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RESILIENT LIVES: A CRITICAL NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE TRIUMPHS AND STRUGGLES OF FIVE AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WITH DOCTORAL DEGREES

by

PAULA BOOKER BAKER

(Under the Direction of Delores D. Liston)

ABSTRACT

This inquiry explored the triumphs and trials of five African American women with doctoral degrees in the field of education. The project is a storytelling and questioning inquiry that is woven around themes of race, gender, spirituality, and family as experienced and interpreted through narratives. Stories presented were used as channels through which the academia and the world were explored. Although the study focused on the experiences of five African American women, their stories provided the space to identify events, experiences, people, and circumstances that helped to empower them. Realizing everyone has unique perspectives to contribute, these stories offer support for others faced with obstacles to understand overt and covert adversities will appear nevertheless they can be overcome. As life long learners and educators of others, we ought to remain cognizant of the needs of students. This exploration provides positive support to counteract the negative media stereotypes and images that bombard our everyday lives.

Despite double marginalization because of gender and race, these women that participated in the study excelled and became successful. With their diverse experiences, these women developed strategies to survive, overcome, and achieve. The findings from
this study suggest that the experiences of the African American women were connected with and influenced by their relationships with family and others in a mentorship role. I propose that higher education holds a transforming power for African American women as well as others. These stories and strategies should be shared with others as they were shared with the researcher to provide positive encouragement and support as they begin their academic journeys.

INDEX WORDS:

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by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to those who have doubted their abilities. A pessimistic, self-defeating attitude destroys expectations of success. When optimism colors your lenses, and obstacles are approached with confidence and perseverance – success is assured.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my deepest appreciation and heartfelt gratitude to the members of my dissertation committee. I selected you because I believed you would make unique contributions to my study and allow my voice to remain intact – you accepted my invitation and your contributions were indeed exceptional. To Delores Liston, my chair, you introduced me to a broader lens with which to view myself and my surroundings. This broader frame of reference led to my exploration into Black Feminist Thought which was pivotal in shaping my thought process. To Saundra Murray Nettles, thank you for sharing your expertise in resiliency, Black feminism, and narratology. To Ming Fang He, your expertise in narrative inquiry, culture and identity issues helped create the scaffold that shaped my study. To Lori Amy, thank you for sharing you expertise in gender issues. Each of you asked questions that evoked contemplation and brought fluidity to my boundaries. Collectively, I thank you for braving the hurricane winds and torrential rains (early in my dissertation process) that closed schools for miles in order to meet with a zealous student so that I could continue on my journey.

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CHAPTER 1

PRESENTING THE SCENE

Still I Rise

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust

I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?

Why are you beset with gloom?

'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells

Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,

With the certainty of tides,

Just like hopes springing high,

Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?

Bowed head and lowered eyes?

Shoulders falling down like teardrops.

Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?

Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
   Diggin' in my own back yard.  
You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
   But still, like air  
I'll rise.  
Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise?  
That I dance like I've got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs?  
Out of the huts of history's shame  
   I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
   I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.  
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
   I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
   I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.

Maya Angelou (1978)

Introduction – Setting the Stage

In the poem “Still I Rise,” Maya Angelou describes the personal life of conflict, resiliency, and alludes to the development process of resilience experienced by many Black women. Listening to the accounts presented through each stanza we peer into the life of Black women; lives that are judged not only by race, but by gender and class. Through her poetic story we glimpse a society that perpetually looks down on people of color principally because of differences. This judgment assembled with discrimination seems to become a part of daily life. How are some African American women able to remain strong and resilient? How does the spirit of African American women rejuvenate to “rise” above harsh and unyielding obstacles? This study, Resilient Lives: A Critical Inquiry into the Triumphs and Struggles of Five African American Women with Doctoral Degrees, shares the stories of five women while creating counter narratives to the dominant culture.

My inquiry has a lot to do with storytelling: not just the simple act, but the complex feat that brings new perspectives and deeper understandings. “Where narrative’s power of specifying combines with theory’s power of generalizing, ever more inclusive and multiplicitic standpoints for knowing become possible” (Helle, 1991, p. 63). Once the
stories are interwoven with lived experiences and viewpoints, we are presented with opportunities to find additional spaces for resilience and hope. Through the telling and retelling of stories we revisit what we know, how we understand, and what we believe as true while sharing our culture, our mores, our viewpoint, and our lives. At this point we are able to connect with and learn from the stories of others as well as make new discoveries from the retelling of our own stories. In the midst of struggle, many African American women left a powerful legacy – stories. These stories presented in the form of poetry, song, oral or written narratives share the power of the human spirit.

