint seems to matter, but why?” (Collins, p. 127).

Race as a source of providing context to the lives of women is included in Moradi’s exploration of this topic, and it helps distinguish between womanism as a concept and an identity development pattern. Womanist identity development for Moradi is a four-stage model based closely on the work of Cross’ (1971) racial identity model, which identifies a patterned progression marking movement from external drives for identity to internal motivations. Under this model, women in the first stage, Pre-encounter, are conformist and fail to see oppressive behaviors in society, while in the second stage, Encounter, they begin to recognize societal inequities and embrace a womanhood identity. Moradi also stated women in the encounter stage begin to seek role balance between men and women. In the third stage, Immersion-Emersion occurs in two phases. First, the female gender is idealized and patriarchal definitions of womanhood are rejected. During the second phase, women find allegiance with other women and begin to seek positive representations of what it means to be a woman. Finally, during the Internalization stage women integrate their personal positions on womanhood into their identity apart from scripts shaped by society or a particular women’s movement.
Furthermore, Moradi (2005) acknowledged that many dimensions of identity, such as race, socioeconomic status, sexuality, religious affiliation, and family of origin, might alter a woman’s sense of womanhood and perception of self. Therefore, research is needed that examines women’s perceptions of womanhood and explores holistically the spectrum of identities that realistically reflect the experiences of African American women. The womanist identity model incorporates the essence of the feminist movement without the requisite political involvement, racist undercurrent, and classist division discussed previously. An apparent limitation of the womanist identity model is that while it seeks to capture positive variables within a personal definition of womanhood, questions are raised about the applicability of the model in cases where childhood rape and molestation, physical abuse, or gender oppression and other forms of violence shape the worldview of a woman searching for positive self-affirmation. Finally, both the womanist and feminist identity models are rooted in the same historical barriers that still encourage the need for a separate view of African American womanhood development. The historical roots of classism and racism blocked Black women from the benefits and voice of the feminist movement, and while institutionally minor changes have been made to make the feminist model more appealing to women of color, there is still need for work (Williams, 1999; Williams, 2005).

Counter Images in Contemporary Society

Whereas White women have the luxury of defining themselves along the sexual (Laws & Schwarz, 1977) constructs on Victorian morality and 1960s feminism, African American women are forged from a perpetually detrimental construct. It appears that scant attention has been given to the Black American female apart from pathology.
Although definitive discussions for White women that examine the desires, aspirations, successes, and positive self-perceptions that comprise their overall womanhood appear in referred journals, when it comes to discussing the variables that ascribe meaning to Black womanhood, most of the significant discussion primarily takes place in popular literature and published books. It is through the work of African American writers in literary (Collins, 1990; 1999) and social sciences that one can fully begin to appreciate all that goes into recognizing and understanding the developmental script that defines many African American women, and therefore operate.

Primarily, there are four well-documented images to which African American women have been assigned: Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, and the Matriarch, each of which was birthed through the racism and oppression of African American history (Collins, 1991). The Mammy presented the African American female as slave and servant to the white family. She was a sexually unappealing and unwomanly character who nurtured the White household and its interests at the expense of her own. This figure is non-threatening because of her perception as being asexual, yet many African American women served in White households and experienced sexual abuse by their employers. Mammyism favors the idea that these Black female types support the dominant culture at the expense of self.

Strikingly different is the Jezebel, often a younger, promiscuous, physically attractive woman who exploits her sexuality to get the things she desires. Her sexual script is one that created a sexually hungry woman who finds fulfillment in pleasing the sexual desires of men, a myth that gave justification for the sexual abuse of African American women by White men (Collins, 2002; Howard-Hamilton, 2003).
Other unique, yet flawed, developmental characteristics of African American women can be found through the Sapphire and Matriarch roles. Sapphire is argumentative, comedic, and emasculating and often is not taken seriously (Hooks, 1992; Thomas, Witherspoon & Speight, 2004). The Matriarch is a controlling and emasculating female created post World War II who can achieve her socioeconomic status without the assistance of a man — implying, therefore, that she only needs a man to produce children and is not interested in attaining a nuclear family structure (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). The roles discussed here have evolved into characteristics built on a Hip Hop culture that are far more insidious and exploitive as well as detrimental to the African American race. That influence will not be discussed in this paper, except to acknowledge its existence (Emerson, 2002; Littlefield, 2008).

Instead, information on the Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, and Matriarch roles is presented as a minute portion of the necessary contextual background critical to understanding how others view African American women. Moreover, these images strike at the core of how Black women have come to know themselves (Thomas et al., 2004). Denigrating images of Black American women have remained embedded in U.S. culture well into contemporary times. Nevertheless, many Black American women do not subscribe to ideologies founded on domination and “otherness” (Collins, 1990). As a group Black American women do not accept characterizations that present them as victims of circumstance such as those embodied in roles such as mammy, welfare mother, mules, or sexually perverse women. While a picture has been created in American culture depicting such positions, these roles are not embraced wholeheartedly or uniformly by all Black women individually or collectively (Collins). Scott (1995, as
cited by Collins) suggested the aforementioned images are reflections upon which to contrast daily experiences with the colliding forces that comprise womanhood identity and individual meaning. Collins noted:

Seeing the contradictions in the ideologies opens them up for demystification. Just as Sojourner Truth deconstructed the term “woman” by using her own concrete experiences to challenge it, so in a variety of ways do everyday African American women do the same thing (p. 93).

Religion as a Defining Variable in Contextualizing Black American Females

Absent of a clearly defined framework by which to conceptualize Black American women, it is helpful to examine the known methods by which these women are viewed. One such lens in African American culture is religion (Constantine, Lewis, Conner, & Sanchez, 2000). Globally, women of all races face oppression under the weight of religious piety, yet it was the African American woman who was considered lacking of virtue, and as a result adopted Biblical ideas of purity and holiness as a way to deflect criticism from Whites.

In essence, the common perception of African American female identity is rooted in the collective cultures of slavery, segregation, and White supremacy and White privilege. This is not to imply the relationship between Black American women and religion or spirituality is primarily abusive. Literature across multiple disciplines has consistently emphasized otherwise with an abundance of research that highlights the therapeutic benefits of religion or spirituality in the lives of many Black American women (Abernethy, Houston, Mimms & Boyd-Franklin, 2006; Frame, Braun & Green, 1999). Notably, Black American women use religious problem-solving approaches more often than men to seek resolution of stressors related to race (Lewis-Coles & Constantine, 2006). Furthermore, many Black American women integrate prayer, the Bible, and their church community into their daily
lives (Abernethy et al.). An important distinction to be made in this discussion is the
difference between spirituality and religion. As noted in Abernethy et al., spirituality refers
to a personal and subjective dimension, whereas religion defines the organized and
institutional element. For some, spirituality is viewed positively, while religion brings with
it negative perceptions.

The “Black church” has been described as an immensely significant multifaceted
institution within the African American community (Adkison-Bradley, Johnson, Lipford
Sanders, Duncan, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Constantine, Donnelly, & Myers, 2002).
For African Americans, the church remains significantly embedded in their culture. Other
helping disciplines such as medicine and social work have recognized the importance of
spirituality in the lives of Black women and their ability to use it to work through life’s
difficulties (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004). Women consider spiritual development,
perseverance, and preservation as essential to their mental health, individual
development, and holistic wellness. Not only is it important to their ability to maintain
healthy selves, the role of the church figures prominently in their ability to sustain
healthy relationships. Funderburk and Fukuyama (2001) have written about the ways in
which psychotherapy comes together and separates along feminist, multicultural, and
spiritual points, and while the authors describe the transformational properties of all
three, the relevancy to African American women is implied but not stated.

Most women have the opportunity to grow into who they are, and there are
conversations that take place about that personal evolution. For the most part, those
discussions reflect the interests of the dominant culture, which are rooted in White
ethnocentric ideology and challenged in critical works by Hooks (1992) and Wyatt
As those discussions take place in the mainstream, by default, definitions form about the invisible women who are excluded from the exploratory process of research. Mainly, the voice of the silenced is that of the African American female. Often the discussions that African American women hear about individual development take place in the church, which creates a dichotomy that is both affirming and yet arguably biased and limited at times. For example, African American adolescents with higher self-esteem reported greater use of culture-specific coping styles centered on spirituality (Constantine, Donnelly, & James, 2002). At the same time, religion, as a practiced organizational form, brings with it elements of power and oppression (Dyson, 1999). Traditionally, the identity of the spiritual African American woman emerged from male interpretations dictated by those in the pastorate, ministry, or other leadership positions (Dyson, 1999; Funderburk & Fukuyama, 2001; Hine, 1998; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

A distinction remains between the Black church as an institution and the spirituality of the ancestors that sustains African Americans thus allowing them to believe in the power of perseverance despite atrocities and adversities. While spirituality among African Americans has demonstrated the ability to uplift, the organized Black church assumes positions of both elevator and oppressor (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). The Black church has become a participant in perpetuating the patriarchal systems from which African slaves sought refuge in the 1800s and 1900s. Much like the White institution from which it emanated, the Black church historically has found sustainability as a male-led organization. In some cases, women have been relegated to the same subservient roles that often define their whole personhood (Hine, 1998).
To understand the influence of spirituality on African American women it is important to recognize three primary commitments to which researchers have found an allegiance within the black church: culture, literal adherence to biblical principles, and race. A point to consider about the ways in which the Black church contributes to the development of a womanhood identity for African Americans is the institutional commitment to a subculture that allows the predominant norms to operationalize the Black church and how its female congregants exist. For example, when Southern Blacks attempted to assimilate themselves to the strict codes of Southern life, they deferred to White cultural standards (Wilmore, 1988). Therefore, when Whites began to depict Blacks as ungodly, undisciplined, and sexually licentious, church leaders began to institute standards of behavior directed superficially at Black women. These ways included ideas of true womanhood that centered on gentility and chastity. As Blacks made the migration north in search of opportunity, many brought with them these Southern religious standards. The patriarchal church provided Black men, who in the same White Southern environment lacked authority, with divinely provided authority over his woman — and this authority included emotional, financial, and sexual authority. This authority, by default, gave Black men a role in shaping the identity of African-American women (Giddings, 1984; Wyatt, 1997) and further disempowered Black women from defining for themselves who they were. As has been well documented, African American women have a history that is incontrovertibly defined by legacies of slavery, oppression, and various forms of violence. If as Moradi (2005) argues that each dimension of identity — race, socioeconomic status, sexuality, religious affiliation, and family of origin — in some form alters a woman's sense of womanhood and perception of self, then the impact
of these variables on the psyche of African American women is worthy of consideration within the counseling context.

Professional Counseling and Multiculturalism

Historical Perspectives

The professional identity for counselor educators-in-training emerges from two primary professional organizations: the American Counseling Association (ACA) and the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES). A third organization influential in the preparation of counseling professionals is the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Program (CACREP), which is responsible for accrediting and monitoring counselor training academic programs at colleges and universities nationwide. It is noteworthy that the ACA can boast as part of its leadership history four presidents of African American descent: three females and one male.

The expectation of a distinctive and longstanding voice on civil rights issues within the organizational structure of the counseling profession is important to this discussion of Black American women for several reasons. First, the ACA, first known as the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA), was formed to serve as a reflective national voice for the evolving counseling profession. As such, the APGA would serve as representative resource for individuals seeking to enhance their personal and professional lives. The APGA is presented historically as the unification of the National Vocational Guidance Association, American College Personnel Association, the National Association of Guidance and Counselor Trainers (now ACES), and the Student Personnel and Guidance Association (ACA, 2002). Each of these areas represents a point
in which contact with an African American would have been inevitable in an equitable society, thereby making the influential mood of the country toward race and individual ideologies about race vital to the success and wellbeing of Black Americans during the same period. In particular, the collaborative efforts by the stated organizations were driven in large part by the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (NDEA), governmental legislation launched during the Cold War era to enroll more young Americans in college and increase the enrollment of college students in mathematical and scientific disciplines. The passage of the NDEA allowed states to improve their guidance and counseling programs with access to federal funds. The act also funded the education of trained school personnel in counseling and guidance schools, and saw an increase in the number of counselor training programs nationally (Sheeley, 1990).

In its golden anniversary issue, the *Counselor Education and Supervision* journal, the flagship publication of ACES, noted the impact of the NDEA on the number of new professionals who “returned to their work settings in the schools during the 1960s” (Sheeley, 1990). Others likewise joined the public sector. Undoubtedly, the new influx of trained counselors in schools and agencies during the 1960s set the profession on course to interact with national concerns raised regarding Black Americans. For as much as the NDEA benefited the counseling profession, a re-examination of legislation found funding for programs was being distributed to institutions that still practiced discrimination (National Archives and Records Administration, General Records of the U.S. Government, 1963). Moreover, the Committee on Education and Labor in 1963 noted NDEA funds were used to: provide graduate fellowships at segregated institutions from 1959 to 1963; award nearly 3 percent of the total NDEA funds for counselor training
programs to segregated institutions in Southern and neighboring states; and, provide nearly $3 million in funding to Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and South Carolina for vocational education programs. The described abuse was among other misappropriations that in 1964 resulted in an amendment to the National Defense Education Act to prevent federal money from benefitting colleges and universities that practiced racial discrimination (NARA, General Records of the U.S. Government).

The move came more than a decade after Brown v. Board of Education, which sought to provide legal redress for racial bias and segregation in education. The question left unanswered in the counseling literature is how organizations such as ACA and ACES reconcile their mission to serve all citizens with the deeply embedded practice of racial discrimination in all aspects of American society, especially during these organizations’ formative years. This is just one query that speaks to the ingrained philosophy toward how counselor educators have trained new generations of university faculty and practicing counselors.

Multiculturalism and the Counseling Profession

Currently, the ethical standards of practice of the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2005) require that counselors gain professional competence and training to work effectively with clients from diverse backgrounds. In the same regard, the Council for the Advancement of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) has developed training standards that specifically speak to the necessity of a multicultural framework for working competently with diverse clients. The notion of a practical and educational approach to counseling that considers the specific needs of non-White populations is not a contemporary issue. As early as the 1960s, counseling scholars sought to
engage the profession in discussions about the needs of marginalized populations, more specifically cultural barriers to the counseling relationship (Hunt & Carnes, 1967; Vontress, 1969; 1966; Wrenn, 1962). Wrenn, with his work *The Culturally Encapsulated Counselor* (1962), offered what has become an ethical challenge for counselors who struggle to maintain a status quo as defense from societal changes. While Wrenn does not specifically address race, it is apparent from the tone of the article that marginalized individuals serve as the subject for provoking counselors’ willingness to change. Wrenn wrote:

> America is no longer an island — islands no longer have significance. Our economy of abundance must rub elbows with many economies of scarcity — with people who have only a fraction of what we have and yet who are well aware of what America has and is. They want some of the same and want it urgently. (p.10)

Practical implementation of an organizational position on issues of diversity and multiculturalism surfaced more than a decade after Wrenn. Cross-culturalism or multiculturalism was first mentioned in the ACA Code of Ethics in 1974, 22 years after its inception as the APGA and 13 years after its first Code of Ethics was established. Context is what makes the timing of this change in the ethical guidelines significant because the APGA emerged during a time in history when a clear statement about where it stands on the issues the treatment of Black Americans arguably could have set the foundation for the way in which the organizational body would proactively address racial issues. The absence of a concise statement in support of protecting the humanity of Black Americans allowed research from a deficit position to fill counseling journals, texts, and training (Vontress, 1961). A popularity of the research conducted during the 1950s and 1960s focused on the deficiencies of blacks as evidenced by the “disadvantaged” label used in government, educational, and
psychological descriptions of Black Americans. It was in 1974 that ethics of race in the connection to measurement and evaluation was addressed; in particular, the Code of Ethics cautioned against making generalizations about populations not represented in the normed sample. In that same year, Vontress (1974) offered a postulation on the misinterpretations that could occur within the counseling relationship due to lack of understanding about the various cultural contexts in which many Americans live. In addition, Vontress noted the environmental conditions from a lack of cultural awareness have consequences for both the counselor and the client. Such disconnect has the potential to create in the counselor feelings of “professional impotence” based in large part to insecurity, lack of preparation, racial guilt, and the tendency to over generalize all “Negro” concerns as racial hostility (Vontress, 1974). These things made the emergence of an organizational discussion on multiculturalism within the professional bodies increasingly significant.

Sue and Sue (1977a; 1977b) helped launch a movement toward multicultural competencies during a time when similar initiatives were also under discussion in counseling and psychology training programs (Arredondo, Tovar-Blank, & Parham, 2008). Although Sue, while editor of what is now the Journal of Counseling & Development in 1977, is credited with launching the first journal issue featuring discussions about various cultural variables as they relate to competency and the formation of barriers in counseling racial/ethnic minorities, no single individual is responsible for the multicultural movement in counseling (Arredondo, Tovar-Blank, & Parham). The authors noted: “The sociopolitical Civil Rights climate of the 1960s and 1970s spilled over into counseling and psychology professional associations that were in disfavor with a self-empowered racial/ethnic minority membership.” (p. 262)
Kaplan and Coogan (2005) noted that “attention to diversity in counseling” commenced in 1972 with the formal charter of the Association for Non-White Concerns (ANWC), a division of ACA. Kaplan and Coogan also observed the obvious in that the focus of the ANWC was to address concerns believed neglected by the parent group, i.e. ACA, specifically the needs of African Americans as clients and professionals. Furthermore, the authors stated the ANWC advocated for greater understanding of African Americans, their overall concerns, and their mental health needs. Subsequently, changes in 1988 addressed hiring within professional circles, in 1995 technology in recordkeeping via race, and a “nondiscrimination” clause that did not have an additional explanation. It was not until 2005 that multiculturalism was infused throughout the document.

Counselor Training as a Contemporary Issue in Multicultural Counseling

Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, and Bryant (2007) addressed the need to consider history and its impact in the development of counselor training programs in order to provide therapeutic services effectively to diverse populations of clients using a broader consideration of settings. At the present, the literature base, particularly that which serves the counseling profession, appears to neglect the history of minorities in the U.S. Banks (1995) described mainstream academic knowledge as the composition of “concepts, paradigms, theories and explanations” drawn from and representative of traditional and established knowledge in the behavioral and social sciences. This type of knowledge represents a Westernized orientation toward the history that academia has come to embrace. As an alternative, transformative knowledge makes use of concepts, paradigms, theories and explanations to challenge the accepted body of mainstream knowledge (Banks, 1995). With the absence of empirically based literature that supports the
inclusion of substantive knowledge about the historical impact of race as crucial to multicultural education, we can conclude that mainstream academic knowledge permeates even multicultural education. Therefore, one could wage the argument that race-specific scholarly research is critical to a profession aimed to address the mental health needs of humanity.

For example, the ACA Code of Ethics (2005) A.2.c. discusses developmental and cultural sensitivity in the following terms (p. 4):

Counselors communicate information in ways that are both developmentally and culturally appropriate. Counselors use clear and understandable language when discussing issues related to informed consent. When clients have difficulty understanding the language used by counselors, they provide necessary services (e.g., arranging for a qualified interpreter or translator) to ensure comprehension by clients. In collaboration with clients, counselors consider cultural implications of informed consent procedures and, where possible, counselors adjust their practices accordingly.

The definition as presented is arguably ambiguous, leaving the topic open to flexible interpretation. Equally as perplexing is the determination to include multicultural sensitivity along with developmental sensitivity when emphasizing the ethical responsibilities of informed consent. This is the only time multiculturalism appears in this section of the ethical code that also addresses the counseling relationship. The next time multiculturalism and diversity appears is under the section that addresses communication, rights, and privacy. In Section B.1.a., discussion of diversity is as follows: “Counselors maintain awareness and sensitivity regarding cultural meanings of confidentiality and privacy. Counselors respect differing views toward disclosure of information. Counselors hold ongoing discussions with clients as to how, when, and with whom information is to be shared” (p.7).
Multiculturalism and diversity as identified priorities come at the end of the section on professional responsibility. Furthermore, ambiguity in the definition provided raises questions about the meaning of the subtext. Section C.2. describes a professionally competent counselor as one who practices within the scope of his or her education, training, supervision, credentials, and professional experience. Additionally, the section states that counselors gain knowledge, personal awareness, sensitivity, and skills pertinent to working with a diverse client population; however the section does not offer guidelines or examples of what ethical responsibility resembles. The document further discourages discriminating against a diverse population of people, with no specific attention given to any one group (Section C.5.); selecting assessment instruments that lack the appropriate psychometric and norm-referenced properties (Section E.6.c; E.8.), and placing the client at risk for a potentially harmful diagnosis (Section E.5.b). Section F.2.b. encourages counseling professionals to remain cognizant of multiculturalism and diversity in supervisory relationship. Central to the study at hand is the ethical obligation of counselor training programs and educators to infuse multiculturalism and diversity throughout the counselor preparation curriculum (Section F.6.b). This item is listed as an independent item, which highlights the importance of culturally relevant counselor training programs, yet it also could be misinterpreted as the responsibility of the department to ensure diverse curricula. The specific responsibility of counselor education and training occurs as an independent ethical standard near the end of the document, where Section F addresses the expectation for creating, teaching, and nurturing a diverse population of counseling students.
Multicultural/diversity counseling is defined as counseling that recognizes diversity and encourages "approaches that support the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of individuals within their historical, cultural, economic, political, and psychosocial contexts" (ACA, 2005, p.20). The components that shape the ACA 2005 Code of Ethics are predominantly established on ideals raised by Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis (1992) in what has become a galvanizing point in the counseling profession. Multicultural competencies are grounded on three principles: awareness, knowledge, and skills. These three are not shaped by race alone or broadly applied populations, as the writers concluded both focused and universal applications have merit (Sue et al.).

By comparison, the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2000) is both specific and implicit in its expectation of professional social workers with regard to the issue of diversity and competency. While it is broad in its definition of diversity, the document also specifies to whom it is referring when it addresses populations by race, age, sexual orientation, or other communities that would meet the definition of diversity. One need only examine the Standards for Cultural Competency in Social Work Practice (20010 and Human Rights: Practice Update on Multiculturalism (2005) for additional examples of the deliberate approach by which the social work profession addressed diversity and multiculturalism. Consistent direction appears to exist in these documents such that multiculturalism is infused in its training practices and professional expectations (Fellin, 2000). Observations of similar examples exist in a review of the literature for disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and education. If a focus on multicultural competency is going to impact the counseling profession for the benefit of the greater society, it is necessary to approach the subject with specificity, and
conduct research that continues to move the profession away from deficit models of counseling (Lee & Delgado, 2007; Patterson, 2004; Tsang, Bogo, & George, 2003) when race is a consideration.

Counseling and Black American Women

The literature is replete with the works of scholars who agree on this aspect of counseling African Americans: cultural context is a focal point of their lives. A review by this researcher of literature specific to counseling and counselor training most commonly produced three theoretical approaches with respect to counseling Black American women. These most common methods cited include Afrocentric, womanist, and feminist approaches.

Afrocentric Approach

The Afrocentric movement draws its methodology from sociology and history to politics and education. As is the case with multiculturalism, there is no single inventor or revelator of Afrocentricity; however, Asante (1987) is cited most often for a paradigm that offers an alternative for viewing Black Americans apart from Eurocentric positions (Asante, 1987; Asante, 2005). Afrocentrism stands on the position that relationship (community) is central because humanity is a collective process (collectivism) found more desirable than individual achievement (Daniels, 2001). The remaining tenets of Afrocentrism are unity, harmony, spirituality, balance, and creativity (Wallace & Constantine, 2005). Likewise, it is the position of an afrocentrist that discrimination based on race, gender, and class requires bold condemnation. Furthermore, as an extension all Afrocentric analysis is a critique on supremacy, hierarchy, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression.
Wallace and Constantine (2005) researched African American college students who ranged in age from 18 to 35 seeking to learn whether Afrocentric values had a favorable impact on counseling help-seeking behavior among Black Americans regardless of gender. These scholars discovered the more an individual adheres to an Afrocentric perspective on life, the less likely that individual is to seek psychological services when in need, and likewise is directed by perceived stigma about counseling and psychotherapy. Wallace and Constantine are cautious about generalizing the results of the study to reflect the behavior of all Black men and women, particularly college students and those within the age range of study. Taking these things into consideration, Afrocentrism as an activist form of meeting client needs may not provide clients with the desired outcome; however, if by Afrocentrism a counselor means to emphasize for therapeutic purposes the positive aspects of an African heritage, then greater exploration within the counseling field is necessary (Wallace & Constantine).

**Womanist Therapy**

Williams (2005) found the search for one approach to counseling Black American women fruitless. The application of a single style has the potential to diminish other areas of a woman’s identity. Williams said:

Afrocentric and feminist theories have made major contributions to understanding how social constructions of race and gender affect mental health, yet because race and gender are compartmentalized in Afrocentric and feminist discourse, these theories are limited in their analyses of the relationship among multiple cultural variables (p. 282).