**Purpose of Study**

This study sought to communicate the narratives of five African American women with doctorates to explicate that stories presented by the dominant culture are not representative of the complete experience of African American women. Through this understanding the stories established counternarratives to the dominant culture, develop spaces for women to connect and enhance their arsenal of support in the fight to overcome racism, sexism and other social barriers to success. Generally the study revolved around the following question: *How do African American women with doctoral degrees and career experiences in the field of education interpret their experiences in the midst of racial, gender and social oppressions?*

The purpose for this exploration was to contribute a positive retelling of the experiences and abilities of the participants to establish a counternarrative to the dominant culture. In other words, I attempted to bring to light real achievements of African American women, achievements that were attained in the midst of gender, racial, and perhaps other oppressions. Ming Fang He’s declaration in *A River Forever Flowing*
(2003) with regards to narrative inquirers also helped focus my lens. She asserted that it is in our duty as narrative inquirers to remain cognizant of the need to capture “changeable facets” of the participants’ stories (p. 121). He believes our vision on research phenomena, purposes, objectives, methodologies, theoretical stands, obtained knowledge and actions should be able to shift” with concerns of the participants and the changes within society (p. 121).

The telling of the participants’ stories and counter stories allows others to connect with these women and see differences in their own environments, connections, and stories.

**Importance of Storytelling**

“Stories invite us to come to know the world and our place in it. Whether narratives of history or the imagination, stories call us to consider what we know, how we know, and what and whom we care about” (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 13). These tales become more than just stories; they become counter stories as they transpose the dominant culture’s narrative. Ladson-Billings (2005) declared:

The obvious reason for writing about African American [women] is to fill the void in the literature. But another reason for writing about African American [women] is to explore the unique perspectives they bring … (p. xv)

Everyone has a story to tell. By listening to the stories and discovering what the teller has to say, we should be more receptive to different perspectives and more understanding of diversity. Seeing through different lenses allows us to “see” beyond our ethnocentricity and experience “otherness” as we understand the narratives of others.

A good story involves the listener as well as the teller. While the teller presents the information, listeners make predictions, connections, checks hypotheses, and compare
experiences to the unfolding tale. When telling stories we communicate with others and construct meanings. Telling stories helps us organize and understand life experiences while nurturing a sense of confidence, motivation, and broader perspectives.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) believe that story telling has a purpose. In their work, *Narrative Inquiry* the depth of experience is discussed. Narrative inquiry has the compelling, sometimes confounding, quality of merging overall life experiences with specific research experience, realms of experience often separated in inquiry. It is almost a maxim in many forms of research to bound the phenomena and maintain distance from them. Narrative inquiry always has purpose, though purpose may shift, and always has focus, though focus may blur and move. Narrative inquiry boundaries expand and contract, and wherever they are at any point in time, they are permeable, not osmotically permeable with things tending to move only one way but interactively permeable. (p. 115).

It is the job of the researcher to reach across those boundaries and connect with the stories. Through the emotions, intensity, and complexity the researcher accepts the fluidity and value of the stories.

Listeners of stories are able to embrace the pain and strength of the tellers’ journeys. Stafford (1986) believes, “a story saves life a little at a time by making us see and hear and taste our lives and dramas more deeply. A story does not rescue life at the end, heroically, but all along the road, continually” (p. 28). As an African American woman, I not only understand the journeys of other Black women, I realize that I have traveled many similar roads. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) believes that “women feel that
way because knowledge comes from experience, the best way of understanding another person’s ideas was to develop empathy and share the experiences that led the person to form those ideas” (p. 259). This realization allows for personal experiences to become connectors with others while listening and empathizing as they share stories.

**Phenomena under exploration**

Whether we inherit an identity…being Black… or we actively choose one on the basis of our political predilections…identities are ways of making sense of our experiences. Identities are theoretical constructions that enable us to read the world in specific ways. It is in this sense that they are valuable, and their epistemic status should be taken very seriously. (Moya & Hames-Garcia, 2000, p. 43)

The reality in many settings is that people from marginalized groups are forced to abandon home culture, values, mores, and beliefs – self – in order to achieve. African American women rest in a unique position as both women and people of color. hooks (1994) drives home this point by saying:

No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have African American women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from African American men or a present part of the larger group “women” in this culture…When African American women are talked about [as women] the focus tends to be on White women. (p. 122)

One problem for socialization within academia is the creation of dualism where a cut and dry black/white manner is implemented. The position forms a dualist mode, theoretical and aesthetical, where the focus is usually theoretical with rigid steps and
rules. In order to fit in the surroundings, African American women feel compelled to adopt the characteristics of African American men, White men or White women. “Many Black women in the United States come to recognize that, whether intentional or not, different sets of rules may be applied to them that distinguish them from their counterparts” (hooks, 2000, p. 282). This positioning, double marginalization, has a direct influence on perspectives as we are marginalized by race and gender. London (1992) explains that successful women need to create distance between outer roles, responsibilities, and academic or life experiences. In other words, African American women must strengthen self-concepts and achieve independence while conquering invisibility in order to work from the position of double marginalization. When confronted with academic traditions, African American women are once again faced with a choice of conforming to the demands of the academy or transforming the academy to meet the demands of African American authenticity.

Thus African Americans in the academy recognize they exist in a kind of ‘in between’ world between power and privilege of the social order and the oppression and degradation of their racial group. (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 8)

Surrounded by these obstacles that necessitate consideration, African American women may reflect on stories in our personal arsenal for guidance and support.

This extensive story collection travels as far back as “once upon a time,” and remains relevant in the present. The tales originate from historical fiction, or authentic depictions, or family biographical anecdotes. When combined with stories of others, the teller and listener have a plethora of experiences. Personally, my childhood tales gain power when added to the stories acquired while in the safe haven of a Historically Black
College or University provided an appropriate combination of self pride, individuality and perseverance. I was reminded that choices made to support the dominant culture were not required or that personal perceptions need not be weakened to mimic the dominant culture’s beliefs, mores, and values. The stories taught resolve while they recounted experiences of successful academicians that remained true to self as well as the human and civil rights of African American women. Will the participants of this study have similar memories of their Historically Black College and University experiences?

**Why Storytelling**

Why tell stories? I am in agreement with Adalberto Aguirre (2000) that “my story is about real experience, an experience that is as real as my social reality. It is an experience that is representative of the practices, rules, and customs that minority persons like myself encounter…” (p. 320). Indeed, my story is real yet ever revolving and has been influenced by lived experiences and stories of others that have traversed my life. In turn, my life gives meaning to my complex experiences.

Stories have always been a part of my socialization. “In the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversations and humor, African American women as sisters and friends affirm one another’s humanity, specialness, and right to exist” (Collins, 2000, p. 103). I listened to my mother, grandparents, aunts, and cousins tell stories that seemed always perfect for any occasion. Through these conversations and stories emerged tales of struggle for survival and identity as the characters dealt with adversities placed in their path. Many stories were about experiences of real people, several of whom I knew and loved. From these stories emerged helpful hints to instill morals and beliefs while teaching values, perseverance and discipline. One story that my
family still loves to share explains how the family had its inception with my great – great grandfather. This tale explains how Grandpa Amos walked from one small town in Brundidge, Alabama to another town farther south, 30 miles away late one summer day. This journey was not for pleasure, but was the beginning of a great family saga and generational legacy of determination and strength. As I remember the story I first heard as child, I now realize the saga is not only about me or my family, but it describes a universal phenomenon. Indeed, the experiences of African Americans have been historically difficult and usually complicated. Without these stories to provide connections and hope, alienation and failure become more probable. Society maintains many misconceptions on African American women and does not recognize our contributions or our experiences despite the struggles encountered through class, gender, and racial oppressions. As a result of this, we need to ensure our stories survive and provide support, lessons, and hope for future generations.

Collins (1998) presents the conflict with mainstream discourse between equality and opportunity, and real-life practices that systemically discourage African Americans from obtaining power and authority. I recognize the connection with my family story as there exists a counter narrative to discredit the dominant culture’s story. The Boykin family story will be presented here as Bell (1995) asserts to give voice to marginalized people and our community.

People of all races and both genders are products of distinctive cultural histories and family messages that are passed on from generation to generation. These familial and social expectations influence the capabilities, competence, and
expectations we have for ourselves in all areas of our lives. (Bridgforth, 2000, p. 6)

Not only does this story allow a peek into my reason for thinking, it provides an understanding to my drive for success. My family story creates a scaffold derived from combined tales. As the narratives are shared, the scaffold grows and strengthens to challenge the dominant culture’s essentialistic version of my story, my family’s story, and my people’s story. I now realize these stories helped create my perseverance and now builds my “sassiness,” faith and resilience. Although others “shot me with their words and cut me with their eyes,” I followed the path of so many others; the path depicted by Maya Angelou, as I continued to “rise” remembering the “gifts my ancestors” gave and continuing to fulfill the dream.