Furthermore, Williams argued that embedded within Afrocentrism are concepts that generalize traits believed rooted in Africa without regard to gender differences. The absence of a framework that integrates gender into its analysis is contradictory when only an Afrocentric methodology is applied to the worldview perspectives of working with
Black families without considering the role of women. Within this discussion Williams acknowledges that each approach has benefits, yet the womanist approach appears to offer the most potential as a therapeutic intervention as noted by its emerging presence in the counseling literature (Carter & Banks, 1996; Moradi & Subich, 2003; Williams, 1999). According to Williams (2005), the shaping of context by drawing on the links between history and contemporary struggles can make therapy situated in womanist ideology “powerful.” Comprehensively, the use of a womanist model has the potential for a wellspring of counseling possibilities for counselors who serve Black American women, particularly when they counter challenges such as racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. Strategies for integrating the multiple identities consistent with Black American women include directing the therapeutic focus on three key womanist areas: 1) maintaining commitment to context; 2) maximizing a longstanding womanist pattern of advocacy and social justice; and 3) effectively utilizing support systems.

Likewise, Moradi (2005) places emphasis on using forms of oppression to help counselors understand the impact of racism, sexism, and class on the development of identity for women. In support, Moradi suggested the womanist identity model as presented does not offer a process by which females come to know themselves as women. Moradi posits that qualitative research methods could enhance theory through integrating the direct stories of women.

_Feminist Theory_

There is no shortage within the counseling literature regarding psychotherapy and feminism-based treatment strategies. Moreover, a discussion of feminist identity models has been discussed previously in this chapter. In spite of the aforementioned discussion,
room remains to consider the seldom-noted topic of Black feminism or critical race feminism within the counseling professional body of literature. Few (2007) recognizes Black feminism as a “standpoint theory” that transcends the limitations of traditional identity theories. Black feminism addresses the need for holistic understanding from an outlook inclusive of both race and gender simultaneously. Black women exist within a personal space that is defined by multiple systems of oppression. Few refers to the location as an “intersectionality matrix” where marginalization is validated and subjugated through ideologies that define “otherness.”

Few (2007) makes this application of countering oppression and sociohistorical context within the frame of family studies. Nevertheless, the opportunities afforded through Black feminist theory and critical race feminism appear appropriate for the study under discussion. Arguably there are similarities that first make the two indistinguishable; however there are meaningful differences. Critical race feminism is the byproduct of legal studies and critical race theory, whereas Black feminism emerged as a continuation of grassroots activism and scholarship grounded in social science and humanities. Black feminism is a consolidation of many efforts to bring a representative feminist viewpoint to a diverse audience. Critical race feminists may not identify themselves as a feminist of any kind regardless of race. Concerning the latter, the outcome of the work outweighs the defining title or ideology. As with womanist theory, the guiding philosophy behind feminist theory as a therapeutic framework is a conceptual focus on ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation as important factors across situations for women (Herlihy & Corey, 2005). Counselors who adopt a feminist perspective to therapy consider intrapsychic, interpersonal, and external factors as causes that bring clients into therapy. They also
recognize that all forms of oppression have consequences apart from gender. In other words, a feminist therapist works within a therapeutic setting and as an advocate to confront all forms of oppression.

Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory as Frameworks for Exploration

Critical Theory

Critical theory has evolved from what once was a radical means of opposing the bourgeoisie of the 1800s to an analytical lens through which to view opportunities to liberate historically marginalized people groups, such as racial minorities, Native Americans, women, and those in the sexual minority (Hansen, 2008). In essence, critical theory mandates an analysis of power thereby inspiring the pursuit of social justice while excising marginalization and oppression (Hansen). Unlike some of the commonly applied stage models of identity formation used within the counseling profession, critical theory seeks growth at whatever situation an individual is in. Freire (2006), in a discussion of critical consciousness, calls the oppressed into action regardless of his or her place in the struggle for personal liberation. This calls upon the oppressed to view themselves as capable and active participants in their pursuits, and to establish a portrait of themselves as fully human.

Within the context of research and education, Schwandt (1990) described critical theory as a means for exploring oppression in such a way that the resulting research outcome is empowering and emancipating. Furthermore, it is characterized by a consciousness-probing critique of the manner by which lived experiences can be distorted by “false consciousness” or “disinterested knowledge” (Schwandt). That is to say, a critical science epistemology addresses what researchers speak to as the reduction of false
effects as part of the human experience. Where critical theory broadly speaks to an awakened consciousness about patterns of oppression and possibilities for liberation, critical race theory as described below offers specificity in teaching change.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) challenges the experiences of Whites as the definitive example of what is normal in society, and grounds its position in the life experiences uniquely characteristic of racial minorities (Taylor, 1988). Bell (1992) put forward a theory that comments on the reality of social equity in the United States, and the “permanence” of prejudice in American culture. Through its attention to context, critical race theory brings focus to the relationship between social and experiential existences and racial oppression and the subsequent racial dynamics (Taylor). Those who reject critical race theory do so with a disdain for race as a central unit of analysis, use of narrative and storytelling as research methodology, and perceived overuse of social inequity as rationale for research (Darder & Torres, 2004). Likewise, those who ascribe to a critical race philosophy do so with the belief that realistic lived experiences connected to racial oppression continue to exist with the endorsement of Whites and the belief that African Americans and other marginalized populations are “worthy of suppression” (Taylor).

Convergence between the races occurs when there is a mutual beneficial outcome. Bell (1992) illuminates this point in his parable of “The Space Traders.”

Historically, white Americans have been willing to sacrifice the well-being of people of color for their economic self interests and that continued subordination of blacks is sustained by those economic and legal structures that promote white privilege (p. 127).
In all, CRT is based on several presuppositions (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995):

- Racism is not a single, isolated event. It is endemic to U.S. society and remains legally, culturally, and psychologically ingrained in American life.
- Civil Rights legislation intended to remedy systemic racism has proven ineffective in its intent because such laws are purposefully undermined, thus warranting reinterpretation.
- Arguments for neutrality, meritocracy, objectivity, and color blindness mask the self-interests of dominant group in the U.S.
- A need exists for the reformulation of legal doctrine and respect for subjectivity in considering the perspectives of those victimized by racism.
- Property rights overshadow human rights.
- First-person accounts and personal narratives have relevance.
- Perceptions of democracy misrepresent the inequity of capitalism.

Democracy and capitalism are separate and distinct constructs.

The connection between CRT and education is a link that is strengthened broadly through the work of academicians who examine the influence of race in higher education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), racial discourse, and educational theory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). When CRT surfaced in a literature search for discussions related to counseling, the facilitators of such dialogue are often found outside the specialization of counselor education and are most often found to have a home in counseling psychology. As a result, one could conclude that the depth to which CRT creates discussions around the searing impact of racial oppression is missing from the process of preparing
counselors. That is to say, the application of a critical race framework to counselor training has the potential to bring new information to the counseling profession by broadening existing training and practice paradigms that include multiculturalism, diversity, and social justice. Moreover, as it pertains to scholarly activities, Taylor (1998) argued for the consideration of a position that authenticates the voices of racial minorities and reuses challenging and critical questions about education research, and what is described as the covert practice of "resegregation" in higher education.

Finally, the application of a critical race theoretical foundation to the discussion of Black American womanhood development can help direct necessary considerations in meaningful directions rather than have them redirected toward longstanding topics that marginalize such as culinary ability, talent for entertaining, athleticism, or perceived sexual prowess. CRT has taken these and similarly distorted and narrow aspects of Black American culture to emphasize the nescient pabulum that energizes racism and perpetuates inequality. Throughout his text, Bell (1992) reiterated the protracted impact of racism in U.S. society and the inability to eliminate it from America’s relational lexicon.

The use of a critical race theory framework to address various specialization areas within counselor education is apparent, yet scarce. Counselor educators, who are educated in the pedagogy of teaching and counseling, have discovered CRT to be an applicable framework to assess the programmatic challenges in gifted education for African American students (Henfield, Moore & Wood, 2008) and the attitudes and perceptions of African American male attitudes toward school counseling (Moore, Henfield & Owens, 2008). Other fields within the helping professions have moved
toward using CRT to advance discussion about race and professional practice. For instance, within Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT), critical race theory has been used to confront therapist perceptions of race and racism as "key informants" of MFT practice (McDowell & Jeris, 2004) and to interpret knowledge about race and racism within marriage and family therapy education (McDowell, 2004).

Finally, in counseling psychology, the essence of CRT, though not the specific theory, informs much of the literature that uses the concept of racial microaggressions. Microaggressions surface as unintended, deliberate, verbal, nonverbal, or visual forms of insults directed toward people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Attention to microaggression has been documented as actions against counseling and counseling psychology faculty (Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, Summer 2008); against Black Americans and the implications for counseling (Sue, Nadal, Capodilupo, et al., Summer 2008); displayed in everyday Black American life (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008); related to the implications for clinical practice (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, et al, 2007); in student affairs (Sue & Constantine, 2007); and in cross-racial counseling relationships (Constantine, 2007).

Summary

This chapter reviews foundational works that support the need for the study of Black American women and contemporary counseling literature related to this population. Sufficient documentation within counseling literature confronts the need for theories and concepts that do not frame the identity development of women within the framework of Caucasian men. Ways of distinguishing the voice of women from men have traditionally come through feminist and affiliated movements. Nevertheless, the
absence of alternative frameworks for conceptualizing the experiences of Black American females continues. Despite efforts to reshaped feminist ideology to fit the needs of Black American females, there appears to be space for additional theories that may provide a focal point for understanding women of color within the context of their lives and wellbeing. In light of the opportunity to shape the literature base as it concerns gender and racial identity development, critical race theory is emerges as a potential paradigm to advance this dialogue within the confines multicultural education in the counseling profession.

Furthermore, this study unfolds in subsequent chapters to focus exclusively on research concerning the African American female and her personal understanding of womanhood. Moreover, the implications from a study that explores conjointly the spectrum of identities that realistically reflect the experiences of African American women can potentially enrich counseling practice and encourage multicultural competence among newly trained counseling professionals. Chapter three outlines the methodology for researching the phenomena of womanhood as it relates to Black American women, using critical theory and critical race theory as the primary theoretical frameworks.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative research methods to explore the question of how African American females describe themselves using the construct womanhood. More specifically, this study used phenomenology to help determine the context and events that influenced their identity development as women. Focus groups of counselor educators and counselors were also utilized to address the implications of the findings from the interviews. In this chapter, the inquiry paradigm and research methodology are addressed followed by a description of the process that drives the study. The third section of this chapter discusses the sampling and recruitment procedures, rationales for the criteria by which participants were selected, and the characteristics of participants. Finally, the chapter concludes with a description of the procedures for collecting and analyzing data for both the individual interviews with Black American women and the focus groups that discussed the findings that resulted from the interviews.

Inquiry Paradigm: Critical Science

One could argue that any one of several epistemological genres within phenomenological research methodology could have served this project sufficiently well. However, when considering the overarching theme of this research, the population under study, and the impact of this study on counselor preparation, it seemed that critical theory (also critical science) was the most applicable model. This study is founded on critical race theory, described in chapter two. Simply stated, critical theory allows space for the consideration of oppression toward achieving a research outcome that is empowering and
emancipating (Schwandt, 1990). It is characterized by a consciousness-probing critique of the manner by which lived experiences can be distorted by "false consciousness" or "disinterested knowledge" (Schwandt, p. 268). Thus, a critical science epistemology is concerned with what researchers speak to as the reduction of false effects as part of the human experience. As discussed in the previous chapter, critical race theory (CRT) emerged from legal disciplines to find a place in education for scholars who seek to provide context to the experiences of persons of color in America. CRT provides various methods by which to undress racism and White supremacy as the norms in U.S. society (Denzin, 2008). CRT questions the notion the anticipated benefits of the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. have been attained. Likewise, CRT contests the idea that change among the races is a long, laborious struggle, therefore any gains made warrant appreciation (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Finally, Ivey and Ivey (2001) describe race and other forms of oppression as central issues in the counseling and therapy process because both serve as perpetrators of recurring trauma caused by "living in a racist and oppressive society" (p. 222). With these things in mind, the application of a critical race theory paradigm helps to help add context in a way that seldom is applied in the counseling literature to Black American women.

Research Methodology

This research methodology section contains several segments. The first portion provides discussions of qualitative research, phenomenology, in-depth interviewing as a data collection strategy, and the use of a focus group of counselors/counselor educators to apply the findings from this study to counseling and counselor education. Second, the role of the researcher as an instrument for data collection and analysis is clarified, and
researcher bias and assumptions are illuminated. Finally, the proposed research questions used to guide this study are presented.

Overview of Qualitative Research and Phenomenology

Qualitative Research

Biklen and Casella (2007) described the researcher’s focus on maintaining the substance of discovering the process of making meaning as a fundamental characteristic of qualitative research. Commitment to context is a necessity specific to this study and as such, the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology are supported in counseling literature when discussing the utility of qualitative research.

Qualitative research embodies a different meaning depending on which of five perspectives are in use. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) describe qualitative research as possessing a multimethod focus that has an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. Qualitative researchers make use of natural settings in the effort to interpret, or make sense of, phenomena by understanding the meaning people assign to them. When considering the population under study, the ability to capture the stories of Black American women in their daily environments made phenomenology most fitting to uncover the phenomena called womanhood. The end effort was to better conceptualize the subject matter at hand, whether routine or problematic, according to the described meaning of the human experience.

A qualitative method, namely phenomenology, was sought for this study because it allows for the deliberate use and collection of several empirical materials such as case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, and interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts (Denzin & Lincoln). The personal narratives of individual life experiences were captured in this study by using open interviews. The
contributions of qualitative methodologies to the field of counseling have been thoroughly noted, particularly discussions that emphasize patterns of meaning making, context, language, and culture through data collection methods such as narratives, ethnography, participant observations, interviews, and document analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). There are several strengths to qualitative research. A major strength of qualitative research is its dependence on a process directed by rich data sources, context that informs, and meaning. Schwandt (2001) described the nature of an experience is defined as the discovery of the “life world” as it is lived, felt, undergone, and made sense of. For the Black American females who participated in this study, this is the essence of how they arrived at an understanding of who they are as women. That is to say, each person in the study could encounter similar life circumstances and yet recognize a different outcome based on how they viewed the experience.

*Phenomenology*

Schwandt (2001) wrote that the interpretive and descriptive opportunities found within phenomenology make it an appropriate tool to uncover internalized events buried within the unconscious world of the participant. Phenomenological qualitative research casts an exploratory eye on the “life world” of those individuals under examination to reach a state of knowing about their lived experiences in ways that are void of preconceived notions about outcome and meaning (Hatch, 2002). With specific regard to this study, the intent was to examine the ways in which African American females assigned meaning to the life experience known as womanhood, thereby resulting in the implementation of interpretive coding. The properties available within phenomenological research permit the opportunity for one to reflect how research participants explain “life
The expectation of a phenomenological study is that a reader understands the essence of the experience and recognizes the existence of a single unifying meaning such that the reader leaves “feeling that ‘I understand better what it is like to experience that.’” (Paisley & Reeves, 2001, p.484).

Interviewing

Interviewing is one of several data collection methods available through phenomenological study. In this case, interviewing is the method for exploring the context of Black female life experiences. While there are multiple strategies by which to capture the individual concrete experiences of participants under study, Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggest a primary method for collecting the “deep meaning” of experience is to use in-depth interviewing to capture the personal words of participants. Researchers have noted clear benefits to implementing an interview approach to qualitative study. Seidman (2006) describes in-depth, phenomenological based interviewing as a combination of life history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology. His suggestion describes a methodology that expands beyond a mundane pattern of just asking questions and receiving answers. Noted strengths of in-depth interviewing are the accommodating means by which data are collected quickly, and the possibility for immediate follow up and clarification.

In summary, in-depth interviewing is not designed to further scientific quests for answers to questions or to seek outcomes to hypotheses. Its purpose is to satiate an interest in understanding the daily experiences of others as they embark on a life course, and the meaning applied to experiences along the journey (Seidman, 2006). Todorov, as
cited in Seidman (2006, p. 9) suggested the presumption of sufficient knowledge about the experiential existence of others is “anti-intellectual” and at one end somewhat oppressive to those with untold stories. In essence, it is arguably unreasonable to expect scholarly inquiry to provide perfect knowledge about others, and to do so would discount the individuality that characterizes each person’s life. This is a notion that aligns with the principles of professional counseling in that empathic expression is tantamount to the counseling process and is formed on the principle of respect for a client’s worldview without cheapening that view under the pretext of “knowing.” Thus, the process of in-depth interviewing in relation to this study creates the opportunity to comprehend others by gaining access to their subjective understanding and actions within the context of lived experiences. Seidman posited rudimentary assumptions about in-depth interviewing research, such as that the meaning people make of their experiences affects the way they manifest those experiences.

**Focus Group**

Focus groups allow for the production of text that can be incorporated into the overall analysis of data. In this specific case, two focus groups were used to help further the discussion of the findings and address the possible implications of the findings from the interviews with Black American women for the disciplines of counseling practice and counselor preparation. As noted by Marshall and Rossman (2006), a benefit of focus group studies that has specific relevance to this project is the ability to check tentative conclusions about the consequence of the research. The addition of a focus group discussion to the research design of this study was not unusual as described by Hatch (2002). Focus groups are believed to supplement qualitative data. In this instance,
however, a focus group strategy was not applied to the primary population under study, but to a secondary population comprised of counselor educators and practicing counselors.

*Researcher's Role in Qualitative Research*

With in-depth interviewing as a primary method of data collection, the researcher is the primary instrument. My role in this study was that of a researcher seeking to understand through the words of others’ everyday experiences that help create an individual worldview. As a doctoral student seeking an advanced degree in counselor education and supervision, such information was viewed as potentially beneficial to my own development as a multicultural competent counselor educator and practitioner. As an African American female, I believe it is incumbent upon me to pursue professional opportunities that increase the understanding of my community. When searching the literature that shapes the understanding and practices of those in the helping professions — counseling, psychology, and social work — I would like to sense the voices of African American women represented. Presently, that has been not my experience as a counselor educator-in-training when I consider the scholarly work of my profession in totality. Through the opportunity to serve as a participant observer, I was able to facilitate and experience this discussion with the empathy necessary for understanding another’s personal experiences while remaining conscious yet cautious of my own journey as a Black female.

*Researcher Bias and Assumptions*

Although I have biases that may be inherent to my race and gender that are rooted in my journey as part of a marginalized population, I considered these biases while
conceptualizing and executing this study. The humanities and the social sciences appear to have the best record for provoking thoughtful and scholarly discussion about the image and treatment of the Black American female. As I searched for similar discussion in the counseling field, I was left wanting, which in turn created feelings of invisibility as I prepared to embark full-time in the professional work of a counselor educator and practitioner. The combination of that feeling, along with the history of oppression that clearly and continuously defines the African American experience in the United States, helped to shape my perception of what it means to be a Black American woman. As a professional journalist first, then as a counselor educator in training, I watched the disproportional distribution of opportunity for Black Americans compared to the dominant culture. This perception has been well supported by government and academic research. Nevertheless, it appears that change has not taken place at the same rate for Black Americans, particularly the Black American adult female. When considering my generation, that is, individuals between the ages of 35 to 50, opportunities are greater than for those before me, however, occasions remain during which I felt as though my education, talent, and work experience were not sufficient to allow me access to the opportunities I was seeking. It is my awareness of internalized oppression and the impact I have observed and experienced as a member of the African American community that I felt a responsibility to safeguard while conducting this study of Black American women. Therefore, it was my obligation and intent as part of this scholarly pursuit to remain as neutral and unbiased as possible while I collected, analyzed, and reported on the data used in this study.
In narrowing potential areas of researcher bias into four succinct statements, the following thoughts emerged:

1. First, while I do not profess to have ideas or thoughts about how other Black American women come to discover the meaning of womanhood for themselves, I am not convinced that some of the ideological concepts pressed upon Black female clients are appropriate either. As a result of this, it was necessary for me to bracket my uncertainty about theoretical concepts such as afrocentrism, feminism, and womanism so that I did not overlook the presence of these concepts should they emerge as themes expressed in the present study.

2. Related to the above, I wondered if the presence of afrocentric, feminist, or womanist ideas are unconscious ways of being for Black American women and as such will naturally show up in the discussions of women without them being identified as such.

3. Third, I wondered if perhaps Black American women are introduced to womanhood through life experiences shaped by racism and oppression.

4. Finally, I wondered if Black American females most often learned about womanhood through their culturally unique environment, religious affiliations, shared knowledge among peers, vicarious living, and/or mentorship.

Research Questions

The questions designed for this study are intended to examine the ways that adult Black American females came to an understanding about who they were as women. The expectation was that such probes would give rise to well-informed research about the
essence of womanhood for Black American females. Ultimately, the goal was to ask questions of Black females that fostered a better understanding of the following:

1. How do adult Black American females ages 35 and older identify the time in which they became a woman?

2. How have various life experiences, events, and milestones contributed to the development of a concept of womanhood for Black American females ages 35 and older?

3. How do adult Black American females determine what it means to be a woman?

4. Comparatively, how do Black American females ages 35 and older currently view themselves as women?

5. How can common examples of lived experiences among Black females contribute to the body of knowledge in the counseling profession?

In seeking the outcome of such questions, these areas were explored regarding commonalities in the ways Black American females define womanhood, and ways to use these commonalities to provide psychotherapy to Black American women that is multiculturally sensitive.

**Sampling**

Marshall and Rossman (2006) in their discussion of qualitative research stated the examiner should present a strategy for sampling when the focus of the study is on a particular population. Sampling is the process by which participants are determined to be eligible for participation in the research study (Schwandt, 2001). Likewise, Hatch (2002) posited that context and identifying participants are equally important events in the
development of a study. A mixed purposeful sampling strategy was used to select participants. Hatch (2002) described this strategy as a combination of various sampling strategies that fit with formal interviewing. Purposeful sampling is intended to select participants based upon their relevance to established criteria, the phenomenon under examination, and the research questions posed (Schwandt, 2001). This researcher elected to use a combination of strategies in order to include participants with different experiences of the same phenomena, while also seeking rich information that directly addressed the research questions. The following criteria guided participation in this study:

- Each participant had to be a Black American born citizen with at least one fore parent who is of African heritage and has principally resided in the United States.
- Each participant had to be a biologically assigned female.
- All participants had to participate in an interview conducted in English seeking information on how they describe the impact of various events on their development as a woman, and how womanhood had taken on meaning in their lives.
- Each participant had to be at least age 35 at the time of the study.
- None of the participants were intimately known by the researcher.

*Individual Participant Recruitment*

Interview participants were recruited through a diverse representation of community networks that permitted access to a wide range of African American women. This network included religious affiliations, various professional organizations, historically African-American sororities, GLBT networks, and acquaintance referrals. These sources were chosen based on their abilities to provide access to a diverse group of
African American females in terms of age, socioeconomic status, educational background, and sociocultural beliefs. Even within the African American population, diversity is critical to guard against the bias of homogeneity in thought and life experiences.

In order to achieve the above, a distribution list was developed of African American churches and community organizations located within the research area in an upper Midwestern state that could serve as resources for recruiting adult women to serve as participants. Communication to recruit participants occurred primarily via telephone contact, first-class mail and e-mail distribution. Specially, a letter and flyer (see Appendices C and D) that detailed the purpose of the study was distributed to potential gatekeepers within the organizations described. For gatekeepers with a gathering place where members typically met, the researcher asked that the hard copy of the flyer be placed in a common area as the gatekeeper deemed appropriate. Examples of common areas could have been classroom bulletin boards, fellowship hall bulletin boards or female restroom areas.

Given the nature of this research, criteria for selecting settings from which to recruit potential participants was determined based on several factors: the potential to provide access to a rich mix of individuals, the opportunity to establish trusting relationships with the individuals under study, the ability to conduct a study that was ethically responsible and reasonably credible, and plausible entry.

Potential participants who received notice of the opportunity to participate in this research study were encouraged to contact the researcher through the information provided to express interest in participating. The investigator then responded to potential
participants to further explain the study, answer questions, and clarify the participant’s interest (See Appendix E). Once eligibility and interest were determined, the investigator scheduled a time to meet with the participant for the initial interview. Participants received a consent form during the first meeting prior to the beginning of the first interview.

Focus Group Participants

Two focus groups were conducted with counselors/counselor educators after the interview data were collected, analyzed, and written up. Focus group participants were sought from institutions whose counselor education programs were based on curriculum guidelines established by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs (CACREP). Second, counselor educators who could provide a multicultural perspective as a member of an underrepresented group were preferred participants; however, individuals who also could bring a diversity of thought and experience also were selected for participation. Racial and gender diversity in the composition of the focus group were sought to enrich the feedback available by accessing a variety of experiences and interests. The investigator worked to achieve a diverse group that would accommodate multiple perspectives on this topic.

Focus Group Characteristics

Scheduling of mutually convenient times and locations necessitated the formation of two focus groups. Focus Group 1 consisted of three individuals: two African American males and one African American female. Of this group, all three were fully licensed professional counselors. Two had earned doctorates in counselor education and supervision and were working in clinical settings and teaching part-time in university
settings. One participant was a doctoral student who was working at a community agency. Focus Group 2 consisted of two individuals: an African American female and a White male. Both had extensive experience in agency and clinical settings. In addition, both were university faculty in counselor education departments. A single counselor educator was unable to attend either focus group session and provided commentary about and analysis of the findings through written communication. This individual was an African American female, with extensive teaching and clinical experiences and expertise in multicultural issues. While this individual’s contribution was outside the focus group process originally intended, the contributor’s reflections were included and were analyzed along with the other data from the focus groups.

Procedures

*Data Collection Method*

Upon collection of signed informed consent of selected participants, open-ended, in-depth interviews were conducted to obtain information from the participants. An open-ended interview guide is flexible in its structure, thereby allowing participants the freedom to engage in the data collection process based on their individual experiences as Black American females, and how they derived meaning from those experiences within the context of this study. In discussing the use of open-ended questions, Hatch (2002) stated that the power of qualitative interviewing when used in this way allows participants opportunities to share their unique perspectives in their own words, thereby bringing clarity to a problem where little information is known. An interview guide (see Appendix F) was used to ensure consistency in the method used to initiate discussion about the topic at hand and to provide structure where needed, while also permitting
follow up questions, probes, and the flexibility to explore other areas shared by the participants. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

Two separate interviews were conducted with 10 participants, which is consistent with phenomenological study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Seidman, 2006). The researcher met with each individual for an initial interview and a follow up interview. The amount of time required to conduct the initial interviews ranged from 1 hour, 23 minutes to 2 hours, 6 minutes for an average length of 1 hour, 56 minutes. Follow up interviews ranged from 1 hour, 7 minutes to 2 hours, 4 minutes for an average of 1 hour, 55 minutes. Completion of all interviews occurred within two months from the time of the first individual session, with an average of 10 days between each interview. An introductory session via telephone explained the nature of the research, address any participant concerns, explain the consent document, and schedule the first session for a time that is convenient for the participant. The first direct meeting confirmed the participant’s consent to participate in the research study, address any new questions, and launch a preliminary discussion of the topic.

The content of the second interview helped to identify themes that emerged during the first meeting. Prior to the second interview session, each participant received a transcript of the first interview and the opportunity to correct or expand upon the responses from the first interview. Participants reserved the opportunity to discuss initial reactions or clarifications to the first interview session at the second meeting. The second interview session allowed the researcher to correct, clarify or reflect upon content presented during the first session. In addition, the second interview provided a chance for each participant to raise new thoughts that surfaced following the first interview.
Upon completion of the interview and transcription processes, each participant was presented with an opportunity to review her individual case summary from the within case analyses and the preliminary findings from the cross-cases analyses as a form of member check for accuracy. Three participants responded and offered general accolades regarding the depth of the material shared. Of those who responded, each shared feelings of excitement about the potential impact of the individual stories shared. No corrective or concerning feedback was offered.

One area of researcher sensitivity concerned the potential to identify participants from their stories. This was not an expressed concern of participants. Overall, several steps were instituted to maintain participant confidentiality throughout the study. All information collected as part of this research study was stored in a secured file cabinet in the researcher’s office. Each participant selected a pseudonym to serve as a cover for the person’s identity and to help ensure anonymity and confidentiality. In cases where the participant expressed difficulty determining a name to use, the researcher provided examples of names or suggestions. All audiotape labels, transcripts, and demographic questionnaires contained the pseudonym, and the researcher maintained a separate master list with the names of the participants and the corresponding pseudonyms. Once data was collected and analyzed, the master list was destroyed.

As the purpose of this study was to examine the ways that adult Black American females made decisions about their womanhood, work toward achieving the stated goal occurred by using the following prompts to initiate discussion about what it meant to be Black American woman (also see the Interview Guide in Appendix F):

- Tell me what it means to be a Black woman in the United States.
Tell me about the time when you first learned you were a woman.

Tell me about specific instances in your life that you attributed to being a woman.

(Life experiences, events, and milestones contributed to your ideas about womanhood.)

Tell me about how your meaning of womanhood has changed compared to when you first thought of yourself as a woman.

Tell me how you believe females in your peer group are viewed as women.

These interview prompts were posed with the goal of discovering salient outcomes about the ideas of Black American women about their identity as women. Furthermore, it was believed that any new information to arise from this study could help bolster the body of counseling literature specific to the intersection of the Black American female experience and therapy.

Focus Group Format

Focus group members were provided by electronic mail with a draft of the preliminary findings from the individual interviews, an outline of the preliminary findings and a set of questions to help guide the focus group discussion. Overall, focus group members were asked to discuss what the emerging findings might mean for counseling African American women and training counselors to work effectively with this population. To help structure the discussion with that outcome in mind, both focus groups were presented with a copy of the following questions:

I. General Impressions
   a. Please share your initial thoughts about the findings from the study.
   b. Tell me about what you discovered in the findings that reflected new information about Black American women.
c. Tell me about what you discovered in the findings that reflected information that is consistent with what you already know about Black American women.

II. Counseling Practice
a. In what ways do the findings help to inform the ways that professional counselors serve Black women in a therapeutic setting?
b. In what ways, if any, do the findings address unique needs that might be addressed in the counseling of Black American women?
c. How might the study findings inform counseling of female African-American teens and young adults?

III. Counselor Education
a. Tell me about salient points you identified in the findings as they relate to counselor education.
b. What do you see in the findings that could contribute to the ways in which counselors-in-training are trained to work with Black female clients?
c. What about these findings might inform Multicultural Counseling, particularly as they relate to an understanding of Black American women?
d. What is the potential impact of the findings on research in the areas of gender and/or racial identity development?
e. What did you discover in the findings that could help to improve the ways in which counselors are trained? (Include school counseling, marriage and family counseling, community counseling, etc.)
f. What do you see as the potential impact of the findings on traditional counseling theories as applied to this population? (CBT, Person Centered, Alderian, etc.). Where do they align, not align?

Participants met for two hours to discuss the findings through an open dialogue that was facilitated by the researcher. In a limited number of cases, not all questions were asked; however, content related often surfaced as part of the natural flow of discussion, most notably those that related to training, theory and competency. Audiotape and transcription captured the content of each focus group session.

Data Analysis

Experiences that occur during the course of an individual's life are shaped by events that become of essence of their beliefs and worldview. Ideas believed to be true
become reality and are therefore subject to inquiry (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The way
in which data collected through this research was analyzed was critical to preserving
trustworthiness and credibility. Hence, the strategy for analyzing this data was of great
consequence.

By using the opportunity to assess and compare all data sources as they occurred,
the researcher had the opportunity to evaluate and contrast information collected from
each interview upon completion. Additionally, focus centered on the real-time
management of data for both the within-case and cross-case analysis as suggested by
Miles and Huberman (1994). Real-time management of data means that the researcher
attends to data as it is collected. In this case, as each new interview was completed, the
audio tape was reviewed for clarity and completion, interview transcription began
immediately, after which each transcript was edited and reviewed. Responsive data
management in this form also helped the researcher to address immediately potential
pitfalls such as incomplete, missing or unusable data. Finally, journaling helped capture
expanded ideas, new revelations, and other observations in the field.

In addition, a logistical procedure that incorporates summarized steps for
conducting existential-phenomenology study by Pollio, Graves, & Arfken (2006) was
implemented to assist with analyzing data. The specific steps are outlined as follows:

Step 1: Provided potential subjects with detailed information about the study, and
obtained consent to participate in the study. Once informed consent document was signed
and returned to the researcher, each participant was provided with a demographic
information sheet to complete (see Appendix B). Informed consent and demographic
information was collected from participants prior to the interview. This step helped the researcher in developing rapport with the participant.

Step 2: Conducted initial interview using the interview guide described (see Appendix E).

Step 3: Completed journal entry following each interview session, noting salient themes discussed and significant ideas to note in subsequent interview, key points of particular importance to the participant, and any points that resonated with the researcher.

Step 4: Transcribe the initial interview. Initially the researcher used both a digital and audio recorder to capture session data with each participant with the intent to use a professional transcriber. A lack of transcriber proficiency in understanding the racial context of the material warranted a change in this step. Following the initial three interviews, the researcher assumed responsibility for transcribing all remaining interviews. The researcher used the change to enhance familiarity with the content of each interview, thus helping to create a richer understanding of each participant’s experiences. While listening to the recorded interviews repeatedly the researcher was better able to identify salient points, and noted these observations in a journal for later reference. This process occurred for each participant.

Step 5: The researcher reviewed each transcript in its entirety for accuracy. Upon completion and verification of each interview transcript, the researcher reviewed each transcribed account of the first interview session to identify recurring themes, similarities in experiences and language, and emerging questions for the second interview stage. Once a transcript was reviewed, and potential themes identified and follow up questions were developed, the participant was contacted to arrange a second interview.
Step 6: Provided each participant with a copy of her transcribed initial interview to check for accuracy.

Step 7: Conducted second interview.

Step 8: Modified as needed the transcript of the first interviews based upon feedback obtained during the second interview. Steps 3-5 were repeated with the second interview transcripts.

Step 9: Identified new themes and units of meaning introduced following second stage interviews as reflected in field notes and participant feedback. After all interviews from the second session were transcribed, data was scoured for points of meaning. Coding of the individual interviews occurred manually by examining every line of each transcript in search for common phrases, discussion points, and salient themes. Within-case analysis took place using demographic information collected and context provided through individual interviews, and data recorded from journal entries.

Step 10: Cross-cases analyses were conducted by using commonly repeated experiences to create main domains for exploration. Identified domains were color coded and served as the main repositories for additional ideas that could speak to ideas and experiences that indicated womanhood. These domains became central themes that guided the cross-case data analysis. Further exploration of each domain yielded subcategories that were likewise coded according to domains identified. Each subcategory was reviewed and analyzed for further reduction into refined points as warranted about how Black American females came to understand themselves as women. This researcher also received feedback on the preliminary categories from her dissertation chair, and some were modified and clarified based upon this feedback.
Step 11: Formed a general description of phenomena identified. This is the first major part of chapter four.

Step 12: Member checking. Participants received a draft of their within case summary and the findings from the cross-case analyses. Participants could provide feedback on the findings from this portion of the study.

Focus Group Analysis

A process similar to that used for analyzing individual interviews was used to analyze data produced by focus group discussions, with one exception. NVivo 8, computer analysis software, supported the coding of responses from the focus group sessions. NVivo is a computer assisted qualitative data analysis program produced by QSR International Pty Ltd., a company based in Australia. While NVivo 8 offered an overabundance of options for handling qualitative data, in this study it was used essentially to code, organize and manage data that resulted from the focus group interviews and the written comments from one individual who was unable to attend the focus group meetings.

Theme Emergence

Consistent with Pollio, Graves, & Arfken (2006), the following steps for analyzing phenomenological data were used. The specific steps are outlined as follows:

Step 1: Provided potential participants with detailed information about the study, and obtained interest in participating in the study as a focus group participant. After obtaining agreement to participate, each participant received via email a draft copy of the initial study findings, an outline of the findings, and a copy of questions for their consideration.
Step 2: Based on participant availability, an initial focus group session was scheduled.

Step 3: Once scheduled, obtained informed consent from each counselor educator present prior to the start of the session.

Step 4: Facilitated focus group dialogue using the questions described as a guide (see Appendix J.)

Step 5: Took notes during focus group session, and completed journal entry noting potential themes discussed and key points of particular importance.

Step 6: Scheduled the second focus group session.

Step 7: Listened to the audiotape to ensure clarity and for information.

Step 8: Noted for journal key points that could serve as preliminary themes and initial observations from the first session.

Step 9: Researcher transcribed the first focus group session. Initially the researcher sought to conduct one focus group session; however, availability became an issue for some participants such that it required the scheduling of a second session.

Step 10: The researcher reviewed transcript from Focus Group 1 in its entirety for completion and clarity.

Step 11: Began setting up project in NVivo 8 beginning with sources such as the transcript and audiotape file from Focus Group 1.

Step 12: Facilitated second focus group session, and received written responses from one participant (identified as Focus Group 3).

Step 13: Repeated steps 7-10.

Step 14: Repeated step 12 for Focus Group 2 and Focus Group 3.
Step 15: Upon completion of each focus group transcript, the researcher reviewed each transcribed account informally to identify recurring themes, similarities in thoughts and language, and emerging questions.

Step 16: Used transcripts stored in NVivo 8 to sift through the data for similar language and thoughts expressed through all three Focus Groups. This was possible using a text search query called a word frequency. This particularly query allowed the researcher to scan for recurring words or phrases in selected sources. Text search queries can assist with the formation of codes.

Step 17: Reviewed the most frequently occurring words or phrases in all three sources (transcripts) for context and potential codes. Constructed an initial list of free nodes based on results from text search. Free nodes are created as needed in the coding process, and with the most complete description possible.

Step 18: Conducted second review of transcripts going line by line. Items that reflected a salient point became a free node. There were 523 free nodes created from this step.

Step 19: Placed free nodes into sets. Sets allowed the researcher to view the data in another way, and in smaller numbers, thus making the data easier to handle. Nodes help with the creation of codes. Sets are the grouping of ideas about similar nodes.

Step 20: Condensed nodes to reduce redundancy and overlap. Queries were used to identify overlapping areas and each node was reviewed thoroughly to identify redundancy. This step reduced the number of free nodes from 523 to 297. This increased data organization.
Step 21: Reviewed sets of free nodes for the most identified points. This step helped to reduce redundancy among free nodes and assisted with the development of coding labels. At the conclusion of this step 168 free nodes remained.

Step 22: Organized free nodes into tree nodes. Tree nodes serve as the main categories or codes for the data. Tree nodes have a hierarchy with the main categories serving as “parent” nodes and subcategories as “children” nodes. Identified tree nodes were color-coded and served as the main repositories for additional ideas that could address the impact of the findings on counselor training and practice. Further exploration of each node yielded subcategories that were likewise coded according to domains identified. Each subcategory was reviewed and analyzed for further reduction into refined points as warranted about how new information about Black American womanhood would benefit the counseling profession and services provided to Black woman.

Step 23: Formed a general description of impact on counselor education in relation to the phenomena identified. This is the second part of chapter four.

More specific to the study under discussion, the qualitative data analysis software was first used as an exploratory step. After transcribing the focus group sessions, the researcher reviewed the data in order to detect themes that arose from the information. Researcher notes from the live focus group session and subsequent to preparing the transcript served as the basis for ideas about possible categories for coding.

First, information within the transcriptions were examined using the text query feature in NVivo 8 to identify the top 100 frequently occurring words and/or phrases used by the focus group members (Silver & Fielding, 2008.) This step was significant because it helped to examine content from all counselor educator groups, and to develop a
preliminary idea of coding characteristics. The text query helped the researcher to determine common perspectives shared among focus group members. Additionally, this step enabled the researcher to examine terminology highlighted through the text query within the context of the focus group discussion, thus allowing for the ability keep track of salient themes and to eliminate less relevant points. The researcher also used the computer software to assist with the process of analytical coding. That is to say, NVivo 8 was used to help collect ideas and create categories from the data by examining each transcript line by line, and depositing coded items into repositories created as free nodes (general codes) in NVivo.

Focus group participants were able to address the findings through three sections of questions: general feedback, training centered thoughts, and practice-focused implications. Each category served as a collection point for free nodes (general codes) during the line-by-line analysis. What would have first appeared as a random category for thoughts about the findings eventually led to coding categories for concrete and relevant points. Ultimately, dialogue from the focus group about the findings from the analyses of the interviews with the Black women in this study likewise filtered into two primary domains of thought based on content shared, that being how training occurs and how counselors practice. Discussion points in the transcribed data that appeared to live within these two domains were coded as such. A second review of the data helped further refine coded items into three immediate themes that were the same for each domain: counselor awareness, counselor skills and counselor knowledge. Data that fit within these subcategories, 297 items, were coded as such using NVivo 8. Since this particular software allowed the researcher to further explore, reflect, and reconsider identified
themes, the data was considered a third time for additional subcategories and repeatedly reviewed to ensure a point of saturation had been reached. Again, a line-by-line review of the data continued until responses from focus group participants appeared repetitious. Participant quotes validated the selected themes.

Supplementary to its usage as part of data analysis, NVivo 8 also was one of multiple forms by which to ensure triangulation of the data. Triangulation is a method that can be used to maintain a measure of credibility (internal validity) in qualitative research studies. In this case, triangulation entailed using multiple sources of data in order to ensure as much as feasibly possible clarity of conclusions reached. NVivo 8 was part of the triangulation process implemented, along with conducting the actual focus groups, individual interviews with participants, carrying out member checks, reviewing audio recordings of data, transcribing data and formation of coding structures.

Summary

Outlined throughout this chapter are the rationale, context, and specified methodologies and procedures for conducting this research study that has sought to learn about Black American females and their ideas about womanhood. More specifically, readers can find in the section labeled “sampling” criteria for participant selection, and procedures for data collection and data analysis using a phenomenological approach. This study seeks to explore specific views about the salience of race and womanhood as a phenomenological event. The subsequent chapter will offer a summary of the findings that have resulted from the steps of data collection and analyses outlined in this methods chapter.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

Chapter 4 presents the findings to emerge from this study, which examines the ways in which Black American females ages 35 and older individually arrived at a womanhood identity. The report of the findings occurs in three parts. The first section includes a summary of the participants in this study. Included in this information are details about each participant’s marital status, socioeconomic status, educational background, family socioeconomic status, developmental ideas about womanhood, and contemporary ideas about womanhood. Also included is a chart that captures relevant demographic information about each participant (see Table 1). The second part of the chapter presents the results of the cross-case analyses of the interview data from all participants. This second segment examines key themes about womanhood development from the experiences of the participants. The third portion of the chapter contains the results from a focus group of counselors and counselor educators recruited to discuss the implications of the findings from the participant interviews for counseling and counselor education and training.

This phenomenological study used open-ended interviews in order to provide the most conducive method for allowing each participant the opportunity to express her own operational definition of womanhood. This method also created a means by which each participant could use her life experiences to establish a personal meaning of womanhood. Such interviews also encouraged each woman to expand upon individual notions and
corroborate others in rich detail about the ways in which their lived experiences came together to define personal thoughts about womanhood.

After thorough examination of the narratives, the researcher discovered there were several recurring threads revealed within the analysis of each participant’s interviews. These threads are referred to in this section as within-case themes. Upon further analysis of each narrative, this researcher noted the presence of salient points within each participant’s overall life narrative, such that it became necessary to identify such points in the formation of ideas about womanhood.

Summary of Participants

Short summaries that seek to capture the life stories of each participant are presented. Each participant selected for herself a pseudonym, some of which were common female names and others seemed more metaphorical. Participants were not queried as to their choice of pseudonym, although for some there appeared to be a connection between their individual personality as expressed through the interview process and the name selected.

Confidence

Confidence is a 37-year-old female who presently lives in the upper Midwest. She is married and has four children. She described herself as a full-time homemaker and a full-time supervisor for an independent daycare. She graduated from a nationally recognized urban high school with a strong scholarly reputation, and subsequently earned a bachelor’s degree from an equally prestigious historically Black university located in the South. Confidence described the upbringing she experienced in a home with a mother who worked various jobs before becoming an administrator in the judicial system and a
father who held a professional position. She said her family lived on a yearly income of $45,000 during her formative years; however, their financial status changed dramatically as her mother’s income increased after she earned a professional degree and began work in the legal profession. When asked about the time when she first thought of herself as a woman, Confidence stated her transition occurred with the birth of her first child, a daughter. She was 24 years old and moving toward graduation when she discovered she was pregnant. Confidence stated this life event prompted a change that included the ways in which she viewed herself physically and socially. The idea of motherhood prompted changes in her normally youthful attire to what she first described as having to “dress like a mom.” Confidence used words like “delightful, life-changing and positive” to describe her transition into motherhood. Some of the changes her new status prompted were the need to “buckle down, get a grip on life and get a grip on your finances.” She said coming to terms with the biological aspects of pregnancy, such as feeling the baby move and knowing that another life was growing in her womb, made her life appear different and gave rise to an internal need to be more “responsible” in her actions and decision making.

The subject matter of Confidence’s interviews focused on the theme of motherhood as an indicator of womanhood. For this participant, ongoing involvement and availability as a mother was important. Confidence discussed feelings that her mother missed opportunities to know and connect with her during formative years because her mother was working multiple jobs to provide for the family. Even though her mother worked fewer jobs once she graduated college and began a professional career, she still spent long hours apart from the children and home. As a result, when Confidence learned
she was pregnant with her first child, she chose the role of stay-at-home mother over professional. This is a choice that Confidence said she did not regret because it allowed her to spend time with her daughters and help prepare them to become “young women.”

Dorothy

Dorothy is a 54-year-old female. She was born in the Southwest and raised in the Midwest after her father relocated to the area when Dorothy was a toddler. She was raised in a blended family, although she did not learn until her late teens that the woman who raised her was not her biological mother. Dorothy said she often felt as though she was treated differently than the other children in her family, and believed it was because her hair and features were less Eurocentric than her siblings. Dorothy stated children teased her about everything from her body features to her teeth. Her need to love and for love produced three failed marriages: one abusive, another unfaithful and the last ill fated. Dorothy is permanently disabled from work and is working toward the completion of her high school diploma. She recounted many life episodes that others might consider “becoming a woman;” however, she attributed her introduction to womanhood as the time when she left an abusive marriage, returned to school, acquired her first job, and stepped into self-sufficiency. In her family of origin, Dorothy did not experience love in the way in which she was seeking it. Her relationship with her mother lacked affirmation, which propelled Dorothy into what she described as her first false experience of womanhood through sexual activity as a teen-ager.

For Dorothy, the essential aspect of her growth into womanhood centered on a theme built on self-acceptance and feelings of inadequacy. Her pursuit of self-esteem and acceptance as a woman resulted in a doomed teen-age marriage that nearly destroyed her
relationship with her parents or her own unintentional efforts to the same. She stated that while she endured pain through some of the life choices she made, ultimately she would not change the journey that shaped her into how she presently knows herself as a woman.

Miracle

Miracle is a 62-year-old female who was raised in the South but spent most of her adult life living along the East Coast. She currently is retired and resides in the Midwest. Miracle earned a bachelor’s degree and worked her entire career in the technology field. Miracle rejected what seem to be traditional events in the female rite of passage such as marriage, childbirth or puberty. Instead, she stated she recognized that she was a woman when she left to attend a college hundreds of miles away from her family home. The participant described the event as a moment of independence because she was the first person in her large family to attend college. The decision to attend the college of her choice created a stormy relationship between Miracle and her father, such that he threatened to disown her. Nevertheless, the decision to pursue the college scholarship opportunity she had been given marked the beginning of her emergence into a self-empowered woman. The participant described herself as normally passive. She believes her stance demonstrated to her three younger sisters that education as a key to independence from their father and the circumstance of their social class was possible. Miracle stated she was raised by a well-meaning but controlling and often mentally abusive father.

A central theme to surface for Miracle was the rejection of ideology shaped by patriarchal ideals. Evidence of this analysis can be supported in the details of her paternal relationship with her father, her rejection of socially constructed notions about gender-
based roles in the family and workplace, and her use of education as a link to self-empowerment.

**Patience**

Patience is a 47-year-old Black American female who lives in a rural Midwestern community. She is married and the mother of two children. The participant has earned a bachelor’s degree and currently works as an advocate for youth. Patience was raised in a family of six children with a single mother. Patience recalled her father leaving the family when she was approximately 6 years old. Although he remained in the same town as the participant, her father did not visit or contribute financially to the family beyond what was court-mandated. As a result, Patience stated she believes she became a woman as a young teenager when she experienced the need to take responsibility for her own financial and personal welfare. Patience earned her first job through a city-funded summer work program. She initially started out picking up trash but learned that work was unsuitable, so she found an opportunity to work in an office. When she returned to school in the fall, she was able to secure for herself a part-time job based on her experience from the summer. Patience stated she has been working “ever since.”