The journey of inquiry begins with the Boykin story; this narrative begins at a point of conflict. After working for many years without pay, Amos and his mother recognized they were due some compensation. Amos approached the plantation owner and requested a financial settlement for his mother and himself. Infuriated, the plantation owner told Grandpa Amos that it would be in his best interest to get out of town before nightfall or be killed. Thus began the walking travels of Amos L. Boykin, and the family anecdote of perseverance and determination that challenges the general accounts created by the dominant culture.

After working for a few years in his new hometown, Amos had saved enough money to move his new wife and family to Ozark, Alabama. In Ozark, Grandpa Amos dealt in building and real estate. Following in his footsteps, his three sons developed excellent skillfulness as builders. Two of his sons, Arthur and Luther formed the first
Black contracting company in the area, Boykin and Boykin Contractors. Many of the houses and businesses in Ozark today still attest to the fact that the Boykin men were skilled builders. Grandpa Amos, almost one hundred and fifty years later, remains a beacon of strength and exemplar of perseverance and inspiration for my family.

The stories of Grandpa Amos and his sons are not the only stories of my family that symbolize the need for resiliency and perseverance. Historically I know of the obstacles that people of color faced. History seems to interweave with reality as I experience life through the stories of my elders. From the time of Grandma Pauline (Amos’ daughter) and my Great Aunts Alma and Catherine to the lives of my mother, Paulette and her sisters Renee and Alma, racism continued to exist. Their stories, set in different decades still included memories of African Americans drinking from separate water fountains, enter restaurants from back doors. Topics range from bathrooms to boycotts, segregated classrooms, sit-ins, civil rights demonstrations, and marches. Akin to the men in my family, the women held important spaces in the family, community, and history. The stories of the women told of their contributions in supporting civil rights leaders and making the community as a whole safer and communication with others to make those in the dominant culture more knowledgeable of our needs and offerings. While being strong, these women also remained nurturing and supportive of their families and communities. They were required to think ahead to the future of their children. In many instances, the women fought for equality with the realization that even in the eyes of Black leaders (mostly men) the needs of Black women would remain silenced or possibly invisible. The stories told of a love for family so great, that these
sHeroes would support the struggle in order to hold the family together and raise strong and proud leaders for the future.

While maneuvering through their lives and preparing for the future of their children, my mother and aunts recalled how society tempted to weaken their identity (the race’s identity) by changing how African Americans were recognized. They lived through the time of being: Negroes, Afro American, Black, Black American, and African American as well as several other combinations of ethnic terms. Through the hyphenation non hyphenation phases these women remained strong and believed that “this too shall pass.” None of my relatives took the time to write their stories, but made conscious efforts to share their experiences. Throughout my life I have found a continual desire to listen, learn, and share. To preserve their stories for future generations, I believe it is essential that we, as African American women, document these stories so that our children and the world know the stories of Black women. This journey of documentation begins by analyzing my family story through Black feminism. During my exploration I followed Collins’ philosophy that breaking the silence and sharing the story remains a useful tool of resilience. Personally, hearing the stories of my family members and of others strengthens the resiliency characteristics (determination and vigor).

Similar to Nettles’ (2001) testimonial, I also perceive “my relatives (as) working people who, with each succeeding generation, follow the widening path of opportunity for African Americans” (p. 13). The stories of Grandpa Amos and other family members as well as other tales that feature exceptional characters of African decent remain significant in my life. These stories, threaded with historical facts and morals, taught (and still teach) of the ills of society while celebrating those that overcame social obstacles.
Indeed the stories were engaging; however, at the same time they provided inspiration, resilience, and political resistance. The revelation that characteristics presented by the dominant culture should be seen as opinions and not fact in itself was empowering. Through shared stories African American women created avenues to share accounts of resilience and success which in turn provided support and new clarity for self-reflection. Furthermore, knowing that others had coped and triumphed against racism and sexist practices provides encouragement and possibility for those beginning on similar journeys. Through analysis of the stories I also deepened my belief that with greater understanding comes greater responsibility. I realized that being a part of my family, high expectations were in place and it was my obligation to continue on a trail seeking greatness while remembering to give positively to the community and others. Through this study I find a space to merge my obligation of greater responsibility and contribute positively to my community and culture by presenting stories of resiliency and success that may be used as a framework or motivational tool for others that want to triumph over obstacles.