For Patience, womanhood notions appear to be shaped by a theme around achievement such that it allowed her to care for herself and avoid social scrutiny. That is to say, Patience’s picture of womanhood is in contrast to the models available to her as a child. This included the ability to provide a picturesque home for her husband and children, financed in part by a personally and financially prosperous career.
Brenda

Brenda is a 57-year-old Black American female who lives in a rural Midwestern community. She is married and the mother of four children. One child died in infancy. Brenda was raised on the East coast and moved to the Midwest with her family as a teenager after her mother remarried. The participant earned an associate’s degree and has worked for nearly 20 years in the health services industry. She retired early due to chronic illness and spends much of her time traveling or in the company of her grandchildren. Brenda described her emergence into womanhood as the time when she married at age 18 and later gave birth to her first child. The responsibility that comes with caring for another person helped Brenda realize the need to be personally accountable and less dependent on her mother, who raised Brenda as a single parent. The participant appeared to seek independence and an opportunity to flourish outside the strict protection of her mother’s household. Although she married her first boyfriend, a man of whom her mother approved, Brenda recalled that she quickly learned the liberation she sought was not coming soon. Instead of relief from a mother with strict rules, she gained an overbearing and physically abusive mate.

Personal accountability is the main theme of Brenda’s description of her life journey toward womanhood. Within that concept also rested ideas about personal responsibility. For her, accountability and responsibility were most apparent in her mothering relationship with her children and grandchildren.

Precious

Precious is a 58-year-old Black American female who resides in a suburban Midwestern area. She is married and has no children. Precious was raised in the rural
South, and arrived in the Midwest to attend college. She lives what would be described as an affluent lifestyle that allows her to enjoy a membership in her local country club, a home in a gated community, and a warm climate vacation home. Comparatively, her current socioeconomic status is starkly different from the upbringing she knew growing up in a small Southern town. The highest level of education Precious has earned is a doctorate. The participant holds an executive level administrative position in the higher education field. As a result, her work allows her to interact with university administrators and industry leaders across the globe. She has worked in education for more than 30 years. When asked to describe the time when she first began to view herself as a woman, Precious recounted the period when puberty arrived, between the ages of 12 and 13. The participant recalled when she shared with her mother and favorite aunt about the changes taking place in her body, “they explained to me about womanhood.”

Precious is keenly aware of the ways in which her maternal family isolated her from the temptations of youth and the discontentment caused by race and racism in the rural South. Understanding that she was “set apart” because her family wanted a different life for her is a major theme in recounting her life story.

*Destiny*

Destiny is a 37-year-old Black American female who resides in a suburban Midwestern area. She is married and has one child. Destiny was raised in the South but has traveled extensively because of her profession. The highest level of education she has attained is a master’s degree in the human services field. She currently works in higher education. The participant stated she believes that which distinguishes Black women from those of other races or ethnicities is the internal fortitude to survive most situations.
All women have the same anatomy and that alone does not make them unique. For Destiny, race is the center of her experience as a Black female in America. She recalled the many opportunities for racial discrimination to fester internally. Destiny remembered going with her older sister to play at the home of a friend in their all-White neighborhood. Destiny said her sister, who had a lighter skin tone, was allowed to play inside the home while Destiny sat on the porch watching them through the screen because she was not allowed inside. Much of her experience is shaped by living out life as the only Black person in predominantly White environments.

Destiny identified the point at which she began to see herself as a woman as when she earned an athletic scholarship that allowed her to attend college at a predominantly White university. Destiny said few in her family had completed high school, and no one had attended college. Racial consciousness is a critical theme in how Destiny has come to understand her life within the context of womanhood and how she understands other females as women.

Charity

Charity is a 36-year-old Black American female who resides in an urban area located in the Midwest. She is married and has three children. Charity was raised in a middle-income family with two parents and two siblings. The highest level of education Charity achieved was the tenth grade. She currently works as a general laborer. She recognized the importance of education as a model for her three daughters, and is looking to complete her high school diploma through an online program. The participant stated she began to see herself as a woman after she turned 30 years old. Charity recalled the time vividly because she was on the brink of what she described as a nervous breakdown.
The participant is gregarious and transparent in her discussion of the path that directed her toward an understanding of womanhood. She described feeling as though she was being pulled in various directions, such that she did not know what she needed to become a woman. This point for Charity appeared painful as evidenced by the tears that surfaced as she described her journey. Although this period was one of anguish, the participant stated she used the experience to sift away ideas that presented a misrepresentation of what she had come to believe were the actions of a woman, such as giving birth or being a mother and wife. Charity was naïve and at 13 went searching for “love” that she did not find at home. Charity stated she believed that having a child would bring her love.

Once she had her first child at age 16, she believed that made her “grown” and by result a woman. She moved in with her boyfriend, who later became her husband. Charity’s journey toward womanhood can be characterized by the themes of familial love, self-love and affirmation, and strong religious faith.

Faith

Faith is a 51-year-old Black American female who resides in an urban area of the Midwest. She was briefly married but is now widowed. She has two children from previous relationships. The highest level of education completed for the participant is the eleventh grade of high school. She provides childcare services in her home to earn income. Faith and her ten siblings were raised in a two-parent home with parents who were general laborers. She was born and raised in a rural Southern town. The participant described her mother as stern and disciplined. This could explain Faith’s belief that she arrived at womanhood when she became pregnant at age 17 with her first child. She stated, after she gave birth the responsibilities of motherhood forced her to embrace the
consequences of her decision to have sex with her boyfriend. In her eyes, Faith said she was “still a kid” at the time even though she was confronted with womanly experiences. She described herself as “still a kid now” although she is the grandmother of three.

Faith exhibited a strong religious faith that served as a theme for how her life as a woman has taken shape. She also demonstrated an aura of toughness that aligned with her no-nonsense attitude toward men. This also is an important theme in her life story as it relates to her view of herself as a woman.

*Terri*

Terri is a 57-year-old Black American female who resides in a suburban Midwestern city. She is a widow who has raised two children. She was raised in the South and lived primarily in a three-generation household with her grandparents and mother. The highest educational level completed for Terri is graduate school. She is trained in the human services profession and works in higher education. She estimated her family income as a child was in the neighborhood of 15 to 20 thousand dollars, although she was uncertain. Her grandparents were farmers in a small Southern town and her mother worked as a nursing assistant. Terri’s current income would place her in the middle-class bracket. Terri credited her maternal grandmother for shaping her ideas about womanhood and setting a model for the role of a Black woman. From her perspective, she began to walk in the idea of womanhood once she moved to the Midwest after graduating college, began to live on her own, and became a mother. She stated it was not her intention to become pregnant, and the father of her first child was not someone with whom she wanted to build a marriage. Terri is frank in describing the person as someone
who helped fill a lonely “need” created by living far away from her family support system.

Motherhood helped her to see the need for responsible decision-making. It is part of her definition of womanhood that comes after years of maturing. Maturity is a central theme for Terri; however, it is not a state that is reflected by chronology alone, as she stated females can reflect maturity and wisdom apart from age.

Discovering Womanhood Across Cases

The previous section sought to analyze and present some of the specific life events that have provided context and understanding for how individual study participants arrived at knowing themselves as women. This next section presents the results of cross-case analyses of the data from these same participants. This section identifies key themes about the experience of Black womanhood for the participants, and addresses ways they have assigned meaning to those experiences. The foundation for this section is based upon the five primary research questions of this study. These questions asked about: 1) how Black American females first came to know themselves as women, 2) what experiences or milestones contributed to notions about womanhood, 3) how Black American females determine what it means to be a woman, and 4) how Black women believe they are viewed in contemporary America. The fifth question asks how can common examples of lived experiences among Black females and their sense of womanhood contribute to the body of knowledge in the counseling profession, and what impact might these findings have on counseling and counselor education.

After thorough examination of the narratives, the researcher discovered there were several recurring themes revealed within the analysis of the participants’ stories.
These initial themes are referred to above as within-case themes, and were presented above along with the summaries of the participants. These themes as well as others that emerged during the cross-case analyses were considered across the participants’ experiences as communicated in their two interviews. Overall, the key themes believed to be reflective across all participants that emerged during the cross-case analyses were responsibility, independence, self-sacrifice, education, religious faith, and sexuality. The information in this portion of the chapter is presented based upon study participants’ responses to the major research questions of the study. Three sections follow that address: 1) when these women first thought of themselves as women and what life experiences have contributed to the view of themselves as Black women, 2) the qualities associated with womanhood, and 3) participants’ perspectives on Black women in contemporary America.

Becoming a Woman

This section presents the combined findings from Research Question 1: How do adult Black American females ages 35 and older identify the time in which they became women? and Research Question 2: How have various life experiences, events, and milestones contributed to the development of a concept of womanhood for Black American females ages 35 to 99?

Below is the presentation of findings from responses to interview questions pertaining to this question. By one example or another, many answers address the question of how Black American females arrived at the discovery point at which they saw themselves as women. For some, that time comes with the transition from childhood to caring for children as new mothers. For others, womanhood ideas first emerge upon
graduation from college, securing a first career, or purchasing a new home. Finally, for at least one participant there is the satisfaction of knowing womanhood is an ongoing journey that at present is far from complete. When considering the collective stories of all participants, womanhood is more about an attitude or ideology than one or more events over the course of one’s lifespan. It is not necessarily a single event, milestone or occurrence that leads to the Black American female seeing herself as a woman. Instead, this discovery is sparked by attitudes, beliefs or values about what it means to be a woman in America. More commonly reported experiences are presented first, and less common experiences are reported later in this section.

**Motherhood**

Five participants recognized the presence of increased responsibility upon becoming pregnant and giving birth to their first child. In these cases, responsibility was most often expressed as the awareness of being accountable for another individual, namely an infant child. Motherhood created for these participants a bridge from the carefree role of a youth to the careful role of nurturer and provider. Each of these five participants described the experience in such ways that would suggest it was both intuitively driven and modeled by matriarchs in the home or community. Although her mother was a charismatic minister, Faith stated it was not her mother’s religious or moral influence that guided her into a role of greater accountability. Instead, Faith said she developed her ideas about the new role she would fill through the guidance of her two older sisters, both of whom were married with children. Faith said, “I knew I was going to be a mother and it was my responsibility.” Likewise, Terri viewed motherhood as a role of increased responsibility when she became pregnant while building her young career. While it remained unspoken, the implied message from both was that termination
of the pregnancy was not a consideration. Dorothy was naïve and poorly educated on matters of reproductive health when she became pregnant by her abusive boyfriend. She was isolated from her family of origin, and saw her primary function as protector of her children from a dysfunctional extended family. The circumstances for Confidence and Brenda were slightly different in that while they were young women when they experienced their first pregnancies, they were either married or engaged to be married. Brenda was married to the first man to show interest in her, and subsequently endured physical abuse while she was pregnant.

Of the five, only Confidence recalled the time with excitement. In considering the experiences of participants who linked childbirth with their first ideas about womanhood, motherhood and the subsequent responsibilities to follow were often an isolated experience. That is to say, these participants embarked on the motherhood experience without the involvement in parenting that comes from an active partner. These participants expressed the recognition that their primary duty would be to provide for the physical and financial well-being of the child, independent of the father.

For example, Confidence said the vision she had of herself changed when she was pregnant with her first child. She was excited about the event as well as the change in her identity. Pregnancy was described as “wonderful and life-changing” as she discussed feeling the fetus move around. She said, “It’s just like, wow! And, then you’re responsible for that child. So that’s how it just takes you to a different place.”

The event of giving birth to a child was an occurrence that some of the participants experienced as a life transition. This transition brought with it specific ideas about image, maturity, self-sufficiency, sacrifice, hardship, and relationship. Brenda
stated, “I knew that I had responsibilities to that child, to make sure that they were clean, fed, and attended to.” The wake-up call to a reality that one is now responsible for the comprehensive well-being of a small child is a sentiment that was reflected by other participants as well. Terri similarly recalled the duty to safeguard a new child upon reflecting on an old saying of her grandmother’s: “momma’s baby, daddy’s maybe.” Her point of emphasis was to echo the implied sentiments that regardless of what the father of the child chooses to do, the responsibility for its upbringing will rest squarely on the shoulders of the mother.

In terms of catalysts that might have caused participants to increase their awareness of their space in the lifecycle, clearly the three participants who experienced pregnancies as young adults – Charity, Dorothy, and Faith – were forced to recognize the need for transition from having teenage responsibilities to adult-like duties upon the birth of their children. All three stated they were unprepared for their new role, with Faith specifically stating that the new responsibility did not come with identifiable hardships for her. She stated, “It wasn’t nothing to it. It wasn’t a rough time. It wasn’t an easy time, either. The only thing I might would have done different is be married.” Likewise, in discussing her life with the benefit of hindsight and reflection, Dorothy indicated, “I don’t have any regrets” for the timing in which her life was shaped. Of the three, Charity appeared to experience the greatest degree of personal discourse over the path her life has taken, although she, too, did not express regret as much as disappointment that her lack of satisfaction was the catalyst for choices she made as a young adult.

It is interesting to note that none of the participants identified the physiological aspect of conception as being the determinant of their womanhood. In essence, there was
no relationship expressed between sexual intimacy and the development of a womanhood identity for the participants in this study. The decision to become sexually involved such that it produced a child did not have an impact on whether the participants saw themselves as women. Of the participants who are mothers, one is a parent through adoption.

*Other Life Cycle Transitions*

Study participants responded to the aforementioned question about milestones or life events associated with womanhood with statements about becoming pregnant, gaining a first job, embarking on a college education, and experiencing puberty. More than reflective ideas about specific events that were equated with womanhood, participants talked about their first awareness within a framework shaped by cognitive beliefs, familial examples, and personal values. For instance, the participants were nearly divided on the catalyst behind their initially viewing themselves as women. Four participants linked the time with leaving home for college or work.

Upon further examination, findings suggest these events alone do not inspire revelations about how Black females changed how they viewed themselves. Instead, changes in perceptions of womanhood were dictated by beliefs about the events. For instance, consider the transition of leaving home to attend college. With the participants for whom that event was significant, the time marked the arrival of a "voice" in making decisions about the future. Precious stated, "I know that my mother wanted me to get out, leave (the South), get a better education, and not make the same mistakes that she did." For other participants who experienced what could be viewed as launching activities, these periods created opportunities to demonstrate responsibility, which emerged as an important theme and will be discussed
later. One participant stated she did not have a clear answer for when she began to see herself as a woman, but rather views it as an ongoing process. When asked about the time at which she discovered she was a woman, Charity responded with a rhetorical question: “Have I stepped off into womanhood yet? I think I know that I am becoming a woman around now because I’m 36. Like I said, it’s been a long haul.”

As for other findings related to life cycle transitions, another respondent attributed her womanhood introduction to puberty, although leaving home for college contributed to her actually feeling like a woman. In essence, all participants discussed their initial ideas about womanhood in ways that were transformational rather than merely events. Miracle connected the time of her first awareness that her life was changing with her departure for college. She had never spent much time apart from her parents and siblings, so the change allowed her to test her maturity and ability to make decisions.

I felt like I was capable of handling that separation … I just felt like it was time for me to kind of step out on my own, get away from my parents and my sisters and just see how I could handle it.

In reviewing the collective experiences of the participants, there are some additional similarities in the ways in which they have experienced shifts through the life cycle. These are transitions that were not necessarily discussed as part of the interview protocol or as relevant information in the context of their womanhood experience. The transitions noted were gleaned from researcher observations about the participants and their demographic information. For example, the participants reflected a range in their ages and place on the lifespan continuum. The majority of the participants are in the middle to late adult stages, and thus some have had specific experiences related to progressing through one’s lifespan such as facing retirement and having grandchildren.
Precious has a vacation home and Terri aspires to own one in Africa. As for other roles, Brenda, Dorothy, Faith, and Terri referenced their roles as grandparents in the discussion of demographic information.

**Maternal Family Influences**

The findings suggest maternal family relationships played a significant role in shaping ideas about what it means to be a Black woman in America. In direct response to queries about womanhood and role models, the majority of participants shared a story that would suggest a strong relationship with their maternal members of their families of origin. For instance, Miracle recalled a time when she was ready to leave home for college and her mother, who normally acquiesced to her husband in child-rearing matters, supported Miracle’s efforts to attend college out of state. Faith was raised by both parents, although her mother seemed more vocal than her father in matters of religion and such was the nature of the relationship she described. Terri was raised by her mother and grandmother, although many of her examples yield from experiences she learned under the guidance of her grandmother. Precious was raised by her mother until she was a senior in high school, at which point she went to live with an aunt upon the unexpected death of her mother. While the participants each appeared to have longed for a different relationship with their mothers during their formative years, they continued to speak respectfully of their mothers. Participants acknowledged “sacrifices” made by mothers, maternal grandmothers, and maternal aunts. Precious acknowledged that her mother endured an abusive marriage because she had four children to provide with a “house” in which to live. Furthermore, Brenda said, “I had a rich childhood even though I had some
tumbles and some bumps.” Below are additional quotations from participants regarding their mothers or maternal influences:

I would say that my determination for especially hard work would have come from my grandmother. She really was a hard worker. It’s almost like you could expect that from Black women. (Terri)

My mother is the one who stressed our independence. She just didn’t do it in front of him because she didn’t want to antagonize him. (Miracle)

I can say all down through my family women have been strong. (Brenda)

None of the participants explicitly reported their mothers or other maternal family members as having a significant role in their initial view of themselves as women. It also is important to note, however, that when asked about models of womanhood around them, most participants stated a mother, other female family member, or female acquaintance as role models. A single respondent said she could not identify an individual in her family who had a significant influence on her development as a woman. Additionally, Precious was the sole participant to state that her idea of womanhood was shaped by puberty and conversations about womanly issues such as breast development, menstruation, and hormonal changes. Precious stated her mother had strict ideas about female behavior based on her upbringing and obstacles as a young woman. Precious recalled that she told a favored aunt about the arrival of her menstrual cycle before telling her mother. She recalled:

My mother was very guarded of me and so when it happened I told my aunt because I felt safe telling her. And then, of course, she advised me that I needed to tell my mother and so I did. And that was the beginning of the womanhood.

Learning Life Lessons: Cultivating Wisdom

All participants talked about one or more circumstances that served as a learning point for how they view themselves as a woman. Often this wisdom was cemented
through experiential learning and reflective understanding. When Destiny considered the path that led her to increased “self-acceptance” she said, “I thank God I’m here now because boy, am I smarter and wiser.” Wisdom occurs independent of academic training or scholarship and is the product of “living” and “learning” as described by the participants. This creation of knowledge surfaced in the form of understanding how to negotiate intimate and casual relationships, learning how to maximize limited financial resources, and recognizing the importance of internal motivations for personal contentment. Faith, who dropped out of high school after completing the eleventh grade, envisioned real education as the ability to survive and be “street smart.” It is her goal to teach her teen-age granddaughter to be wise about people, when to extend her trust, and how to be cautious of activities taking place around her.

Charity, who admittedly let anger define much of her development, learned to know the wisdom of “self love.” While she lacked a high school diploma, Charity appeared to possess a way of knowing that Black elders call an “old soul.” The aura she carried is not without validity as Charity stated herself that she began to go through the motions of an adult life well before she had her first child at age 16. At age 36, she still wants to complete her high school equivalency and attend community college; however, she wants to teach her three daughters about the pitfalls of low self-esteem, the benefits of self-worth, and the lessons she has learned in her struggles with both. She did not identify formal education as a criterion for fully recognizing herself as a woman.

From her perspective, one of the life lessons learned is that men cannot be trusted. The first lesson in her life story came when Charity’s parents divorced when she was a child and she lost her father’s attention. Next, she was forced into oral sex at age 7 by an
uncle, and she and her sister were nearly abducted while walking home from school by a man who tried to coax them into helping him distribute fliers. She learned that people can be abusive. Long before Charity began to pursue her husband when she was age 13 and he was 18, she had learned to be wary about the love of a man even as it was something for which she actively searched.

*Formal Education.* In connecting wisdom with feelings of womanhood, it is relevant to note that while formal education was not presented in the data as strongly as the informal learning that creates wisdom, organized education remained important for most participants. Thus, both formal and informal education is of value to Black American females; however, the two differ in the degree to which education is viewed as a marker for womanhood. For instance, formal education emerged as a significant achievement for Patience, who recognized as an adolescent that a formal education would create the pathway to the type of future she desired for herself. Although she acknowledged deficiencies in her mother-daughter relationship, Patience credited her mother with reinforcing the idea that “education is the way to go.” Furthermore, successful academic achievement enabled Miracle to experience a trusting relationship with her parents that was different than what her siblings would know, in that because Miracle was a good student her parents viewed her as responsible and therefore afforded her greater freedom. The place where education intersected with feelings of womanhood for Miracle is when she decided to reject her parents’ ideas about where she would attend college. It was at the point of decision-making that she first viewed herself as stepping into womanhood.
In general, formal education is that which begins with kindergarten and continues through the completion of high school. The decision to extend the formalized education process to include vocational training or a college degree also was a choice for each person. Across the range of ages, each study participant completed what has historically been for Black Americans a basic level of education. Typically, this education is through grade eight, while high school completion is an expectation that is not always realized as evidenced by demographic information provided by the participants. Those participants who did not complete a formal high school education ranged in age from 36 to 54 years old, which is notable, because these individuals represent the first two generations after the federal legalization of school desegregation. The highest level of education completed for the remaining participants included one associate’s degree, three bachelor’s degrees, two master’s degrees, and one doctorate. The participants recognized the connection between education and increased access to socio-economic opportunities, all of which are opportunities that are limited for the Black American female. There also is an equal appreciation for the informal education that has occurred through various events, experiences, and age that creates wisdom. It is with the informal educational process that Black American females develop holistic ways of surviving, or “learn” how to be resilient. Those who did not earn a high school diploma or university degree did not identify education as a key marker for their own sense of womanhood.

_Evolution of Womanhood Across the Lifespan_

Participants across all age groups experienced changes as a result of life events; however, what remained constant were the attributes that first created for them a womanhood identity. This is to say, participants remained committed to core internal values that helped define the phenomena under discussion. For instance, Faith was asked
if she experienced any changes, milestones, events that helped her to see herself differently today than at age 17. She responded “no” because for her the only change was “that I had a baby at a young age.”

Participants described themselves as “smarter” or “wiser” as a result of earlier experiences. When specifically asked how their views of themselves as women might be different, each participant indicated their core values or personality remained the same as when they first thought of themselves as women. Brenda said, “you know the older you get the more you learn.” It is this sentiment that appears to reflect the individual changes that participants might have experienced as part of their metamorphosis into women.

Participants discussed feelings of greater wisdom as a result of life encounters. For instance, Destiny discussed an initial view of womanhood that is shaped by an immense belief in God. As a result of her many health, family, and personal challenges, that faith has increased, thus creating a greater “comfort” with self. When asked how she views herself currently in comparison to when she first thought of herself as a woman, one participant indicated she feels “no different” because she is the same person she has always been. On the other hand, Charity was still evolving as she pondered her womanhood status. She has taken care of others ahead of self, and as a result has lacked the freedom and support to discover herself as a woman. Others alluded to transitions within the context of individual achievement and increased comfort with self, but did not connect that feeling to womanhood. Patience arrived at seeing herself differently as a woman not because of any new revelations about herself but about the world in which she lives as a Black woman. She came to recognize “it’s easier being – at this point – an
educated, middle-class, Black woman of a certain age than being a young, uneducated, poor Black woman."

While some of the older participants expressed themselves in a demeanor that would suggest a laid-back or mellow approach to womanhood later in life, there was nothing to suggest they were more comfortable in their womanhood identity than younger study participants. There was not a line of questioning that explored perceptions of womanhood that addressed age.

Qualities of Black American Womanhood

Research Question 3: How do adult Black American females determine what it means to be a woman?

How Black American females define what it means to be a woman seems to be shaped by several characteristics. Participants discussed womanhood in a way that suggested it is not only defined by events or milestones but by specific qualities associated with viewing themselves as women. The key characteristics to emerge from the data are expressed in reflections about responsibility, independence, self-sacrifice, confronting challenges and resilience, religious faith, and sexuality. These characteristics are presented in the following section.

Responsibility

Over the course of the study, findings about responsibility are represented in three primary ways: demonstration of wisdom and sound judgment, accountability to self, and duty to others. Duty to others mainly speaks to caring for the needs and nurturing of children, although it can also include extended family and fictive kin. Intellectual responsibility is not necessarily determined by academic achievement but by wise decision-making. At the same
time, intellectual responsibility includes the ability to obtain and maintain employment and financial security. Responsibility as a form of accountability to oneself surfaced in the form of discussions about making life changes and decisions for the benefit of personal wellbeing. By the account of Destiny and Brenda, this form of responsibility means early recognition that their future would be determined by them alone. In discussing the guidance of her mother, Brenda said, “The things that I saw were basically that she had her life. Although she had six kids, she had her life and that was her time. And somewhere I consciously knew that.” As for Destiny, it is a woman’s responsibility to shape how others see her. She said, “Perception is reality, and if I perceive myself as being honest, good-natured, good-willed, faith-filled, and treasured, then that’s how everybody else is gonna perceive me.”

The third example of attitudes toward responsibility as a function of Black womanhood is presented through perceptions about accountability to others, namely family and other identified individuals. The mother role as a function of responsibility was explored earlier in the chapter; however, it is important to recognize here that caring for children is an obligation that is addressed by several participants as responsibility. Miracle defined responsibility as making decisions about life and living the consequences, while Terri stated responsibility is about recognizing that superficial things such as outward appearance or mediocrity will only “get you so far.” Ultimately, responsibility means holding in account how others view you, particularly children. Terri summarized it this way:

I know we like to have that “this is my life,” but in reality as a Black woman it’s not just your life because a lot of other lives are connected to your life. And, you really do have to think about what impression you want to leave.

This account is supported in the experiences of Miracle, who attributed her ability to leave home to her parents’ thoughts of her as a person capable of making what they viewed
as responsible decisions. Although she was the middle child in her family of seven children, Miracle was saddled with the duty of helping her parents manage their financial affairs. One reason for this, she stated, was her academic ability. Other reasons spoke more to her accommodating personality and willingness to reject confrontation. Miracle was trusted in her family to make levelheaded decisions.

Four participants recognized the presence of increased responsibility upon becoming pregnant and giving birth to their first child. In these cases, responsibility was most often expressed as the awareness of being accountable for another individual, namely an infant child. For others, responsibility as a characteristic of womanhood is represented in one’s ability to provide for themselves financially, accept accountability for individual actions or behaviors, and to contribute to one’s individual growth. Commitment as an expression of responsibility to others was stated in multiple examples by study participants. A primary way in which this concept was stated was in the form of caring for the finances and welfare of parents, holistic support for struggling siblings, or nurturing spouses or extended family. For instance, Faith has taken on the task of raising her two grandchildren, one of whom was abandoned at birth by the child’s mother. Precious was able to tap into her plentiful financial resources to help out a struggling sibling who was terminally ill, and Destiny worked to pay two home mortgages for herself and mother. Through these examples, participants discussed responsibility to others not as crutches to support dependent behavior but as obligations to self and as expressions of character. Brenda said she learned to care for extended family and close friends by watching her mother, and is pleased that she has observed the same developing philosophy in her daughters. Brenda said this particular show of character “comes
from me because I’m that kind of person, but it first came from my mother and grandmother,” which makes it generational.

While many of the examples given by participants would suggest that responsibility is defined by actions that would be considered as positive, this was not entirely the case. Responsibility, when connected to actions and attitudes, can also be reflected in decisions made. For example, Brenda believes she taught her daughters to make responsible decisions about areas such as mate selections, education, and finances. When her daughters elected to become sexually active and conceive children outside of marriage, she noted that as examples of failure to make responsible decisions.

**Independence**

Terri said it well in capturing the next key theme identified by participants, that of independence. “If I can’t make the decision, then I’m not involved, you know, especially when it comes to my own life. And, I think that (attitude) was part of trying to assert my womanhood.”

For the Black females in this study, being a woman contains notions that true women are those who can mature from the guidance of a parental/caretaker structure and stand ably with their own life course in mind. As it is described and reflected in the narratives of the participants, this type of maturation is different than that which propels one from child to mother in short course. Instead, the descriptions offered by those who recall the liberating effect of being independent and accountable to oneself attribute their finding a “voice” to events such as leaving home to attend college. The exercise in independence described in some form by all in the study suggested an awareness of events that had an impact on their lives despite obstacles in their environment. That is to
say, the recognition of independence is described in ways that make it more than a milestone on the journey of life. The experience of independence is an attitude more than an event. Miracle recalled, “We weren’t really brought up to be as independent as we turned out to be” in speaking of herself and siblings. Instead, she learned “that other people were not going to be there for you all the time.” Her first experience with this self-awakening occurred after graduating from high school and successfully obtaining her first job. She disputed the suggestion that it was these events that created for her feelings of independence. Instead, Miracle contended that her independence was birthed through a willingness to do whatever was necessary to realize the future she had for herself. This sentiment was not a solo expression, particularly the idea of making decisions for the welfare of self. For Patience, personal empowerment was necessary to withstand the instability of family discourse. In this particular instance, the participant recognized early that her future hinged on the ability to create a survival plan for adolescence. This would later surface as a blueprint for college and life in general.

Patience attributed part of her motivation for grasping at self-sufficiency as a function of being a middle child in a family of ten. She described growing up in a large family with a single parent as “hard,” and as a result, she had to become independent at an early age.

I had a job starting at 13, and I was about 13 when it was a consciousness of If I’m going to be successful, if I’m going to have the things that I want, then I really need to make some effort on my own.

Independence achieved through the opportunity to attend college was transformational for other participants as well. For Destiny, an athletic scholarship liberated her from poverty, the domestic violence inflicted upon her mother, and a future
of uncertainty. She was able to attend a prominent Southern university with a Division I athletic program, and in the process became the first person in her family to attend college. After graduating, she enjoyed the opportunity to travel abroad and play professional basketball in Europe. It is through this lens that Destiny came to understand herself and in the process learned that she, too, was a woman.

Self Sacrifice

Each participant described an instance in which she sacrificed her own needs for the benefit of others with the idea that this is what Black women do, although the ways in which efforts of sacrifice emerge differs. Self-sacrifice was described by multiple participants in ways that would suggest it can be an impenetrable barrier to self-awareness and self-actualization. Individual sacrifice such that drives the psychosocial development of Black females presents itself in two ways through this study. The first and most obvious way that self-sacrifice emerges is through deference to the needs of others for their primary benefit. The second way that self-sacrifice is presented is as a survival mechanism and a strategic action for advancing the desires of self. In other words, Black American females give up a part of themselves for the good of another person as well as to obtain small pieces of what they desire from life. Several participants were in agreement that the problem with self-sacrifice in order to get by in life is that it stands in the way of the personal growth of Black American women. When asked if Black American women have the opportunity to be themselves, Miracle said it is difficult "because we’re asked to be so many things to different people. It’s like we’re constantly proving ourselves" to the degree that “we never get the chance to just be ourselves.”
Concrete examples from the experiences of multiple participants are further noted. In some cases, there were examples set by adult females in their family and community circles, such as in the lives of Destiny and Precious, both of whom watched their mothers work tireless hours to provide resources for their children, with and without a spouse in the home. In other cases, self-sacrifice meant “making do” with achievements gained. In this instance, Miracle sacrificed her dream of becoming a physician in order to immediately enter the workforce and help support her younger sisters in their efforts to attend college. She had “made it through” and knew realistically that her parents could not afford to send her siblings to college. Miracle said, “So, that meant I had to come out and get a job because I had to help send the rest of them through.” To do otherwise, from her perspective, would have been to “act selfishly.” As she explained, this choice meant Miracle had to “learn to make do” with life apart from being a physician. It is important to note that the notion of “making do” is not synonymous with settling or complacency. “Making do” suggests that dreams deferred are something that can be overcome. Miracle said, “It’s something we can live with. You learn to make do.”

Charity noted the demands to be superhero figure in her relationships “took a toll” that left her feeling as though she “lost” herself. She also acknowledged the negative impact of this concept on her quality of life. “Once you’re out there wandering around it kind of takes a toll. So, I’m trying to be Miss She-rah of the world, and when people call, you try to be there.” The outcome of self-sacrificing behavior as a perception of womanhood is reflected in the way Charity discussed the experience:

It was so many people pulling me in so many different directions that I did not have time for myself to even know what I needed in life to be a woman, a real woman. Then, when you look at it, being a real woman brings responsibilities, that, regardless of whether you’re ready for them or not, life was.
Destiny echoed a similar reflection of the multiple demands that she grew to believe were unique to being a Black woman. As a mental health professional, she has witnessed the incongruent lifestyles of other women as well as herself. Outwardly, these were individuals who were polished and primed, yet their outward appearance presented as a covering for internal battles with a myriad of issues ranging from unrealized aspirations to low self-esteem. The way in which Destiny discussed the demands upon Black women suggested they are shaped by what others want at the expense of how they as women see themselves. The outcome of making oneself available to outside obligations is that it decreases the ability to nurture and care for self. At times over the course of her life, Destiny acknowledged fighting her personal fight with surviving cancer at an early age, maintaining her Christian faith, and finding ways to fit in with social norms. Destiny said:

I’ve been on that side of the fence where I had to be in control of everything I needed to do this. I needed to have this. I had to have this appearance, and this, this, this, and this. I was the most unhappy little person. I was taking care of everybody but me.

Confronting Challenges: Resilience

In arriving at an answer for how Black American females come to understand the influences on their development as women, the data suggest this change occurs within the context of experiencing challenges that create personal growth. One word used to capture this occurrence is resilience. That is to say, wrapped within all that makes a Black female know herself as a woman is the ability to recover from challenges in ways that are forward moving and productive. Miracle believes “making do means being resilient.” As she described, a Black woman is resilient when she does not settle for her circumstances or give up when circumstances appear unmanageable. In this description, Miracle likened
the process to “making the best lemonade possible” when someone has given you a “bag of rotten lemons.” Based on the metaphor of lemons, sour experiences are life happenings such as institutionalized racism, domestic violence, psychological mistreatment, and low socioeconomic status, lack of formal education, or unanticipated health challenges. The response to a “bag of rotten lemons” is an attitude that rejects the notion of “settling” for what life offers. Miracle said, “Settling is taking whatever life hands you and no longer trying for something better.”

Three ways in which participants presented examples of resilience are in their attitudes about how they should be treated by others, how they should treat themselves, and how they nurture a new generation of Black American women. For example, Brenda emphasized the importance that her daughters not come to see themselves as potential victims of abuse. One way in which she has worked to make that happen is through sharing with her daughters and granddaughter a life story shaped by perseverance. She stated, “I was lying in the bed the other day and I said to myself, ‘I’m a survivor.’ He didn’t leave a scar on me.” In this reflection, the participant applied meaning to physical as well as psychosocial scars that can result from abuse. “You know sometimes when people come out of an abusive relationship they have scars on them. I don’t have that.”

A second example of resilient behavior emerged from the reflections of Precious and Destiny, both of whom confronted life-threatening illness at early points in their lives and relied on spiritual faith to help sustain them during the process. Precious was diagnosed with cancer as she was developing her career in education. She survived the experience by relying on her spiritual faith and a support system built of relatives and female acquaintances. By the time Destiny had reached early adulthood she had
undergone five surgeries related to “women’s issues.” At the time of this interview, she was undergoing chemotherapy following a second recurrence of breast cancer. Destiny described herself as normally confident in her abilities. The journey to survive her recovery from cancer has taken “some time” for her to regain a sense of confidence and comfort with her changed physical appearance. She described a woman who has given herself permission to walk through the house naked whereas at a previous point normal “insecurities” would have dissuaded her comfort level.

I didn’t realize how embedded in me that was until I actually had to tap into it. It was because I think my cancer was making me look at a totally different perspective of the physical body. Then my faith and my self-confidence that I didn’t realize I had kicked in.

A third example of resilience was presented in the experiences of Black American women such as Dorothy who embraced the challenges of working in a male-dominated work environment in order to construct a stable foundation for herself and children. Dorothy reported she did not use illegal drugs or alcohol to cope with her circumstances although she witnessed that behavior in others. She used a job-training program in her community to prepare herself for a blue-collar job to liberate herself from her abusive first husband.

The job was a blessing but inside the job, the company wasn’t ready for the women, especially a Black woman. And, it was like, it was tough in there and it was tough out, but I never did drugs, never drank because I’ve seen what drugs will do to you.

A single respondent discussed the concept of resilience in a way that would suggest it is a detriment to the conceptualization of Black women as much as it is thought of as a positive attribute. The perception of the Black female as an indestructible force in humanity leaves little room for vulnerability.
You know that song, ‘I am super woman, yes I am.’ And, that’s how we cope. We’re supposed to be able to because Black women are strong. You’re supposed to be able to birth the baby and work and do everything and when things hit you you’re supposed to get up and bounce back ... Those are the messages. (Patience)

In summary, the most significant means by which Black American women sustain themselves in the midst of daily challenges is through resisting defeat such that it allows them to reframe their lives and goals despite circumstances or disappointments. This attitude is called resilience, and while it has been demonstrated in the course of confronting ongoing challenges to securing basic needs, it also is reflected in the ways in which Black American women address racism. The means by which participants experienced and moved past racism is discussed in the following subsection.

*Living with Racism.* When prompted to consider the social-cultural environment that influenced the time during which they came into their own as women, study participants reflected upon the world that surrounded them at that time for context to the stories of how they came to understand womanhood for themselves. The socially constructed concepts of race and gender have held places in the American framework long before African American activist Sojourner Truth posed the question: “Ain’t I a woman?” when seeking voting rights in a society shaped by patriarchy, racism, and sexism.

Similarly, Miracle stated an understanding about how the social constructs of gender and race converge in shaping how a female comes to be viewed. She recalled the first time she returned home after completing a successful first year on the East Coast. Although her awareness of the world had changed, the rules of the small Southwest community in which her family resided had not. So, when her mother begged Miracle not to cause a ruckus when asked to use the rear entrance of a doctor’s office, she complied.
More than ten years after the legal end of segregation in America, Miracle was reminded that despite her academic intellect, race still mattered.

A product of the same time period, Terri said her grandmother sheltered her from the outside activities created by racism and rebellion. Much of what she learned about racial politics as a young woman was through the storytelling of others rather than her own firsthand account. In this, Terri learned that discernment is essential to one’s emotional and physical health. She believed her grandparents wanted to protect her from the hostility of Southern living, and many of the hard lessons they experienced as a result of racism. In this regard, the lesson is in learning to respect the cautious guidance of elders when it comes to negotiating mutual spaces in society.

For Miracle and Patience, the lessons that came from deep humiliation that drives one toward empowerment were as important as the scholarly achievements realized through formal education. Miracle stated she prided herself on earning good grades, so it was not surprising when she received a full scholarship to attend a well-regarded historically black college. Notwithstanding her compliant demeanor and academic ability, it was a life lesson while working as a nanny to a wealthy White family in her hometown that provided a 15-year-old Miracle with the motivation to consider life beyond her immediate environment. She recalled:

When I was about 15, my father had hired us all out as nannies in this rich neighborhood ... I had a 3-year-old, an 18-month-old, and a 6-month-old that I had to take care of and the 3-year-old I had to call her Miss whatever her name was. I was like, I did it because I didn’t like confrontation, but that didn’t make me feel like I was a woman. Not that experience.

Patience’s story is similar in that she spent her entire teen-age life working and providing money toward her family’s survival. In retelling her story, she expressed a
belief that both Blacks and Whites “expected little” from her and her siblings because of race and class.

I didn’t want to be poor; I didn’t want to be looked down upon and I felt like and decided very early the only way I could escape and not be that is to set my own expectations. And so that’s what I had to do because, you know, unless you were from a certain family, you know, the whole classism thing and then the whole colorism thing because we were all dark skinned and then we’re all poor; and, you know, and so there were so many things that were against me that if I didn’t have expectations of myself then nobody else would.

The findings on race suggested that skin color can serve as a catalyst for employment opportunities and a barrier to advancement. Brenda recalled several occasions when her former employer expected her as a supervisor to implement workplace rules that were applied differently among White and Black employees. She said when a White male employee reported to work ill and unable to perform his duties, she asked that he return home. According to Brenda, the employee then called her supervisor and complained that he was being treated unfairly because of his race. The employee was given the benefit of truth and Brenda said, “My boss wasn’t giving me the respect of my judgment because the guy was White.” She stated:

I had been knowing my boss for 20 years and he calls me and he says, ‘Well, do you think it may be a racial thing because he said you’re being prejudiced toward him.’ And, I just told him, ‘Look, I’ve been knowing you for 20 years and you have never heard me be prejudiced toward anybody. His arm is broke.’

Suffering through Sexism. A single participant discussed the direct impact of sexism, which in reviewing the experiences of Black American women, this form of gender-based discrimination often is masked by issues of race. Sexism is relevant in the findings because it is manifested in covert ways that make it seem transparent to the life experiences of participants. In considering the findings related to this topic, some participants faced sexism in their workplace while others experienced it at home. When
asked if she believes Black women are respected in America, Brenda responded, “No, no, no! As a Black race we have not been respected and women less than men.” The case could be made for relationship abuse as a form of sexism against women. Physical abuse is addressed in the subsequent section. The participant Miracle discussed throughout the study the ways in which her father controlled her actions and her “voice” by attempting to control the types of jobs she held as a young adult, the young men she dated, and her choices about a college education.

Even when I graduated from high school and I was looking for a summer job to try and help pay the expenses for college he would not allow me to go and search for a job on my own. He packed us in the car and he drove us to all the different places. He filled out the applications for the jobs. He conducted the interview with the person. (Miracle)

Encountering Abuse and Maltreatment. Physical and sexual abuse and emotional mistreatment figured prominently in the stories of participants. Among the group, all but one participant either experienced relationship abuse directly or observed it perpetrated upon other female family members. The majority witnessed physical abuse perpetrated against a mother or other family member, two reported being abused by a spouse, one was sexually abused as a child by an uncle, and one did not report a direct abuse history. In all cases, abuse is not presented as an inevitable occurrence in the lives of Black American women. Brenda openly reported that her first husband regularly “beat me” and appeared offended by the suggestion that “it’s a given” Black females can expect to be physically abused in their relationships with significant others. Brenda stated, “No, I tell my daughters you have a right not to be abused. It is not a part of the Black experience. Some women make it a part, but nope. No.”
Admittedly, the concept of relationship abuse has left Confidence confused by the behavior. “I never understood it. They told us, ‘Sisters don’t fight. They love each other.’ My sister and I would get in trouble about that, but they would fight each other.” She believes her mother remained in her abusive marriage as long as she did because of “low self-esteem.” Destiny said she has never known her mother in anything but abusive relationships. Miracle reported her father was most often verbally abusive, but also would physically abuse her mother. Precious recalled her upbringing in a home with a violently abusive stepfather who seemed to beat her mother without cause. His violent outbursts were unmanageable. She recalled the beatings as follows:

We’d hear his car pulling up in the driveway and he would demand that my mother would get up out of bed and cook his food; and then, if he didn’t like how it taste or how she looked at him or vice versa, then he would just beat her.

It is noteworthy that there was an absence of a predictable pattern of potential for abuse. For example, those participants who reported experiencing abuse did not group up in homes where abuse was observed in the parental relationships. Likewise, of those who reported witnessing abuse in the home, none reported experiencing abuse themselves. Abuse experiences also were described as a characteristic or key event in the development of Black women. Of those who reported a direct encounter with being abused, the event is described as something that occurred in the course of the relationship, similar to the way that divorce or infidelity happens. One participant was abused by a husband who used drugs, while two others were abused by spouses seeking to “control.” Second, those who witnessed abuse also observed “low self-esteem” in the victims as noted in the cases described by Confidence and Destiny. Both women reported observing their mothers in physically violent relationships, but believe they stayed because of poor self-image. Finally, Precious believes her mother remained in her
abusive situation by necessity and religious faith. She said, “My mother had a strong
support of women in the community that would, you know, talk to her, comfort her,
whatever, you know. And, my mother had a strong belief in God.”

Religious Faith and Spirituality

Beliefs in God and exercising what is described as a “personal relationship” are
important contributors to the character development of Black American women. This
type of faith is different than religious doctrine, and has been directly and indirectly
identified as pillars of existence for Black American women. All participants cited
religious faith as a reason for the beliefs, values, and strength they possess and have
witnessed in the attitude of others. Religious faith has been identified as a source of
support during periods of challenge, such as poor health, moving beyond abuse, family
crises, or when making critical decisions. When Brenda reflected on her past she said, “I
feel like I’m a survivor and God was looking out for me when I wasn’t looking out for
myself.” Aspects of faith accented Charity’s interview, and provided a clear example of
how she has managed to survive her stormy journey.

It’s when I surrendered to the Lord and I said, I can’t do this, you know I keep on
messing it up. I keep on running to this man and to this man. I was never beaten
physically, but mentally it’s the worst thing to me. It’s the mind thing.
Destiny identified spiritual faith as the nurturing force in helping her to endure
cancer treatment, recovery, and the temptation of doubt about her future. “Getting
diagnosed with breast cancer was like God has a purpose for me, and here I am shutting
up, not being heard, trying not to be seen, and he needs me to do these things.” In
essence, religious faith and relationship with God are experienced on a spectrum that
ranges from religious practices such as church attendance to beliefs about a God-inspired
purpose for life. Along this spectrum are opportunities for Black American women to exercise the faith they’ve observed and experienced during times of adversity.

Sexuality

It is noteworthy to report that of all the participants, three of the 10 identified sexuality as a component of their identities as women. The remaining appeared uncomfortable discussing issues related to sexuality, including sexual development, sensuality, and sexual intimacy within relationships. This is not to say that Black American females do not consider themselves as sexual beings or reject sexuality as part of their identity as women. This is a piece of data that is of interest and worthy of further exploration.

Of those who freely tackled the issue of sexuality, the representation of participants crossed generational lines. For instance, Destiny, one of the younger participants in the study, believes thoughts about sexuality change with each generation and viewed her generation as not having pressure to view sexuality in a particular way. She explained it in the following manner: “If you look back to the generation before me, it wasn’t talked about that much and the generation after me, there’s so much peer pressure about it that it’s the focal point.”

In contrast, Terri, who is approaching retirement age, believes Black American women have experienced repressive ideas about sexuality based on history and culture. Historically, Black American women have been sexually exploited, while culturally America, in general, has ideological hindrances about sexuality. The example of this she used is the politicized nature of sex education in schools. The former guidance counselor said she recalled a time “when sex education was meaningful” and provided young
people with critical information for life that they might not get at home. This sentiment was consistent with the findings through other interviews. The majority of participants indicated that education about sex and sexuality was absent within the home and limited in school or other settings. Participants indicated the most frequent source of information, including reproductive health, came from older siblings, friends, or direct experience. Across all ages, participants shared that their mothers did not discuss with them matters related to positive sexuality.

Faith was reared during a time when sexuality was not discussed in her home in any form. “With our generation it wasn’t talked about, sex and whatever. They would just say don’t go having no babies by them little boys but they didn’t explain the issues. I don’t know what was wrong with them back then.” As a result, she committed herself to discussing such matters with her granddaughter “from the time she was a little girl.” Faith said she provided her granddaughter with information and options in hopes the young adult would not follow her path to early motherhood. “I talk to her. I ain’t never been a person who talked vulgar, but I saw things through life and learned. I make sure that she knows everything.”

While Miracle, the oldest participant in the study at age 62, kept her discussion about sexuality on the surface, she explained that her mother was open and forthcoming with information about female sexuality. She said, “any question we had” her mother would answer in part because her father attempted to scare her with graphic discussions about what males want from females. Miracle said often times her father’s tactic would prompt more questions, which then would be answered individually by her mother.
Participants of various ages agreed that one possible reason why Black American women seem reluctant to discuss sex issues is due to “shame” about their past, “fear about being judged” particularly in a church setting, and attitudes about privacy. As Confidence proclaimed, “Sometimes it’s none of your business … we don’t go around spilling our business to everybody.”

Research Question 4: Comparatively, how do Black American females ages 35 and older currently view themselves as women?

Compared to women who are not Black Americans, females ages 35 and older express a sentiment that suggests race is an important aspect in how they experience themselves as women in the United States. The interview guide included a specific question that sought to discover how participants viewed themselves as Black women within the context of American culture. Even with a question that specifically addressed this area, overwhelmingly the participants provided this context to their interview responses before they were directly asked. In other words, the influence of womanhood is clothed, and in some ways shaped, by how they experienced their development within the context of race and contemporary America. With and without a prompt, each participant shared a thought about the unique experience of being a Black female in a country like America. The common feeling expressed was one that suggested Black women in America are regarded differently than American women of other races and ethnicities, and that Black men “either marry a White woman or as close to White as possible.”

Two participants were more descriptive in their observations about the ways in which Black women are characterized and treated in America. As an example, Faith
supported a commonly held belief among adult Black women that successful Black men prefer to establish relationships with non-Black females once the men attain affluence or material comfort. While she cautioned that she believes in personal accountability and not laying blame because of race, at the same time she believed there is a limit on the social acceptability of being with a Black woman. In essence, she believes non-Black women represent a symbol of status for Black men. She cited African American professional athletes as the example to support her position.