Stories: I definitely loved to hear them, experience them and share them. In my experiences I have realized that telling stories is a powerful tool used to teach and learn important lessons. In the African American culture, stories are used to entertain; however, they are also often used by many to serve practical purposes. According to critical race theory, “stories are a communicative form for the minority that frees it from silence by giving it voice” (Aguirre, 2000, p. 321). Everyone has a story to tell, and each person can be engaged in a story. As I reflect on my lived experiences, I do believe the stories that resonate in my life helped develop a foundation of determination and a drive for success that withstood the paintings of distortion presented by society for African
Americans. These stories gave me strength to face disasters such as illness and loss as well as racism, sexism, and other social obstacles. The same stories sustained me as I began to experience the discrimination inherent in our society. This realization that I can be successful and that the obstacles in my path have given me a keener yet more accepting perspective led me to question: “Do other African American women have similar experiences?” By listening to the narratives of other African American women and navigating through these relationships I explore this line of thinking.

This study revolved around the general research question: How do African American women with doctoral degrees and career experiences in the field of education interpret their experiences in the midst of racial, gender, and social oppression? Additionally, this study explored the influence of family, community (counter stories), experiences at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) and predominantly White institutions (PWIs) on the participants and their lived experiences. The stories presented demonstrate the participants’ marginalized positions in society influenced their perspectives. Moreover the stories show that the metanarratives presented by the dominant culture do not capture the complete experience of African American women.

My interest in storytelling and understanding the total experience began with a personal journey that I now recognize started long before I realized how interconnected perspectives and experiences would be.

**Autobiographical Anecdote**

As chroniclers of our own stories, we write to create ourselves, to give voice to our experiences, to learn who we are and who we have been. Our diaries become the stories of our journeys through life, stories that are both instructive and
transforming in the telling and the listening. These stories…then serve to instruct and transform society, to add to the collective voice we call culture.

(Cooper, 1991, p. 110)

Even at the conclusion of this journey of exploration, I will continue on my transformation as I retell and relive parts of my personal story. Although I grew up in Southern Alabama, my education on race began as a far away fear in the tales I recall. My mother sheltered me very well from the racism in my environment. My life’s education broadened as I began to recognize racial issues glamorized on television, and wonder why people like me were not seen on my favorite shows. My focus zoomed in on derogatory comments made by the personalities presented on television, the radio, and in my presence. I wholeheartedly agree with Patricia Hill Collins who claims “the news media…constitutes important sites for reproducing these controlling images” (2000, p. 85). My childhood memories do not recall shows that had Black characters as prominent figures in the community or academicians that promoted change. I remember storylines of Black families that lived in the projects or ghetto, students that were trouble makers or delinquents, and a businessman whose production came from a junk yard stockpile. Yes, there was one show that had successful African American characters. However, neither the husband nor the wife had completed higher education, and the equally successful friends of this couple were educated and White. The only other African American woman that lived in this flourishing environment was married to a White man and her television persona was stereotypical of the dominant culture. Even with the television shows geared towards children I found no connections. Like most young girls, I loved to watch Disney movies and travel to far away magical imaginary places. While being entertained I often
wondered why Black girls could not be princesses. I remember staring into the heroine’s faces for any inkling of a “minority feature” that would allow me to connect to the character. The connections never came.

Even with this glance into the racist society, I still considered myself sheltered in that I was not the target of the discrimination. As I look back over my childhood, I believe the stories were ways for my elders to familiarize me with racism and social obstacles while protecting me from the true harshness of reality that comes with personal experience of discrimination. The stories were realistic encounters and I was an invisible character. In a safe and controlled environment, I was given internal strength through the stories that prepared me for my own personal encounters with racism.

As my elders foreshadowed, racism crashed into my face during late elementary school as I became the only minority student in many of my classes. Even today I vividly remember the sinking feeling I had when I realized once again I would be positioned in the advanced classes. I understood the curriculum and accepted the challenge. Participation in advanced classes, however, did not seem worth the pain of cynicism I sometimes received from Black and White peers and White teachers. “Educators commonly affirm that learning environments for young children should be child centered and as homelike as possible. …this principle is often not applied to programs designed for African American children” (Hale, 2001, p. 121). In my school setting, the programs were not designed to reach children of color. In order to be successful, I had to conform to the dominant standards and stifle my curiosity to learn of my heritage. For me there was opposition each school year as the inner conflict oscillated as I struggled with being the honor student I was and the stereotypical Black student others expected me to be. bell
hooks (1994) believes marginalized students need not bring their conformist beliefs to the classroom because it is already placed in the system to promote dominance and colonization. “Theorists suggest that women are more likely to experience two modes of knowing: one located in the body and the space it occupies and the other passing beyond it” (Collins, 2000, p. 259). My internal knowing (ambition and determination) had been set long ago and the honor roll student I was would triumph over the stereotype others created for me.