OK, y'all had these Black girls when you was going to school and going to college but when you got famous that's when you went and got the White woman. So, what happened with the Black woman? She was good enough then, why couldn't she be good enough when you got famous? ... They have had a Black woman, and then they think, thank you Jesus because they are with a White one, because they can control them. They always say the White woman is easier and will do what a man say do, which is why they go and get them. A Black woman is only going to take so much.

Confidence concurred with the notion that Black American women are underappreciated and “misunderstood.” Another participant, Destiny, shared the belief that Black American women are less valued than women of other races. She further suggested that Black American women have historically been characterized as lacking morals and sound judgment, even though her lived experiences demonstrate otherwise. For example, when presented with tempting romantic feelings toward a married acquaintance, she ended the relationship before their feelings led them into infidelity. She expressed pride in that decision:

Those things as a Black woman have allowed me to be proud when I talk to you about being a Black woman. I think we, Black women, take from our experiences like that and say, 'Wait a minute, I deserve better,' whereas our counterparts learn differently.

Although all the women in the study discussed their evolution toward womanhood within the context of race, including racial politics, they also acknowledge
diversity within the experience of females who live the Black experience in America. The dominant sentiment among participants about the way in which Black American females are viewed when specifically adding racial context reflects a small measure of inconsistency. For example, for Terri, there are some contradictions about America that can make one less than proud; however after having traveled abroad, she has become less tolerant of women who fail to participate actively in their own success. She said she has noticed a spirit of concern for others that is not always expressed in ways that inspire hope in struggling Americans. Terri stated: “When I’m in Kenya I keep saying I’m definitely buying land, this is going to be my summer home when I retire and I know that’s because of the humanity that I’ve seen there and the friends that I’ve made.”

In a similar way as Terri, Miracle has learned to live out her blackness in a less binding fashion. Also having grown up in the last days of the Jim Crow South, Miracle learned that race created boundaries for her as a Black female. Once she was able to experience life outside the confines of overt racism and segregation, she was able to make the transition from an identity shaped by race and gender to a self-actualized personhood. Life events such as graduating from college and embarking on a new career with a company that was progressive in hiring helped to shape her ideas about how she could view herself. She described the experience in the following way:

It wasn’t until I graduated from college that I realized that I had to define myself rather than letting someone else define me. So, when I started working that’s when I started thinking of myself as a person in a black skin because I had all kinds of friends and all kinds of boyfriends in all different colors.

A slightly opposing viewpoint was shared by Miracle. Today, she presents as a woman who is confident in her self-view such that she willingly volunteered that she might be naïve in her perception of whether race continues to impact her adult life. Even
with that display of openness, she believed there are sufficient examples of how race has not hindered her progress in the important areas of work, home ownership, and adoption. Nevertheless, she is aware that non-Blacks seem to struggle with her presence as a woman of color. For instance, she recounted a story from her part-time job as an office professional in which she noticed people appeared uncomfortable about describing Black people as part of storytelling. She has noticed that non-Blacks struggle with finding the “politically correct” label for Blacks, African-Americans, or Negroes. She recounted, “...they don’t know what to say, so I just say it for them because it makes them uncomfortable. So I just kind of put them at ease.”

Collectively, the study participants expressed as a central theme the notion that in some ways the experiences of Black American females are uniquely shaped by race and culture. The participants articulated this through their shared experiences in which they connected race-specific encounters with what they view as a dominant vision of Black women in the greater society. The more importance emergence within this context is a refusal to adopt a majority worldview perspective of what it means to be a Black American female as their own perspective. In other words, the participants are conscious of the role of race in shaping their lives as Black women and can offer multiple examples to support why they believe this to be the case; however, they are reluctant to accept a majority worldview that solely sees them through a monolithic lens crafted by race and racial stereotypes. In general, areas that reveal similarities and differences in the lived experiences of the participants are further discussed below. The ensuing section is the outcome of observations that further highlight the life stories of the interviewees.
When asked about how they believe Black American women are perceived in present society, the majority of participants stated a dismal depiction. Some of the words used to describe how Black American females were typecast are “lazy,” “B’s,” “ho’s,” “gold diggers” with a “bad attitude,” and “easy.” They said a more accurate characterization would be “misunderstood” and “dismissed.” Confidence stated: “You see a lot of Black women with the weight upon their shoulders even though that may not be the case with the perception.” Black women are vulnerable, which attributes to the perception that they are afraid to trust others because it is part of their life experience to feel physically, financially, and mentally depleted. Brenda stated from her experience that there will always be backroom politics, but also acknowledged a belief that Black American women are making some progress in the workplace even if other areas are lacking. “I think now we are going to get some respect, but it will always be politics in the backroom,” she stated. Destiny, who has realized some of her goals despite professional roadblocks and a battle with breast cancer, acknowledged the negative images of Black females in society. Overall, she reflected a belief that the present era is a good time to be a Black woman. She stated:

So many of us can be a me or can be a Michelle Obama, you know. You look at her and she has been doing it! She didn’t need to be the president’s wife. That just put her in a more visible way so that me and you and every other Black woman can be like, now it’s my turn.

It is notable that participants can recite numerous caricatures or derogatory beliefs about Black women, yet the arrival of one Michelle Obama on the national scene appears to outweigh existing pejorative examples of Black females. Patience smiled when asked
to reflect on the presence of Michelle Obama. She described her as the “perfect blend of the modern and traditional woman.”

I love to watch her and I love to see the things she focuses on ... First Lady is an important executive position. You can say it’s nothing but the President’s wife, but you watch her. You can believe that but you watch her.

Part of the excitement about the presence of Michelle Obama is reflective of the sentiment offered by several participants who described her as “real” or “the true image of” a Black woman. Miracle extended that idea with her belief that apart from the way in which she serves the country, First Lady Michelle Obama is not unique. In essence Miracle stated that Black women across America excel in many of the same ways as successful scholars, mothers, professionals, politicians, and social activists.

Others also saw themselves reflected in the presence of Michelle Obama, the first Black American female to serve in the role of First Lady of the United States. A commonly repeated theme is the accolades to her intellect and poise that preceded her elevation to the White House. The Black women in this study talked about her in a way that would suggest they personally know the First Lady, even though they do not. They can empathize with her struggle to be successful and the desire to be accepted. Patience described the Black American woman’s desire to live in the mainstream apart from stereotypes and expectations even in normal interpersonal contacts. She retold a story about taking her son to sign a lease for his first apartment while in college. Prior to meeting with the leasing manager, Patience had talked with the individual over the phone. When the two met in person, the manager, who was White, appeared visibly surprised to find that Patience was Black. From her perception, the man was less friendly in person than he was over the phone when he did not realize her race. Based on her continued treatment, she began to believe the manager expected her to accept the
apartment with all its flaws instead of completing the standard inspection when renting an
apartment. She believed he needed to learn otherwise, and so the encounter began in
which she presented a different Black American woman than expected. She stated: “I just
needed him, you know, to treat me like anybody else. Don’t make assumptions. Don’t do
that thing that they tend to do when they don’t know you.”

According to the findings, Michelle Obama also represents those things that the
grounded Black American female has known all the time: Life is work. Patience also
noted, as did others, while there have been comparisons to the fictional television
character Claire Huxtable, this model of Black professionalism is real. “She’s an actual
person.” Brenda described her as a “real Black First Lady.” When asked to explain what
was meant by the term “real,” Dorothy offered the following:

She’s not mixed. She wears her hair, there’s nothing phony about her. She’s very
educated and very smart... she has the lips and the nose; you know what I’m
saying? She don’t put on airs and she loves her husband. That’s what I mean by
real.

The issue of wellness is implied within the life stories of participants who
discussed how they arrived at a personal understanding of what it means for them to live
as a Black woman in America. The following subsection introduces the idea of
professional counseling.

*Life Challenges and the Utilization of Counseling*

While this study did not specifically address patterns of help-seeking behavior
with participants, dialogue about counseling naturally surfaced for some participants
during the course of interviewing. This section appears here to provide some information
about the participants’ utilization of counseling, as this will be an area of interest for the
focus group of counselors and counselor educators who were convened to discuss the
implications of the study findings for counseling and counselor education. Despite encountering challenging events and stressors that were part of the life stories of the participants, only four participants openly discussed issues related to the topic of mental health. Precious and Charity discussed points in their lives during which they felt as though they no longer wanted to live. The idea of not wanting to live surfaced for teen-aged Precious upon the death of her mother. It also became a consideration for Charity, who was dissatisfied with her marriage and life at the time. Charity also described herself as being on the verge of a "nervous breakdown." Both participants denied ever attempting suicide, did not use the term suicide, and denied having sought counseling services. Of the remaining participants, Patience was seeing a therapist at the time of the study and Brenda reported she had participated in marriage and substance abuse counseling with a spouse. The two raised the issue of counseling utilization in the course of discussing various life challenges. For Patience, the subject of counseling surfaced during discussions about overcoming grief upon the death of a sibling. She explained it as a necessity because "I’ve had so many losses in my life, for me to finally say I need help, and actually go out and get help, you know that’s just – it’s unusual because it’s not encouraged in our community." Brenda, Destiny, and Terri also have worked in fields related to the helping professions at various points in their careers.

Findings from Focus Groups: Implications for Counseling and Counselor Education

Examination of the essential life events that have shaped the ways in which Black American females arrived at a personal application of womanhood was the focus of the previous major section of this chapter. The final section of this chapter presents the results from focus group discussions with counselor educators and practitioners, who
addressed the question of how the experiences among the Black women interviewed for this study could contribute to the body of knowledge in the counseling profession. As part of the focus group discussions, participants also were asked to consider what impact the presented findings might have on counseling and counselor education. Focus group participants received the previous sections of this chapter, an outline of the preliminary findings along with an outline of 12 questions related to the overarching research query that asked how the experiences of Black females and their sense of their womanhood contribute to the body of knowledge in the counseling profession (see Appendix J.) Questions for the focus groups were organized in three sections: 1) general impressions of the findings, 2) implications for counseling practice, and 3) implications for counselor education. The ensuing analysis is the outcome of discussions that included five counselor educators and a doctoral student in counselor education. Focus group participants also were therapists who maintained a client caseload.

Focus Group Characteristics

Counselor educators from four Midwestern universities were invited to serve as focus group participants, and three of these universities were represented in the final study. Invitations to participate were extended to eight counselor educators and counselors. Scheduling of two focus group sessions accommodated the schedules of individuals who participated. Focus Group 1 (FG1) consisted of two African American males and one African American female. All three were fully licensed professional counselors, and identified as emerging contributors to the profession based on their record of engagement in professional organizations related to counselor education and counseling. Focus Group 2 (FG2) consisted of an African American female and a White
male, both of whom were seasoned educators with extensive experience in agency and clinical settings. In addition, both were university faculty in counselor education departments. These two individuals had established reputations in foundational professional organizations related to counseling and related areas of specialization. A single counselor educator (FG3) was unable to attend either focus group session but contributed written analysis of the findings through electronic mail prior to the development of the focus group questions, thus she made general comments about the implications of the interview findings for counseling and counselor education. This individual was an African American female, with teaching and clinical experiences, and a clear leadership role in professional organizations, particularly those focused on counselor education. In describing the characteristics of focus group members, it also helps to establish the various perspectives from which these participants responded to the question posed and the findings from the major portion of this study.

Results of the focus groups provided concrete directions for counseling professionals in both training and therapeutic settings. More specifically, counselor educators were emphatic and immediate in their application of the initial findings to counselor training, thus making that area the target of discussion. Overall, focus group participants were unanimous in their agreement that the findings as presented offered new information for the counseling profession in creating greater understanding of African American females and the ways in which they form a womanhood identity. One counselor educator noted African American women often are the focus of research related to race; however little is known about them within the context of gender identity. Furthermore, they used the interview findings to identify ways in which this information
can fill gaps in both counseling and training processes as they relate to understanding Black American women. They also expressed caution when discussing the research findings to avoid overly broad generalizations about Black American women.

Focus group members focused primarily on counselor education and counseling practice. Counseling pedagogy occurs such that lessons learned through various methods of teaching one to become a counselor inevitably can influence counseling practice. Course work and practical experiences that advance student goals toward multicultural competency facilitate the process of training graduate students in counseling. While focus group participants discussed the implications of training and practice separately, the primary direction of their attention focused on training elements as they addressed study findings.

Explored in the subsequent portion of this chapter are several themes that were relevant to both counselor training and counselor practice: multicultural competence, questions for future research, effective use of counseling theory, understanding Black American women and girls, counseling and theory, unhealthy messages, rethinking resilience, and unanswered questions. The preparation of professional counselors rests on a foundation of theory, skill development and expertise in specialized areas of treatment. This element of counselor training is static, meaning it remains the same process regardless of variables such as culture, gender, or class. The accumulation of culturally informed awareness, skills, and knowledge can make experiential training less generic in the same way as the cultivation of a theoretical orientation adds specificity to the therapeutic work of counselors. One counselor educator stated:

Counseling skills and techniques are going to be the same whether you work with any population, right? But, you may have to, because of the knowledge and the
awareness, you may have to create some variation in skills. We don’t look at it in that context. (FG1)
Professional counselors who subscribe to the auspices of the American Counseling Association are ethically obligated to gain professional competence and training that will permit them to work effectively with clients from diverse backgrounds (ACA, 2005). Likewise, CACREP has developed training standards that specifically speak to the necessity of a multicultural framework for working competently with diverse clients (CACREP, 2001). Similarly, embedded within the codes of operation for other helping professions are statements that address multiculturalism. With these considerations looming, focus group members synthesized the findings through filters that provide insights for the counseling profession. Counselor preparation was the mostly heavily discussed domain, with the belief that training has a direct influence upon the ways that counselors operate within therapeutic settings with clients.

Multicultural Competence

At the core of multicultural counseling is the comprehensive understanding of issues and therapeutic approaches “that support the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of individuals within their historical, cultural, economic, political, and psychosocial contexts” (ACA, 2005, p. 20). From the perspective of focus group members, the need for this type of awareness, skills and knowledge is as fundamental to the preparation of well-rounded future counselors as theory or perfecting active listening skills.

“Awareness” that is beneficial to counselors in training resembles an earnest grasp of and respect for an individual reality that suggests people live differently, and as a course will present for counseling with different problems. Not every potential client is
alike. Most evident among the focus group participants was the belief that “awareness” reflects more than knowing about “groups.” It also includes recognition that worldview perspectives are shaped by characteristics of American culture embedded in society. Historically these characteristics have disfavored Black Americans. In support of this application of the findings, focus group participants identified examples of the ways in which society and race intersect to create multiple layers of discourse for Black women such that a culturally attentive counselor is critical. What counselor educators and practicing counselors identified as a missing link in the preparation of multiculturally competent counselors is a holistic approach that comprehensively considers clients’ lives in context of their ongoing experiences and not solely as member of a group. That is not to say, however, that counselor educators viewed group influences as unimportant and posited, “it doesn’t necessarily have to be one or the other, but that’s what’s happening now.” Regardless of where they were in their career lifespan as counselor educators, focus group participants voiced a call to “rethink” multicultural education and counselor preparation.

The context of multicultural education was to help non-whites understand people of color and that was the full premise of multicultural education and multicultural counseling. So, you have this focus that is primarily on trying to educate and we’ve done an injustice. (FG1)

Any time anybody sits across from you, there are some differences. So, when you think about it from a cross cultural perspective that should open up our minds to say, let me find out about this person and not about that group that this person belongs to. (FG1)

In discussing multicultural competency, a FG1 participant stated: “counselors must be culturally competent around racial lines but also gender identity development;” yet gender often becomes invisible when the population is African American women. Additionally, race seems at times to become insignificant when considering gender issues and mainstream
society. As an example, a veteran counselor educator from Focus Group 1 suggested that Black women are observed through a racial rather than gender lens stated: "In our relationships we're sort of egalitarian, but I think if you were to ask me, racism is more of an issue than gender because I have been oppressed by men because I'm black before I'm a woman."

According to counselor educators and practitioners, the motivation behind multicultural education was to guide professional counselors toward learning more about the various ways in which individuals live different lifestyles; encourage reflective consideration of their roles in perpetuating systemic discourse; and use this knowledge for the betterment of clients. As was stated, multicultural education can be a dual process that when embraced can point client and counselor toward relevant understanding of dynamics in force in society and of their respective roles within those dynamics. That is to say in this two-fold process described, one aspect is knowledge-oriented while the other is relationship based. As described by a participant in Focus Group 1, for a Black American woman to seek therapy and encounter "a counselor who ends up treating them in the same context that they're experiencing throughout their lives can really be a challenging experience." In this instance, the potentially therapeutic benefits become lost and the experience is "almost self-defeating in a way." Understanding occurs through the creation of new knowledge through research and thinking about what the counseling profession already knows.

Counseling and Theories

On the surface, multicultural counseling and traditional counseling theories would appear at odds in their usefulness in working with culturally diverse populations. As
 counselors learn more about the people who make up various ethnic groups, traditional counseling theories can appear less appropriate. This point was a recurring thought in the focus group discussions, and served as the point for discussing ways either to make existing theories fit for Black American women, or create new ones that might enrich the therapeutic experience for Black American females. With the realization that most counseling theories, as they are currently known and practiced, did not have people of color in mind during their creation, focus group participants were careful to clarify that traditional theories can be “useful” or “helpful” particularly when applied appropriately and within context. Some examples of traditional theories cited by focus group participants for their potential in working with people of color were Adlerian, Person Centered, and Gestalt. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of human development, Berne’s work with Transactional Analysis, and Parham’s African-centered paradigm align themselves as viable alternatives to fit with the research findings from this study, according to focus group participants. Transactional Analysis was also noted by focus group participants as a perspective that in some ways is arguably counter to, yet consistent with, the stated experiences of Black Americans in that it is based on the “notion that adulthood is when you’re not just doing what you were programmed to do or how you’ve been trained to live.” Another focus group participant described ways in which Adlerian theory can complement work with African American females when addressing internalized ideas about “inferiority.”

While Adler talks about more of a family structure and positioning and birth order, at the same time this whole idea of sitting with and living with this idea of inferiority, and how does that play our in your development is something to think about and question. (FG1)
Overall, focus group participants stressed a strong desire for teaching that guides counseling students toward culling theory for what can work best instead of focusing entirely on the limitations and exclusions of theory when providing therapy to minority clients. According to focus group feedback, meaningful intersection of multiculturalism and theory goes beyond relegating minority issues to a special section to diversifying teaching traditional theories by infusing minority concerns.

Another perspective to arise from Focus Group 1 considered a bridge between the usefulness of traditional theory for populations originally excluded from meaningful research and the ultimate intention of counseling theory. Thereby, when considering a particular theory for use with ethnic minorities, look past the exclusionary position through which it was created and examine the theoretical benefit for the individual. A focus group participant explained it in the following example:

These people who came up with the various theories, they were interested in humanity. They may not be interested in you per se, and they may not be interested in people who look like you, and they may have had disregard for people who look like you, but at the same time, they had questions about life. (FG1).

Finally, two areas related to theory that garnered less attention surfaced during Focus Group 2 addressed issues of gender and lifespan development. For instance, a female counselor educator suggested the push to find an empowerment framework for Black American women, such as womanist theory, amounts to “a cry to be recognized by white feminists.” Similar dialogue occurred in the first focus group where a discussion ensued about the displacement of Black American women in the feminist agenda. It was interesting to note that female counselor educators at various points on their individual and career lifespan viewed this notion consistently. Thus, just as traditional theories can
be exclusionary based on race, theories rooted in feminism can be as divisive based on race and gender.

*Search for Comprehensive Understanding*

Counselor educators in the study viewed contemporary approaches to multicultural education in counseling as the reflection of “a cookbook mentality” toward acknowledging individuals outside one’s own worldview. “Multicultural counseling should be about this wanting to sit down and to understand and explore people who have different life walks and life experiences rather than I need to educate about this,” said a participant from Focus Group 1. These same counseling professionals suggested change to the current philosophy about multicultural education, research, and new knowledge about individuals and their lived experiences within a mental wellness framework. Focus group reflections on the primary findings suggested much of what surfaced through the individual interviews offered opportunities to address potential counseling issues for Black American women that previously had gone unexamined. An emerging counselor educator synthesized the information in the following:

> What we’re talking about is looking at the person from a holistic, contextual, environmental perspective based on their own subjective reality, right? And, so, you put all these pieces together with the client and you get a better understanding of why you have in front of you an angry Black woman. (FG1)

The “pieces” described as “complex” could come in the form of relationship difficulties, career demands, family or child-rearing challenges, health concerns or fatigue from a continuous war with numerous forms of oppression in America. In both focus groups, all but one participant seemingly scoffed at the notion that race and gender related oppression decreased with the election of President Barack Obama. New knowledge comes about through experiences based on race that may cause some Blacks
to anticipate a “looming” incident that on some level will create a type of discourse. One counselor educator described the example in the following story recently reported in the media:

For example, I think about those young kids. They were at a pool. Here are these young kids, hadn’t had any kind of experiences. They wanted to have their camp, go to the swimming pool, and bam! Low and behold, here’s this incident…. it’s something like this that catapults you into understanding what it means to be Black. This is the struggle, per se. There is going to be something that is going to let you know that not only are you Black, but you are a Black woman. (FG1)

As demonstrated in the literature and initial findings, the experiences of African Americans are multifaceted such that individually they try to assimilate into mainstream cultures, while simultaneously striving to remain genuine and transparent as a racial group with its own unique history. On one end is the dominant mainstream culture and on the other Afrocentric heritage that shapes Black American culture, and African Americans may feel pulled by their allegiances to these two groups.

Focus group participants acknowledged additional areas reported in the findings from the interviews with Black American women about which they were unfamiliar. The resulting outcome for them was individual and professional growth and insights through reading the initial findings. For example, the attitudes expressed toward sexuality embarked upon a new area as the consensus was that Black Americans are conditioned at an early age to consider anything related to sexuality as a matter of “privacy,” and subsequently not something open for discussion with others. This reflected an area of discussion rooted in ideological teachings in the family of origin and philosophical discovery of self. A female focus group participant recalled messages learned as a young teen about sex, sexual education, and the threat of pregnancy.
Most of my girlfriends (African American) and I were taught that sexuality and the expression of it was not positive. All I can remember is my mother preaching to my sisters and I not to ever let a man get us pregnant because we could end up being a single mother... I think I was like 7 years old when this started. So just the word “sex” made me nervous. (FG3)

Focus group participants also pointed out the lack of supportive research to help counselors assist their clients reinforces the “human tendency” to “make something up” when the answer is unknown. Additionally, counselor training places too great an emphasis on problem definition over exploring all possible elements of a client’s story, and too little emphasis on the establishment of genuine relationship building and respect for the private nature of African Americans.

*Understanding Black Struggle and Rethinking Resilience*

Struggle is both an anticipant and a measurement of fortitude. For example, in the past Blacks in the U.S. had the Civil Rights Movement and the Voting Rights Act, which sought to bring about racial parity previously unknown; however the new millennium issues for Blacks have been the targeted referendum on affirmative action and more subtle forms of racism. Focus group participants stated it in the following:

> You have to pay your dues just because you are Black. You’re going to have to come up against racism or sexism somewhere down the line. Maybe not like someone else had to do it, and it may not be as hard for you because other folks have paved the way. (FG1)

> The whole idea of struggle is almost like it’s existential in that it’s an important part of life that we all have to go through. For people of color, women of color that’s just where yours is just by nature of you being that. (FG1)

> It is “important to understand these complexities” in the creation of new knowledge and increased awareness about Black American women. Counseling professionals also noted the need to “allow Black women opportunities to voice those ideas, opinions or frustrations because a lot of times Black women are marginalized or
labeled undefined” or irrelevant. This is to suggest Black women are dismissed within the mainstream American culture.

Most often Black American women are characterized as resilient because of their individual sustainability despite life challenges. Focus group participants argued that while challenges are not unique to any one culture, the types of challenges faced by Blacks in America are unprecedented when compared to mainstream and other ethnic cultures. Also as noted by the focus groups, the presence of “struggle” was a salient theme in the lives of all interview participants. Struggle, as it is further noted, is not synonymous for abuse, which also was a part of the life narratives for most interview participants. One participant from Focus Group 1 suggested that the “sense of struggle is embedded in a Black woman’s identity” which is what sets their experiences apart from other ethnicities. For example, in considering the women’s movement, the issues at the forefront of the push for gender equity have not always considered the “struggle” of Black American women. “We’re not used to not experiencing some kind of struggle or challenge,” a Focus Group 1 participant explained. Struggle and resilience are bound in historical context. Another participant posited:

We talk about the single parent households right now, that is not a new phenomena because way back when some families became single parent households at the hands of those who decided that they should be single-family households. Meaning, the black men were lynched and the mothers were left to be single parents, so the struggle was born out of slavery, which also what emerged from that is the resilience of black women (FG1).