This life education became more complex as I matriculated through several educational settings. During this time the stories of my family kept me focused on academic success and individual integrity. Although the darkness of discrimination always followed, the stories provided a safe haven from the negative and a connection to my support system so that I could face my obstacles. As a student I recall classes when my responses should have demonstrated my ability and knowledge of the subject matter; yet my teacher seemed to be caught in a stereotypical view. Again my gender and race overshadowed my intellect. A scenario that remains fresh in my memory happened in fifth grade when a teacher chose to believe I cheated because “a Black girl had never won a class game of Quiz Bowl” in his room. He never considered I was seated alone and answered the question orally, the only factors of importance to this teacher was his stereotype for minority students and girls. After 12 years of having to defend my disposition as an African American female honor student that was worthy of academic accomplishments and deserving of ambitions, goals, and dreams, I began my undergraduate studies.
The years at Tuskegee University became an extensive silver lining over my clouds of unfairness that showed me that in the midst of my trials there is hope. Indeed, I knew of optimism from my family, but at this point I learned that this situation was bigger than my family and many others in similar positions triumphed.

The culture of care in the African American tradition is also evident from research on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). …Students who attend HBCUs comment in interviews that the HBCUs were more caring places than public White campuses. (St. John and Cadray, 2004, p. 98)

There, at a HBCU, I developed more perseverance than ever. Furthermore, continual dialogue with others that truly understood my experiences and the realization that I could recognize parts of my story within their lived experiences gave me a sense of connection and support; I was not alone. Because of the connection I could break through overt and covert barriers and share in the experiences of others.

Finally I could see that my life was not totally unique, there were others in my company that had been judged by their race and gender without consideration for intellect. According to Delpit (1995), we “must recognize and address the power differential that exists in our society between schools and communities…between poor and well-to-do, between Whites and people of color” (p. 133). I began to recognize this discrepancy between people early on in my education, but the differences became more focused when I attended a Historically Black College (HBCU). In this environment I recognized pride in my heritage and history; however, I realized that social class was another factor used to separate. My sight focused more as I realize I am not only judged by race and gender but by social class.
Although obstacles were ever present, I was thrilled to be surrounded by people that favored me physically, held similar academic aspirations, and understood my struggles. My focus at this point was on learning who I was and the academic curriculum, not racial and stereotypical differences. There was no need to prove I deserved to be in this academic setting. As I listened to stories told by my peers, I heard about their grandmothers, mothers and aunts that overcame different obstacles to become lawyers, physicians, senators, judges, and professors. These conversations brought validity to Collins’ assertion that “Despite suppression, Black women have managed to do intellectual work and to have our ideas matter” (Collins, 2000, p. 3). Although I was only a student, I was able to find myself in many of the stories. This connection brought me more hope and determination to continue following my dreams.

The solidarity was short lived as I attended a predominantly White institution (PWI) in pursuit of my Master’s degree. Pascarella and Terenizini (1991) conclude that African American students who attend PWIs are more likely to experience alienation, personal dissatisfaction, and social isolation as well as overt and covert racism. My experiences supported their finding. Once again I felt as if I was someone who did not belong, and I relied on the stories in my memory to sustain me through this period. This time there was a slight difference. Yes, I did have professors who made negative comments about the academic prowess of minorities; however, I remembered the success stories of my ancestors as well as those of my Tuskegee classmates who were children of lawyers, physicians, professors and senators. Classmates who would be one day legacies to continue on the route of success created by their parents. Moreover, I remembered the life lesson learned at Tuskegee; I remembered how to fight oppression and my goal to
focus on the betterment of self and community. After all I was trained among the best to be the best and strive for the best life has to offer. When covert messages of inferiority were presented I recalled stored memories of those who achieved excellence. My personal stories along with those of my classmates became a guiding light that penetrated the negativity that seemed to be designed for the express purpose of making me disbelieve in myself.

Like most African American women, with all the academics and life lessons I was privy to, until very recently I remained oblivious to the influencers that reinforce negative images of Black women. Personally, there was sadness, yet power in knowing that other African American women have been introduced to these negative messages and yet have overcome them and become successful. Collins (1994) declares that Black women experience racism in a different manner because of the constraints of racial and gender oppression. We, as Black women may have different experiences; however, there is no denial that we have experienced oppressive constraints. By using Black feminist thought as a methodology informed by critical race theory, these different experiences will be viewed through a lens that recognizes diversity as well as classism, racism, and sexism (Yosso, 2002).