Another challenge raised by counselor educators was the idea of resiliency as the ability to confront adversity such that Black American women appear to display bravery in coping with daily challenges. The counter argument to this idea is that there is more to resiliency than the mere ability to defy hardship and withstand tribulations. That is to say,
resiliency is not measured by the ability to cope with adversity but the ability to limit where possible the ways and number of challenges. A participant from Focus Group 1 stated: “we focus too much on the individual ability to be resilient and use their protective factors to overcome barriers as opposed to demolishing those barriers when they all can be abolished.” Examples given of barriers that can be “abolished” are sexism, racism, and the separation of socio-economic classes to start. In response, a perceived role of counselor educators is to train counselors to promote self-efficacy and advocacy for the benefit and welfare of the client and society.

Racism is something that can be confronted, but if I focus so much on you being a resilient person, then all I’m telling you is to cope with it, cope with it, cope with it. That’s what my concern is, so as a counselor educator preparing counselors, I want to know how can that individual advocate for themselves? How can that individual advocate for individuals behind her who may go through that same situation? (FG1).

Does it have to be either or? When we start talking about advocacy, we talk about advocacy on a micro level and a macro level, and we talk about it on a systemic level and an individual level. So now, you as the counselor and you and the counselor educator you talk about systemic change at the same time that you’re talking about individual resilience and change. They can go hand in hand. (FG1)

Some of the questions raised throughout the focus group discussions pertained to philosophical expectations when training future counselors and counselor educators. Other questions to surface were germane to learning more about Black American women in specific contexts.

Understanding Black Women and Girls

A question looming over the initial findings was how the results compared to Black American females younger than age 35 or to women of other ethnicities. Focus group participants noted this unexplored question and identified it as a potential query for future research. Findings from the explored population suggested that nurturing and ways
of knowing occurred across generational lines. Reflections from a participant in Focus
Group 1 summarize the point of this topic: “One of the things for me to consider even
though we’re talking about teens and young adults is how were they mothered. Because
each one of these women were mothering or grand mothering a teen or young adult.”
This means, although the study does not explicitly discuss Black American women ages
35 and younger, it still offered a foundation on which to improve understanding of the
lives Black females generally face.

From Deficit Focus to Strengths

Several focus group participants identified within the findings shared narratives
from Black American women that tell a story of their experiences in the U.S. apart from
deficit positions or points of comparison to the dominant culture. Thus, the findings
present an uncensored record of Black women created without manipulation or
preconceptions. The deficit position to which many focus group participants referred in
their analysis has historically taken a research position of wrongness or failure (e.g., low
education, promiscuity, substance abuse) when seeking to understand Blacks in America.
Alternatives to the deficit approach would include inquiries that seek to discern examples
of self-efficacy or achievement within the Black American experience.

One focus group member suggested as researchers “we talk about the problems
with the single Black female head of household. Well, let’s talk about not the problem
but let’s talk about the success. There are some success stories out there also.” Across all
three focus groups, the reaction was similar. Another counselor educator reflected: “racial
identity development is always discussed in relationship to African Americans; however
the counseling field has rarely focused on gender identity development and women of
color.” Both the counselor and the client bring with them different views about the meaning of life experiences. These varying viewpoints have a part in how counselors conceptualize Black American women as clients.

**Conceptualization of Black Females**

Focus group members have suggested current approaches to conceptualizing Black American females could be flawed when these assessments are based on professional biases that favor a pathological view. Three commonly cited observations emerged from focus group discussions about the implications of this study for counselor preparation and practice. The first observation is that all counselors must take time to explore all the experiences and concerns the client is willing to bring into the therapeutic session. Second, when considering this population counselors sometimes rush to a conclusion without holistically exploring client concerns. Third, they misdiagnose entirely. Incomplete or misapplied diagnoses are examples of ways in which counselors can impede the therapeutic process. A veteran counselor educator recalled the cautionary warning he offers to counseling students while teaching them to use the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), considered the bible for classifying mental health disorders. Counselor educators noted although they strongly encourage counselors-in-training to “be slow to diagnose,” the observed human tendency is to make and defend the rationale for the chosen diagnosis, even to the point of rejecting conflicting data. A member from Focus Group 2 explained: “Well, I would think similarly from a counselor point of view, be slow to conclude that you understand your client.”
Deliberation in diagnosis was suggested for all counseling professionals regardless of race or ethnicity, and sentiments about diagnoses that are well-considered was a concern expressed in the feedback from each of the three focus groups. Although African-Americans are considered more likely to understand many of the historical and social challenges to Blacks in America, counselor educators noted the same caution about reaching quick conclusions.

Counselors/counselor educators noted widely observed sources of familiarity about African-American women, such as their aforementioned tendency to appear resilient, connect with religion, and possess an apparently low rate of help seeking behaviors. In the process of acknowledging the presence of these factors in counseling literature about Black American women, the focus groups applied alternative observations as examples of why the findings in this study are significant. For instance, one counselor educator posed the question as to whether resilience in Black American women is wrongly applied. Instead of viewing Black females as tragic figures in American culture with lives mired in pain and recovery, perhaps a greater unexplored meaning to resilience exists that has been overlooked. In essence, perhaps resilience is limited in its common application to overcoming adversity. Maybe what we know as resilience is driven more by an internal desire to extract more from life than it appears to be offering at any given moment rather than recovering from a setback. In which case, resilience is not necessarily a matter of "bouncing [back] like a rubber ball" as a Focus Group 2 member suggested. Resilience could also mean moving toward expectations for the future. In another case, a counselor appeared almost offended by the continuous application of the resilient definition to Black Americans in general, including women.
Single Black women, majority of us have babies early, you know, we're receiving public assistance, all these negative statistics that researchers write about and publish them in journals. The most fascinating thing about them is that you're very hard pressed to find any positive information about African-American women. I say that to say there is something with this resiliency, but how do we use it effectively? (FG1)

One implication for counselors might be that the early expectation for Black women is that we have to be strong and be a good caretaker for other people. Counselors must be careful not to buy into stereotype of the “strong” Black woman. (FG3)

*Role of Spirituality and Religion.* Participants appeared to reach consensus in a primary source of power for Black American females, and that strength resides in their expression of spiritual faith through religion. This finding was consistent with interview participants. Likewise, counselor educators emphasized the importance of teaching counseling students to consider and explore the role of religious faith with each individual client rather than rely on prior research that simply states that Black Americans as a group are highly religious. Religion as a system of support clearly is a significant factor in the lives of most Black Americans as demonstrated across multiple disciplines and within the counseling literature. In this study, religion was demonstrated to be not just a source of moral guidance but a source of support, reflection and direction. Awareness and knowledge about the multifaceted role of religion in the lives of Black American women such that it informs the ways in which counselors learn to conceptualize counseling concerns is important. A focus group participant summarized the critical nature of religion in the following:

I just think that’s an important piece that one, we should explore with all of our clients, but then especially when you start talking about Black Americans and Black American females. If you don’t at least address that piece then you might be missing a big piece of what’s going on with the client. (FG1)
Another counselor educator noted “counselors must understand the role that spirituality can play in both personal and career decision making for African American women.” Others connected with a point to which interview participants alluded when discussing influences on their womanhood identity. “Church women” often served as models and teachers of behavior for young Black American females. A sole focus group participant strongly suggested that the influential role of religion has decreased with present generations of Black women and girls.

*Gender and/or Race*

Focus group participants suggested that counselors who aspire to demonstrate multicultural competency seek to understand Black women from both gender and racial contexts. Furthermore, these counselor educators observed that race appears to remain an issue in the larger society; whereas gender topics appear on the forefront of discussion more readily. Moreover, focus group participants, particularly those who were female, noted the displacement of Black female issues among feminist concerns. One cited example of a lack of gender solidarity is the perceived push to make Black American women choose between gender and race. A comment from a participant in Focus Group 1 captured the point:

> This is my bias but I think that sometimes Black women do not have the privilege to do that, or the voice to do that, meaning we are not seen in a lot of ways as women. So, it’s hard for us to claim that issue when we’re not even seen, even within the women’s movement. For example, there’s a ‘Women in Counseling Issues’ video and book and there’s not one Black woman [featured]. You’re talking about women in counseling and we’re not there.

A perceived reality in which Black American women seem overlooked in many aspects of mainstream culture is a sentiment addressed by individual participants and
focus group members alike. One Focus Group 1 participant noted that some of the challenges Black American females face as women become lost behind race. Thereby, Black women experience privilege that results from access and opportunity, and pain from ongoing oppression in other areas. This tension of race as one life dimension and gender as another dimension contributes to unclear messages about blackness and womanhood.

**Unhealthy Messages**

Black American women are the recipients of messages that can help to create unhealthy ideas about who they are within their race and their gender. As discussed previously in the individual interviews, Black American women perceive themselves as underappreciated and often mischaracterized. Likewise, counselor educators noted the importance of preparing counselors who can recognize and understand the impact of internalized oppression on the lives of Black females in America. One focus group participant noted the role of appearance-based values that are rooted in slavery, such as the acceptance of European features evidenced by a preferential skin color and hair texture. This FG1 member suggested, “These may be values that have been integrated into a cultural subconscious.” The following quotes further describe some of the damaging messages heard as part of the womanhood phenomenon:

I think the constant image that black women get is that they’re not good enough, right... we’re bombarded with a number of those kind of issues at work, in relationships, within families. Many households are single African-American households, right, and that gets taxing. It gets very challenging. It’s another area where we might be feeling some insecurities, some challenges, and so you have a lot of different messages that come from society that have this ‘I’m not good enough.’ (FG1)

It’s almost like there’s an ugly truth and it’s not a truth. The African-American woman doesn’t fit into what the ideal American family is. That’s the message
being sent. Again, we said the ideal family is a husband and wife but the image that you get is white. And, African-American men, have the advantage in that maybe if I get me a white woman then I get closer to that ideal. (FG1)

I have an article on African American families and oppression. I look at color, body, and so on. For Black women, the only area where they came out well in terms of physical attractiveness was with body size. You're only fat, one girl said, when you take up two seats on the bus. (FG2)

Clearly articulated in the discussion of findings among counselors and counselor educators is the belief that counseling professionals can unwittingly or with malice participate in inflicting emotional damage to Black female clients by advancing negative societal messages. Numerous messages in society about the value of Black women range from “that I’m not good enough for this Black man” to “I’m not good enough for this job.” Participants also noted these messages are further compounded by a negative counseling experience during which the counselor also “looks at you from a deficit. Then that counselor is perpetuating an image, and that’s what we don’t want to have happen.” New understanding of the unhealthy messages that have defined Black American women from slavery to contemporary times also spark questions about the true meaning of resilience within Black American culture.

Unanswered Questions: Future Research

Suggestions for future research arose from new and unexplored questions offered by focus group participants. These questions about Black American womanhood were addressed most often within the context of American culture, and could offer the opportunity to expand the understanding of gender identity development for Black women. Namely, participants wanted to know about the impact of socio-economic status (SES) within the framework of gender identity development for Black American females. Individual interview participants alluded to the presence of poverty and other economic-
based dividers in recounting their life-shaping experiences. Nowhere in the initial findings do interview participants attribute economic empowerment – or the lack thereof – as part of their womanhood development. Indirectly, Black women discussed employment and career development as indicators of their independence and self-sufficiency, but nothing specifically was stated about income level and womanhood development. Likewise, interview participants did not report the influence of an increased income status on their overall perception of womanhood. The same is possible for the role of education in advancing the lives of those in the primary study, where clearly it was a catalyst for opportunities not always available for Black American women within the age group of the Black women in this study.

The second unanswered question concerned the ways in which information learned about Black women ages 35 and older compared to younger Black women. Furthermore, when considering age, one might explore what teachings older women share with younger females to assist them toward developing a womanhood identity. While focus group participants identified within the findings the presence of positive generational influences, they also expressed doubt that current generations are the recipients of similar teachings that guided women in the same age bracket as the study group participants. For example, a participant in Focus Group 1 recalled commonly utilized approaches within the Black community to teach young girls about guarding themselves sexually, and in the process protecting their reputation and future. Prominent messages included sayings such as “keep your skirt down,” “don’t mess with little boys” or never “let a man get you pregnant.” One of the veteran counselor educators recalled,
"Blacks invested more in teaching their girls, in the past. They're not teaching them anything now."

The Black female participants in this study viewed wisdom and guidance shared by Black matriarchs with young women and girls as training embedded within the family culture. By contrast, focus group participants also noted these types of messages appear to occur less frequently, if at all. This is a sentiment captured in the following statements:

Having those conversations where, the old school folks didn’t have really deep conversations about sexuality per se, but what they did say was ‘keep your skirt down’ and ‘don’t you go out there doing that with those little boys.’ Somehow, somewhere folks stopped having those conversations and now we have 13, 14, 15 year olds having babies. (FG1)

My dad said ‘any old way won't do in here.’ That’s one example. My students will hear me say this: ‘do it right, do it once.’ My uncle used to say, ‘[General] Sherman said be sure that you're right and go ahead.’ Those are the three things that I grew up with. Now my great nieces are carrying that. I posted it outside the door to their house so that they would see these things. (FG2)

The third prominent question raised by counselor educators and counselors primarily focused upon pedagogical issues related to the process of teaching counseling students to become effective and competent practitioners. Within the framework of preparing individuals to become counselors, or perhaps even counselor educators, the question arises about which aspects of training are obligations and which are optional, or at what point does advocacy, multiculturalism and social justice become more than aspirational objectives. Mainly, some of the counselor educators believe training efforts would best serve African American female clients by embracing a holistic perspective that considers their lives in totality. One educator explained it in the following: “This [need] is difficult to understand and when you have a group like African-American women – that are dealing with a lot of issues – it’s really important to look at them in an
individualized way.” The next consideration is how experiences influence the manifestation of what counselors define as “presenting problems.” Thus, future research might consider surveying the amount of training time that goes into problem definition and client conceptualization when it concerns minority populations.

Summary

Overall, this chapter has reported the findings from interviews with ten Black females about their experiences and views of themselves as women. The findings that emerged from the within case and cross case analyses are presented. Each case summary included salient themes that emerged to help shed light on identity development as a Black American woman. Subsequently, the study produced findings that addressed three main areas: Becoming a woman, Qualities of Black American womanhood, and Black women in contemporary America. The emergence of a womanhood identity occurred through motherhood, other lifecycle transitions, maternal family influences, cultivating wisdom, and lifecycle transitions. Additionally, noted in the findings are identifiable characteristics such as responsibility, independence, self-sacrifice, overcoming challenges and resilience, spirituality and faith, and sexuality. These highlighted themes revealed themselves in several layers and easily could have stood as single categories.

Participants also pointed to contemporary culture and history for examples of how Black women are viewed in the United States. Interview participants described an existence in mainstream culture marked by messages that either uplift or weigh down one’s sense of self as a Black woman in contemporary America. The reality of Michelle Obama as a common yet accomplished Black woman on the national and international scene seems to have encouraged other Black American females through her presence as
an individual who mirrors how some Black women view themselves and aspire to for others to see them.

Through this study, it becomes apparent that for the counselor educators and counselors involved, the expansive application of principles that feed multicultural competency remains a concern. Furthermore, this concern for whether the counseling profession has maximized the potential influence of multiculturalism was consistent among focus group members despite their race, gender, or years of service in the counseling profession. The counseling professionals in the study recognized the value of the findings as they pertain to stimulating scholarly discussion about the concerns middle-aged Black females have regarding their place in contemporary American society. Most notably, counselor educators acknowledged the struggle that occurs for individuals of two historically oppressed groups: women and Black Americans. The following chapter will expound on the findings presented here, address limitations of the study, offer recommendations for future research, and discuss the implications of the findings for counseling and counselor education.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to address a need that exists for research that focuses exclusively on womanhood development for Black American females. More specifically, this study endeavored to discern the most prominent factors that contributed to the development of a womanhood identity for Black American females as described by study participants. As thoroughly stated in previous chapters, this study explored participants' experiences related to their discovery of Black womanhood. The final part of this study involved focus groups of counselors and counselor educators discussing the implications of the interview findings for clinical practice and counselor education and training.

Overview of the Study

The ways in which Black American females arrived at personal understandings about what it means to become women emerged through reported characteristics and expressed attitudes. Beliefs about womanhood encompass several factors; chiefly among them are variables such as race, socioeconomic status, sexuality, or religious affiliation (Moradi, 2005.) There are numerous traits, experiences and identifiers that could contribute to how Black females learn to experience womanhood, however the most salient characteristics are reflected in six areas that come under the umbrella of becoming a woman. These factors warranted special recognition for their presence in the individual stories of each participant as well as within the cross-case analysis.
Discussions of Key Findings

_Becoming a Woman_

Black American females between the ages of 35 to 62 perceive the time in which they became women as a process shaped by life experiences, significant events and milestones. Collectively, arriving at a definition of womanhood was not solely dependent upon a single event or commonly lauded milestones such as achieving professional or academic accolades, reaching a certain age of maturity, or embarking upon traditional roles of spouse or caregiver. In some ways, this finding was consistent with literature on female identity development (Moradi, 2005). Based on the findings from this study, womanhood also includes a transition in attitude or ideology such that personal beliefs about character, self-motivation and self-awareness are prominent. The evolution of this process can differ for each Black American female.

Considerable overlap exists between direct experiences and external influences in realizing the phenomenon under question, having to do with how Black American females come to identify themselves as women. As an example, motherhood is significant to the research findings because some participants moved into that role and considered it a leading reason for seeing themselves as women. However, what made childbirth a relevant experience was the responsibility that accompanied the role and not necessarily motherhood itself. For Brenda, a 57 year-old interview participant, the role of a mother crystallized when she became a parent. "Then it just really sunk in. This is what she did. This is the love that she gave me." Therefore, motherhood was associated with becoming a woman because it also involves responsibility and care for the comprehensive wellbeing of a dependent child. This prototype of a Black American
mother creates the image of a protective, strong, and caring individual (Sharp & Ispa, 2009), who also recognizes the need to raise children, particularly daughters, with skills that will allow them to become self-determinant and self-sufficient (Mandara, Varner & Richman, 2010). Demonstrations of responsible character emerged through examples of maternal influences cited by study participants.

**Maternal Family Influences.** Family influence provides another factor for discussion because it highlights the impact of matriarchs on the development of younger Black females. Better awareness of Black women identity through meaningful experiences fosters understanding of Black females as new working professionals, students and clients. Study participant, Precious, recalled hearing her mother discuss the future she desired for her daughter. “I would hear, ‘I’m gonna make sure that my daughter doesn’t get pregnant or make the kinds of mistakes that me and my mother made.’” In-depth familiarity with mothers and their gendered expectations for their children could lead to better understanding of the mothers, their experiences and the values that ultimately would be passed on to children. Sharp and Ispa (2009) reported available data about parental expectations exist, but largely on White, middle class populations. This would suggest that Black parental expectations and gendered goals for children are unexplored areas of research.

**Independence.** In terms of independence as a characteristic of Black womanhood, being a woman contains a notion that a ‘true’ woman is one who grows from the guidance of a parent or caretaker, and is able to stand ably on her own with a self-determined course for life (Mandara et al, 2010; Sharp & Ispa, 2009; Turnage, 2008.) As is described and reflected in the narratives of participants, independence follows feelings
of empowerment that arise from self-discovery, finding voice, or walking away from manipulation and mistreatment. In essence, independence emerges in the study as a confirmation of an attitude more than an event.

**Self-Sacrifice.** Participants discussed patterns of self-sacrificing attitudes in varied ways that suggest self-sacrifice involves a sense of obligation and duty to one’s racial community, is a life preserver for the beneficiary, and may be an anchor that prevents movement for the one sacrificing. Self-sacrifice clarifies two points about Black American females based on the findings. First, the welfare of others consistently unselfishly replaced the needs of the participant. Most often, this occurred while raising children, supporting parents, or caring for siblings. Second, Black American females willingly give up a part of themselves for other people, while protecting a piece of themselves for their own wellbeing. Both examples make self-sacrifice in order to get by problematic because each stands in the way of the personal development of Black American women.

**Oppression and Womanhood.** Race and gender are socially constructed concepts that existed in American society long before multicultural counseling became a focus of the counseling movement. Many participants reported that as children the harshness of racism and racial politics went unnoticed to them, due in part to elders protecting them from direct encounters with racism. As adults, the study participants learned to fight these battles for themselves. For instance, Brenda quit her job when the boss for whom she had worked for nearly 20 years suddenly accused her of discriminating against a White employee with a poor performance record. Brenda recalled: “To me, that was putting me down, where I couldn’t make decisions because he was a White man.”
Black American parents have long viewed it as their duty to prepare their children, particularly daughters, to survive in a society that makes differentiations based first on race and then gender (Jones-Thomas & King, 2007). Consistent with prior research, it appears that race-related issues surfaced as significant concerns for Black American women in this study more often than gender concerns. Yet, issues of race and gender seemed to be intertwined as reported by one participant who stated, “You know, we talk about not seeing race, but when you introduce me I’m still an African-American woman. I’m never just a woman.”

As reported in the findings, participants experienced sexism in the workplace and at home. Physical abuse is the most glaring form of sexism observed, and two participants reported abuse in their own relationships. Physical beatings occurred most often within marital relationships of parents, extended family, or significant others. Participants who reported abuse in their intimate relationships denied observing physical abuse in their families of origin. Similarly, those who reported witnessing abuse among parental figures denied experiencing abuse themselves. This observation seems to suggest that at least for the Black women in this study physical abuse did not have a cyclical effect on Black American females, nor was it a generational phenomenon. While this aspect of the findings emerges from participant reports, it runs counter to the prevailing research and preventative efforts that view physical abuse as a self-perpetuating multigenerational pattern. While proportionally, Black American women would appear to experience intimate partner violence more frequently than other women, these assertions are based on research extrapolated from predominantly White, middle class samples (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2007). Black American women as the sole focus have not
been the subject of research regarding intimate partner violence (Coley & Beckett, 1988; Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2007; Morrison & et. al, 2006). Despite the abundance of research that speaks to the impact of domestic violence on women and families, studies that examine ethnicity, culture and the impact of abuse are few and emerging (Kasturirangan, Krishnan, & Riger, 2004). Certainly, these findings indicate a path for future research that deeply explores the overall impact of domestic and family violence on Black American females.

Religious Faith and Spirituality. For the participants in this study, there was a difference between religion and spirituality. Organized religion provides a place for mentorship, fellowship and other means for addressing some of the social-emotional needs of Black American women. Spirituality serves as a moral compass and life preserver for daily existence. The combination of religion and spirituality can at times offer for Black American women a place to seek comfort in times of despair, direction in times of disappointment, and protection from the oppression faced in America. An experienced female focus group participant recounted the times when churchwomen reminded her of appropriate etiquette and behavior for young girls, thus making church a place for social grooming. For Charity, a 36-year-old study participant, spiritual faith sustained her while she teetered on the brink of a “breakdown.” Destiny, 37, credited “my faith” with helping her overcome the emotional and physical effects of breast cancer.

Sexuality. The discussion of sexuality within the context of this study produced interesting responses from some of the participants. While a small minority recognized that sexuality is a component of their identity as women, the remaining participants appeared uncomfortable discussing issues related to sexuality, whether that included
sexual development, sensuality or sexuality within intimate relationships. Open discussion of sexuality could prove discomforting for this population of women for several reasons. First, social norms in the Black American community discourage such matters as “personal business.” An African-American male focus group participant recalled family lectures during which his mother reminded him to safeguard his “private parts.” Furthermore, a considerable amount of socially constructed baggage exists related to sexuality and Black American women. The history of Black women includes a legacy of sexual exploitation, while culturally in America sexuality remains politicized around many issues such as birth rate, HIV infection rates and perceptions of promiscuity (Townsend, 2008.) Parmer and Gordon (2006) contend researchers spend too little time examining the historical context in which Black American females have evolved sexually as a group and too much time on the physical aspects of Black sexuality.

The results of this study demonstrate that middle age Black American females come to know themselves as women in ways that are complex yet nevertheless informative. That which makes this way of knowing complex is the inextricable connection between race and gender. While over time race might seem less obvious a barrier in the lives of Black American women, it remains present if only in the subconscious. For example, study participant Miracle described a comfort with considering herself apart from her racial background, yet she remains aware of the discomfort Whites have when discussing simple racial issues with her. Interview participants assert and focus group participants directly stated that race and gender are inseparable for Black women. More so, various academic disciplines acknowledge the link as true.
Furthermore, despite other demographic differences that might exist between Black women, consistently defined characteristics suggest that shared experiences in some leads to shared ways of knowing and assigning meaning. For instance, responsibility emerged as a valued characteristic and description of womanhood among participants; however, the way in which responsibility manifests itself differs for each woman. In essence, participants shared the same outcome if not the journey – i.e. motherhood versus puberty as motivating factors in gender identity development. Black American women long for understanding from a broad view and within an individual context. Therefore, counselors who consider both intrinsic values and external motivations are vital to creating counseling experiences that are equally valuable. The subsequent section explores potential implications of the findings from this study for counselor education and counseling practice in detail.