Telling and retelling stories encourages the listeners as well as the tellers to examine their beliefs, culture, personal histories, values and experiences that affect who we are, how we perceive, and how we interact (He, 2002). The concept of telling and retelling will be important as I challenge the traditional academy to include the voices and stories of African American women with doctoral degrees. “As our life experience evolved with shifting rivers in changing landscapes, our roles were shifting accordingly”
By presenting stories of African American women scholars in narrative, their stories and the tradition of narrative are authenticated. My hope is that critical narrative inquiry will allow others to find strength and continuity for their stories.

In agreement with Patricia Hill Collins (2000), I believe the experiences and stories of African American women are diverse and in spite of the differences, connections are formed because of similar challenges in a culture that historically and routinely derogates the very characteristics that make us unique as women of color. African American women are positioned within various social classes and academic levels; however, there remains a strong tie between experiences and ideas. This study delved into the stories of five African American women who attended Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCU) for undergraduate studies and predominantly White institutions (PWI) for graduate work to gather their stories of success.

The combination of HBCU and PWI environments was chosen because I found that choosing a HBCU was just as important in my development as the decision to attend college. My experiences at Tuskegee University allowed me the opportunity to achieve higher education while strengthening a needed sense of heritage, pride and identity. I was in an environment where I was the norm and not the exception. This safe and nurturing environment provided me with an opportunity to be educated by professors that looked like me and valued my beliefs and mores. Attending an HBCU was a priceless experience that will remain with me always. The experience strengthened my self-concept and refueled my determination to reach my goals in life. Strong ties to my undergraduate experiences lead me to ask: “Do other African American women with HBCU educational experiences have similar thinking?”
“According to Antoine M. Garibaldi, Provost and Chief Academic Officer at Howard University in Washington, D.C., a majority of African-American students today attend high schools where they are in the minority…” (Thomas, 2005). This was definitely a reality for me in elementary and secondary school. As the third generation of my family to attend a HBCU, I felt immediate pride as I made my choice for higher education. Once I entered the gates of Tuskegee I recognize the importance of my decision to attend “the pride of the swift growing south” as I stepped through time and made a connection with my past and saw increased possibility for my future. I became another benefactor of the dreams of Booker T. Washington.

Each year I returned to continue my education I realized the effect the Tuskegee Experience had on me, my values and beliefs. Tuskegee gave me a quality academic and social education. My Tuskegee family built on the home foundation that instilled in the students that we were the best, should put forth the best, and should always strive for the best. Tuskegee – more than just a community, town or a university. Tuskegee came from an inspiration and ideal that began over 120 years ago that built on the belief that African Americans deserve the best and can achieve the best if presented with opportunity. As I listened and now reflect on the stories of Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee alumnus, I am once again reminded of the morals embedded in me: with greater knowledge comes greater responsibility. Following in the shadows of Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, the Tuskegee Airmen, Ralph Ellison, and Betty Shabazz through the footsteps of my family, Alma Boykin Bryant, Alma Boykin Colvin, Paulette Boykin Booker Love, and Renee Boykin Matthews (Hampton University – parent institution of Tuskegee) I recognized my inheritance and began my journey of growth and discovery.
Life continued after the HBCU. After graduation I continued on life’s journey clutching the new sense of pride and remembering my academic extended family. Stories from my undergraduate days and alumni encounters reminded me not to succumb to being a part of the minority stereotype in society, because I am an important part of continuing the heritage of African Americans and the HBCU legacy. I left Tuskegee University with renewed motivation and dedication to academic success. As I continued my education, I still had times of wonder. Different people continued to cross my path and leave with me their personal and family stories of struggles and success. I added these stories to my arsenal in preparation for the future. The stories continued to strengthen my foundation and refuel my determination through this most intense educational journey. Again I wondered, “Were there other African American women that have similar experiences?”

As a life long learner I decided to pursue further education. For this goal I decided to attend a local university, a predominantly White institution (PWI). Once again I felt the conflict; there was a pull between personal/social identification and academic potential. In my classes I was seen first as an African American then a woman student. Continually I had to prove that I was worthy to be in the classes and I deserved the best education offered. There were many challenges, academic and non-academic; however, I was equipped with the Tuskegee Experience to strive for the best because I knew that was what I deserved.

With two degrees in hand, I realized I was still oblivious to many of the issues that impact African American women. Yes, I realized that I was always pre-judged by my skin color and gender, and assumed that other African American women possibly
experienced the same thing. I did not stop and realize racism *is* widespread; it was there in the past and continues to seep into the future. The moment I began to comprehend the magnitude of this reality there was extreme sorrow, yet personal strength in knowing that I was not alone. The stories that I had stored over the years I began to remember through a slightly different lens. The stories that comforted me through times of struggle had now metamorphosed as they were reinterpreted from different angles. The success stories had greater significance now that I accumulated more lived experiences and understand better the obstacles African American women have to endure, while remaining positive and striving to achieve their goals.