Implications for Counselor Education

The design of this study included observations made by focus group members who are both counselors and counselor educators actively involved in the counseling profession. These focus groups addressed the implications of the findings from the interviews with Black American females. As a result, the implications for counseling and counselor education come not only from the musings of this researcher, but from several experienced professionals as well.

Teaching about Race and Racism

Counselor educators/practitioners who shared their feedback on the initial findings from this research articulated the need for training that teaches students to contextualize the experiences of potential clients. The appreciation for life in perspective
would include infusion of historical perspectives to multicultural education as well as theoretical course content. This would include the recognition that while traditional theories may have minimum value for all individuals, most nevertheless ignored race and gender differences. When race or gender were discussed it is well documented that these discussions were often misguided by racist and sexist attitudes of the time. Culturally biased counseling theories and interventions have the potential to harm clients (Pack-Brown, Thomas & Seymour, 2008), thereby increasing the importance of course content that promotes the understanding of racial issues. Corrective measures are necessary to address well-rooted paradigms that support theories and practices believed harmful to other cultures (Pack-Brown et al., 2008; Sue & Sue, 2003).

Teaching about race and racism could benefit multicultural education (Locke & Kiselica, 1999), and the current practice of offering a single course in multicultural counseling may not sufficiently prepare future therapists to counsel outside their own culture (Sue & Sue, 2008). Mistrust of White human service providers remains even for Black women who reported experiencing mental health issues and desiring treatment (Nicolaidis et al., 2010). Therefore, the need for counselors who will recognize and address the impact of racism on the psychosocial wellbeing is critical.

As noted throughout this document, several authors have noted the absence of demonstrated understanding among counseling students of the racially driven dilemmas encountered in the United States. These lessons are not limited to those found in textbooks, although that is an important beginning. Experientially, students can come to understand the first-hand impact of racial oppression through service learning. The notion of fortifying the educational experience through active engagement in projects and
activities is not new. As it relates to counselor education and practice, service-learning activities in diverse communities can take counseling students into areas largely inhabited by racial and ethnic minorities. Taking students and services into the community would be an alternative to the current practice of reliance upon the chance encounter with a Black American female client who happens into the training clinic of a counselor education program.

**Systemic Advocacy and Modeling at the Faculty Level**

This study is replete with experience-informed dialogue, and counselor educators who train, supervise, advise and mentor Black American female master’s and doctoral students can benefit from its findings. Counselor educators who teach in master’s and doctoral degree programs can benefit from this study because of their direct relationship with graduate students of color. Gardener (2007) noted that a lack of mentors, supportive faculty and understanding peers impact students’ success and feelings of belonging in their particular discipline and profession. Racial and ethnic minority students experience racism and racial microaggressions in their counseling programs (Michael-Makri, 2010). Racial microaggressions are regularly occurring verbal, behavioral, or environmental “indignities,” whether intentional or unintentional, that direct hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. At times, those who commit microaggressions are unaware of their offensive communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities (Sue & et al., 2007).

The aforementioned literature blends with the findings from this current study to help foster better understanding of middle-aged Black American women as graduate students. For instance, the National Science Foundation (NSF) 2008 Survey of Earned
Doctorates reported that Black Americans accounted for 32 of the 215 (15%) doctorates awarded in counselor education/counseling and guidance; and 36 of the 418 (9%) doctorates earned in counseling psychology. While the numbers are small, the overall reminder for faculty is that Black American women in graduate study programs bring with them unique life experiences that can contribute to the counseling profession if properly nurtured. Mentorship that helps Black American women successfully thrive in such programs requires expansive knowledge about their worldview, particularly characteristics such as those described in the study findings. The supervisory relationship between counselor educator and student/mentee is significant because of the necessity for modeling professionalism, tutelage in conducting research, guidance in scholarly writing and encouraging personal well-being. Supervisory relationships and mentoring within the context of multicultural competence remains a developing field of study in the counseling profession (Fukuyama, 1994).

Implications for Counseling Practice

Focus group participants acknowledged subtle cultural nuances and conclusive societal behaviors that could affect the formation of effective counseling experiences for Black American women if ignored. One example of a subtle cultural rule is the role of boundaries in communication with Black Americans. As one participant pointed out, “personal business” is something learned about early in this cultural group and often embraced individually into adulthood. By function of its purpose, professional counseling elicits feelings of vulnerability and trust; nevertheless, access to personal space and closely guarded information is not easily granted as demonstrated in the findings. Therapists without cultural knowledge about Black American women could
wrongly conceptualize a client hesitant to share personal information as resistant to or avoidant of therapeutic engagement. A more likely assessment would suggest that perhaps such a client is participating in the counseling process as much as necessary without divulging personal information not directly related to their presenting issues. Therefore, failure of the therapist to recognize the existence of cultural rules about “personal business” could thwart the counseling process.

*Wake up to Oppression.* Another example of a mainstream behavior that could influence the counseling environment is the tendency to dismiss the impact of racism and oppression in contemporary America, and encourage potential clients to move past concerns about race. As has been noted, Black American women routinely encounter multiple forms of oppression. Most often, the offenses occur in daily maltreatment based on race/ethnicity, gender and social class. This need to survive this combination of socially constructed barriers is not insignificant, and reflects a functional responsibility that women in mainstream culture do not face. Given this, Black American women may present in a counseling setting as more assertive, composed and resilient than their actual reality. Consequently, this manner of presentation could be misleading for practitioners and lead them toward misunderstanding the degrees of psychological, social and emotional distress, as well as the levels of intervention required.

Counseling professionals seeking to provide useful interventions for individuals struggling with contemporary issues might find this study contextually relevant. Context arises from the human impact of race and oppression in U.S. society, and therefore requires a different viewpoint from which to examine the process of making mental
health diagnoses and considering anticipated outcomes when engaging with a Black American female client.

By default of history, race influences counselor effectiveness and client well-being because of the cross-cultural interaction that takes place in a counseling setting. This means, ethnicity and skin color are dominant factors for some Black American women, and other variables -- such as socio-economic status, education, marital status, sexuality, religious faith -- are sub factors. As much as it is important to understand the significance of race in the lives of Black female clients, likewise the role of additional factors are significant to capitalizing on the opportunity to advocate for and intervene with a population regarded as reluctant to seek help for psychological issues. The findings also suggest four areas as ones holding key implications for counseling practice.

*View Black Females Multi-Dimensionally.* Data from this study reinforces the need to view middle-aged Black females multi-dimensionally rather than monolithically. This is to suggest that counselors consider potential Black female clients as individuals with multiple layers to their identity rather than as single representatives of Black Americans overall. With this in mind, the first implication for counseling professionals addresses recognition of different worldview perspectives.

While it is not revolutionary to regard each client in a fresh light, uncertainty about Black American females and their frame of meaning could prompt counseling professionals to assess such clients using knowledge about group behaviors or misleading stereotypes. This is important to notice because it speaks to counselor bias, but also because it stands in the way of critical steps to forming an alliance in the client-therapist relationship. Rapport building, problem definition and goal setting are elementary to the
establishment of the therapeutic relationship. These basic interview stages are the
foundation for which effective counseling develops, and are difficult to achieve without
advanced use of micro skills (reflective listening, empathy, eye contact.) Authentic
knowledge about the experiences of Black American women may help contribute to the
therapeutic outcomes for this population. This is to say, lack of confidence about cultural
competency could hinder therapeutic outcomes for a population with well-established
mistrust of mental health professionals.

*Be Aware of Characteristics and Values.* Second, these findings provide specific
information about characteristics and values deemed important in the development of
middle-aged Black American women. In many ways, this population remains an anomaly
in that the wealth of scholarly research available is based on perceptions of pathology
(Holcomb-McCoy & Addison-Bradley, 2005; Lipsford-Sanders & Bradley, 2005.)
Characteristics discussed in the findings as important to participants could also serve as
cues to counseling professionals for potential starting points with new clients who are
Black females. For instance, discussion of support systems might intentionally explore
religious faith or relationships with one’s family of origin to better understand the
individual. Precise understanding about the cultural relevance of support systems is vital
in work with women as survivors of intimate partner abuse, a subject that arose in the
findings. In general, women who experience relationship violence also experience issues
of loss and separation as they move away from threatening and/or toxic relationships
(Morrison et. al, 2006). In attending to these, it is likewise important for clinicians to
recognize that leaving an abusive relationship might also mean the loss of some support
systems, such as family, church or friends. Attention to areas considered important can
contribute to greater client confidence in the therapist. This could enhance a trusting therapeutic relationship between the client and therapist.

_Holistic Career Counseling._ Third, across the participant group, neither career nor education appeared strongly associated with womanly identity development. It appeared that employment was a means to achieving an objective, more so than a significant experience unique to gender. Black American women fill numerous roles simultaneously with some of these roles offering satisfaction and others not, and career exploration is a luxury (Parmer, 2002.) Career counseling is ripe with overlap from other counseling specialties (Super, 1993). For Black American women, career counseling is never isolated to the world of work. As noted in the study, participants experienced various situations around work and career, and some of their encounters were at times about obligation and oppression.

_Enhanced Understanding for School Counselors._ Fourth, school counselors could glean from this study’s findings to develop greater awareness and understanding of women who parent or serve as caregivers to the current generation of school-age children and adolescents. The fact that more grandparents, in general, and Black Americans specifically, are raising their grandchildren is documented in scholarly and popular literature (Edwards, 2006; Landry-Meyer, 1999; Thomas, Sperry & Yarbrough, 2000.) Thus, understanding the values of and challenges for middle-age Black women can create for school guidance counselors effective collaborative partnerships that meet academic and psychosocial needs of school-age children.

_Appreciate the Role of Religion and Spirituality._ Finally, understanding the role of religious faith and spirituality in the lives of a client who is a Black American female can
serve as a line of discovery for how both are expressed in the life of that particular client. Focus group members noted it is important for counselor educators and those who will practice the craft of counseling to understand clearly the significance of religion and spirituality for many Black American women. In addition, part of that understanding involves recognition that religious faith and spirituality are not synonymous with religious doctrine or organizational characteristics. Moreover, it includes an appreciation for a belief-system that includes a substantive view of a God power and what flows from God in terms of holistic well-being. Existing counselors would have to learn this along the way. Counselor education programs would best serve potential clients through the preparation of potential counselors by infusing learning objectives that consider religion and spirituality across the curriculum.

*Sexuality as Unexplored Territory.* The discussion of sexuality is one clear way in which social cues are pertinent as several participants in the study were uncomfortable discussing issues of sexuality with the researcher who was of the same race and age range. The cool response of many study participants to an invitation to discuss their sexuality may represent perspectives shared by the larger group on this issue. This would suggest that Black American women are reluctant to discuss their sexuality, even within peer group conversations. Furthermore, it would appear that individual sexuality is in some way connected to that of the intimate partner, and thereby further rejecting the notion of open discussion about sexual issues as it might be viewed as betrayal of confidence. It is interesting to note that in a study about gender identity qualities where strong characteristics are noted, sexual identity is attached to intimate male partnerships.
That is to suggest, overall the Black women in this study did not view their sexuality apart from males.

In general, given the increased racial and cultural diversification of the U.S., it is becoming obvious that educational administrators, counselor educators, and counselors need to develop a broad range of multicultural competencies that will enable them to function more effectively and respectfully in the future (Zalaquett, Foley, Tillotson, Dinsmore & Hof, 2008). Thus, counselor education programs could strengthen their programs by implementing new training approaches and organizational initiatives that are intentionally aimed at stimulating the sort of cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills that are necessary for counseling professionals to work within the context of an increasingly diverse society.

Strengths and Limitations

Phenomenology, as the methodology for this study, allowed for the collection of meaningful data by using semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Consequently, this permitted the mining of fresh information about the meaning of womanhood from the perspective of Black American females at middle and later life stages. The researcher learned firsthand from participants about their perceptions of what it means to be a Black woman in America and when they came to view themselves as women. Additionally, the use of focus groups comprised primarily of counselor educators placed the findings within the context of counselor training and practice. Most notable was the ability of the focus group participants to offer their perceptions of the findings based on content and process, two critical tenets in counseling.
Limitations

Even the best-intended research designs do not emerge without limitations. Specific drawbacks to this study concern participant demographics mainly around sexual orientation and religious beliefs and the roles of the researcher. While the number of participants was sufficient for a study of this type, a larger group of participants could bring greater diversity of thought and experiences. Participant demographics reflected differences in education, socio-economic status, family of origin experiences, and marital status. Even still, the absence of voices that reflect diversity in sexual orientation or diverse religious experiences is noticeable. While this study is rich in descriptions, a Black lesbian perspective could add greater understanding about sexual orientation and gender issues encompassed by race. The sample was also limited geographically, with all participants from the upper Midwest; experiences of Black women may vary considerably in other regions of the U.S.. Finally, the researcher maintained multiple roles as the sole researcher, interviewer, data analyzer, and transcriber for most of the interviews – all of which could increase the possibility of researcher bias influencing the findings.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research about Black American females would serve the counseling profession and the public by focusing on studies that achieve the following three goals. One, expand these findings by incorporating a larger population size for study, thereby ensuring greater within group diversity, and considering a study that examines the same phenomena with women under age 35. Such an exploration could help demonstrate awareness of how gender identity development occurs for Black American females over
time. Two, include queries that specifically address class, sexuality, age and body image as relevant topics that create opportunities to broaden counselor knowledge about meaningful topics for Black American women. Three, further examine the experiences of Black American women to recognize their coping and decision-making strategies relative to mental health, and determine appropriate therapeutic interventions. Realization of these goals might benefit from a different methodological approach.

Generally, this study seemed to highlight the need for a mixed methods approach to exploring the lived experiences of Black American women. By appropriately instituting research methods that combine qualitative and quantitative methods, a greater breadth of information is possible. Such a focus could allow for a questionnaire that would permit the collection of certain data, followed by open-ended interviews that would permit the greater exploration of specific and broad topics. Another future research idea would be to include White women or other ethnic/racial minorities to explore how their narratives about womanhood might be similar to or different from those of Black American women.

Conclusion

Current literature within the counseling profession demonstrates a slowly emerging interest in Black American females and potential mental health issues. Previous studies might seek to examine Black women within the context of a research query that is not specific to that population. This study contributes to the basic understanding of Black American women through attention focused on areas of relevance expressed by participants, with an interest on race and gender. Undoubtedly, the counseling profession appears committed to the advancement of multicultural competency. As noted by Sue and
Sue (2008) effective development of multicultural competency involves more than presenting one course in multicultural counseling that may not sufficiently prepare future therapists to counsel outside their own worldview. The contributions of this study highlight the need for fundamental understanding of Black American women as potential clients or supporters of those seeking therapy. Overall, these contributions are not limited to novice counselors or practicing therapists, and are equally relevant to the counseling faculty that shape curricula used to prepare graduate students for roles as counselors and counselor educators.
REFERENCES


central challenge in the multicultural counseling movement. Journal of Counseling and Development, 86, 348-355


Appendix A

Consent Form
You have been invited to participate in a research project entitled: A phenomenological study of Black American womanhood: Implications for counselor preparation.

This study seeks to learn about the ways in which Black American females come to know themselves as women, how they personally define themselves as women, and what life experiences have contributed to the shaping of that definition.

Your confidentiality will be strictly maintained, and all interview information will be solely used for the purpose of this research study. Each interview will last approximately 2 hours, and will be audio taped and transcribed by a professional transcriber. Several steps will be taken to protect your confidentiality. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym of your choosing. Only the researcher will know both your given name and your coded pseudonym. This also means only your pseudonym will appear on any notes, transcripts, or audiotape materials on which your information is recorded. Any references to specific places or people will be changed in the preliminary and final text to maintain confidentiality. All data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home until the study is completed. Upon completion of the study, all written data that has been collected will be shredded. Audiotaped materials will be maintained for a minimum of three years in a locked file cabinet in the student investigator’s office.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to answer any or all of the questions that are part of this study. If at any time you choose not to participate in this study, the data will not be used. Signing the informed consent form indicates your agreement for the use of your answers as research data.

The purpose of this study is to allow participants an opportunity to share their story about learning what it means to be a Black American woman and possibly to rediscover their values about being a woman. Participants will be asked to share their personal experiences that contributed to an individual understanding about the meaning of womanhood as part of this study. Possible benefits to result from this study include new information about how Black American females ages 35 and older view the construct of womanhood, and how that information can be applied to counselor training, professional practice, and the greater community. As in all research, there may be unanticipated risks to the participant. The researcher
anticipates minimal risk to the participant in the form of mild discomfort when discussing what may be intimately personal issues about their individual development as a Black American female. In the event of discomfort that requires intervention, you will be informed of available counseling services should the need arise because of participation in this research project. You will be responsible for the cost of therapy should you choose to pursue it.

The Human Subjects Institutional Review Board has approved this consent document for use for a period of one year from the date indicated on the top of the page. Do not complete this study if the stated date is older than one year. If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact Nikita Murry, M.A., at 989-708-7575, or Gary H. Bischof, Ph.D., at 269-387-5100. You may also contact the Chair, WMU Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, 269-387-8293, or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions or problems arise during the course of the study.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and/or had explained to you the purpose and requirements of the study and that you agree to participate. By signing this form, you also give permission to have your interviews audio taped. You may refuse to participate or quit this study at any time without any negative consequences. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep as a record.

________________________________________  ______________________________________
Signature                                              Date
Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire
Demographic Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mailing address</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone:</td>
<td>E-mail:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What is your ethnicity?**
- African-American/Black
- African
- Caribbean
- Biracial (Please specify)
- Multiracial (Please specify)

*For the following questions, please place a check mark next to the answer that best describes you*

**What is your relationship status?**
- Widowed
- Married
- Divorced
- Never married
- Dating
- Engaged
- Living together

**What is your sexual orientation?**
- Heterosexual
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Other

**What is your educational status?**
- Less than H.S.
- Some high school
- Graduated H.S.
- Some college
- Two-year degree
- Four-year degree
- Post-graduate degree (M.S., Specialist, Ph.D., M.D., etc.)

**What is your employment status?**
- Currently Unemployed
- Employed Part-time
- Employed Full-time
- Disabled
- Retired
- Homemaker
- Never employed
What is your yearly income level? (Please do not include household income)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>$0 - $10,000</th>
<th>$10,001 - $20,000</th>
<th>$20,001 - $30,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $10,000</td>
<td>$30,001 - $40,000</td>
<td>$40,001 - $50,000</td>
<td>$50,000 - $60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,001 - $40,000</td>
<td>$40,001 - $50,000</td>
<td>$50,000 - $60,000</td>
<td>$60,000 - $80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,001 - $50,000</td>
<td>$50,000 - $60,000</td>
<td>$60,000 - $80,000</td>
<td>$80,000 - $100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000 - $60,000</td>
<td>$60,000 - $80,000</td>
<td>$80,000 - $100,000</td>
<td>$100,000 or more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you have additional sources of income, please indicate the source and the amount:

In which type of community do you currently live?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Type</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Suburban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

In which type of community did you grow up?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Type</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Suburban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

In what region of the country did you grow up?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>South</th>
<th>Southwest</th>
<th>Northeast</th>
<th>Midwest</th>
<th>West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

What is your religion?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Atheist</th>
<th>Buddhist</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Other (Specify)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With whom did you live while growing up? Please check all that apply

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Member</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Grandmother</th>
<th>Grandfather</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aunt/Uncle</td>
<td>Foster Care</td>
<td>Other (Specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With whom do you currently live?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Husband</th>
<th>Boyfriend</th>
<th>Partner</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Roommate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alone</td>
<td>Family (Specify)</td>
<td>Other (Specify)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How many children do you have?

Code: (For researcher’s use)
Appendix C

Recruitment Flier
Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

This is an invitation for you to participate in a research study about African American females and their perceptions about womanhood. The purpose of the study is to understand how African American females define and identify themselves as women. The study is being conducted by Ms. Nikita Murry for her dissertation, under the direction of Dr. Gary H. Bischof, from the Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology at Western Michigan University.

To be eligible, a potential participant must:
1) Identify herself as an African American woman.
2) Be at least age 35 years old or older.

Participation includes completing a background questionnaire and two interviews. If you might be interested in participating, you may contact Nikita Murry at (989) 708-7575 or nikita.murry@wmich.edu.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Nikita Murry, M.A., LPC
Doctoral Candidate
nikita.murry@wmich.edu

Gary Bischof, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
gary.bischof@wmich.edu
Appendix D

Formal Recruitment Letter
Dear (Person’s Name):

Thank you for taking time from your schedule to speak with me regarding my dissertation research study titled: A phenomenological study of Black American womanhood: Implications for Counselor Preparation.

My study seeks to learn about the ways in which Black American females come to know themselves as women, how they personally define themselves as women, and what life experiences have contributed to the shaping of that definition.

Per our discussion, I have enclosed a recruitment flier that provides information about the study to potential volunteers. I have also included for your review sample copies of the materials that will be provided to potential congregants who choose to assist me with my research study.

Thank you in advance for your willingness to share this information with African American women within your congregation. I look forward to sharing with you the outcome of my study once my research project and dissertation are complete.

In the meantime, should you have additional questions, please feel free to contact me by telephone at (989) 708-7575 or via e-mail at nikita.murry@wmich.edu.

All the best,

Nikita Murry, MA, LPC
Doctoral Candidate
Western Michigan University
Appendix E

Script for Telephone Screening of Potential Participants
Hello, this is Nikita Murry from Western Michigan University. I am calling because you responded to my request for individuals who might be interested in participating in a research study that discusses African American womanhood. If you are still interested, I would like to tell you some more about the study and see if you have any questions. Your involvement would involve completing a brief demographic form and completing two in-person interviews at a place and time that is convenient for you. The interviews would last about 2 hours each and would be audio-recorded. The information you share will be kept confidential and no identifying personal information will appear in the write-up of the study.

Do you have any questions at this point?
(Respond to any questions potential participants might have.)

If not interested, thank them for their time and say goodbye.

If interested, say “Thank you for your willingness to participate in my study. I look forward to meeting you on (scheduled date).”
Appendix F

Interview Questions
Interview Questions

• Primary Question 1

*How do adult Black American females determine what it means to be a woman?*

1. Tell me about the time when you first thought of yourself as a woman.
   
   **Follow-up prompt:** What specifically made you know you were a woman?

   **Follow-up prompt:** Can you describe what that was like?

   **Follow-up prompt:** Can you identify examples in society that suggest what it means to be a woman?

• Primary Question 2

*How do adult Black American females ages 35 and older identify the time in which they became a woman?*

1. Tell me about the specific things that were happening around you when you first thought of yourself as a woman. In other words, what was happening in your home, school, job, community, country, etc.?

• Primary Question 3

*How have various life experiences, events, and milestones contributed to the development of a concept of womanhood for Black American females ages 35 to 99?*

1. Tell me about specific instances in your life that were associated with seeing yourself as a woman. (Life experiences, events, and milestones contributed to your ideas about womanhood.)

   **Follow-up prompt:** Tell me more about [specific statement].

   **Follow-up prompt:** Is there anything else?

• Primary Question 4

*Comparatively, how do Black American females ages 35 and older currently view themselves as women? What are some of the factors that have helped shape how they presently see themselves as women?*

1. Tell me what it means for you to be a Black woman in the United States.

   **Follow-up prompt:** Has that always been the case? Tell me how.

2. Tell me about how your meaning of womanhood is different now compared to when you first thought of yourself as a woman.

3. Tell me about the discussions you have had with other females about your or their sense of womanhood.

   **Follow-up prompt:** Tell me how these discussions are initiated.
Appendix H

HSIRB Letter of Approval
Date: June 3, 2009

To: Gary Bischof, Principal Investigator
Nikita Murry, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 09-05-12

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "An Exploration of African American Womanhood and its Implications for Counselor Preparation and Practice" has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: June 3, 2010
Appendix G

Demographic Table
### Table 1

**Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Income Thousands</th>
<th>Highest Education</th>
<th>No. of children</th>
<th>Current Career</th>
<th>Region of Origin</th>
<th>Primary Caregiver</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>$55-80</td>
<td>A.A.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>$10-20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>M SF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>$10-20</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destiny</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>$50-60</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorothy</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>$20-30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>F SM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>$10-20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Childcare Provider</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miracle</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>$50-60</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>$65-80</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Youth Advocate</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precious</td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>$100-</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>M SF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terri</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>$65-80</td>
<td>M.Ed.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Grandparents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>