The stories from my past include tales of African American women that surpassed numerous odds to become successful in their own rights. These personal stories recount individual experiences sprinkled with discrimination. As stated by Yosso (2002), “personal counter-stories are autobiographical reflections…juxtaposed with (a) critical race analysis” (p. 32). Some of the women received educations in spite of laws that were put in place to limit educational opportunities for African Americans; other women progressed academically while ensuring their children also received quality educations. Other ‘sheroes’ in the stories became entrepreneurs, landowners, academicians, and physicians. The point that shines through all the stories for me is that in spite of societal focus on the underside of life for African Americans, oral histories continue as a beacon to provide evidence that African American women have been and continue to be successful.

Despite the negative influences, there are Black women that seem to develop positive self concepts and find ways to excel in the midst of the obstacles. What was their
motivation and strength? My experience as a Black woman has shown me that gender, race, and social class impact many aspects of existence. It seems as a woman I frequently must approach situations assertively whether scheduling routine car maintenance or engaging in scholarly dialogue with colleagues. Each time I walk into a room I am seen as a Black female, I have to act, sometimes forcefully, in order for the descriptors intellectual and articulate to replace pre-determined assumptions. According to W.E.B. DuBois (1903), many people of color have the experience of a divided sense of self or “double consciousness” with our family allegiance and that of the world viewed through the eyes of the dominant culture.

If fighting against racial and gender discrimination is not enough, African American women also have to be cognizant of social class discrimination. When speaking with others I realize I am also judged by the neighborhood in which I reside and the car I drive. It seems as if every element of my being must be validated to prove or disprove characteristics that go beyond the obviousness of race and gender. “How do other African American women deal with these issues?”

**African American Perspectives**

When Black women write about their life experiences, discussion of the anger and rage that may accompany feelings of marginalization, constant harassment, and hostility associated with racial bigotry, is expected, particularly since these phenomena frequently occur through the lives of most… (Harris, 2003, p. 60) One realization I had while matriculating through the Curriculum Studies doctoral program is that writing allows a connection between mind and body. As the pen or keyboard captures the emotions, pain, and excitement, the mind is able to relax and
release the tensions. Whether shared with others or kept for personal edification, this type of storytelling allows experiences and incoherent events to become cohesive memories.

Stories privilege our experience, reawakens and recovers our capacity to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. …However, while our roles shift between the foreground and background according to changing situations, we remain who we are. (He, 2003, p. 116)

Many critical thinkers published material on the African American experience and the importance of sharing this experience. From the nineteenth and early twentieth century voices of W.E.B. DuBois, Sojourner Truth, Carter G. Woodson, Anna J. Cooper and Mary McLeod Bethune through the voices of contemporary scholars such as Toni Morrison, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Lisa Delpit, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and many others, the stories of African Americans continue to resonate and challenge the dominant culture’s metanarratives of the “Black experience.”

“When our perspective is limited, our interpretation of our experience is also limited” (Liston, 2001, p. 66). Because of similar obstacles and adversities presented in personal stories, there is connectivity. Listening to the stories of other African American women helps one to reflect critically on personal life experiences, feelings of marginalization and identity (Harris, 2003). Through these narratives we are able to step outside the self-protective shells and become more accepting of personal limitations and more conscious of strengths. By sharing stories and experiences, African American women are able to “express who they are wherever they are, and in whatever forms are available and efficacious for them” (Harris, 2003, p. 73).
Meta Harris (2003) explains one of the best ways to understanding the stories of Black women comes with the understanding that “the ‘layers’ of meaning …cannot be read simplistically” (p. 61). Undeniably, racism is a contention; however, African American women are also marked by skin color bias, sexism, classism, and self-discrimination. Hayes and Colin (1994) believe “The effects of racism and sexism can also be seen in the self-perceptions and aspirations of women and people of color” (p. 121). There are even times when Black people discriminate against each other. As a result, self discrimination and hatred weaken the whole and perpetuates the will of the dominant culture. I hope to strengthen the whole by listening with an accommodating mind to the individuals. The participants’ each bring unique stories of trials and triumphs from different perspectives and experiences. We can learn and grow from their individual and collective stories.

**Significance**

It is important to realize that each person has a personal perspective complete with different experiences. All voices bring unique stories of failures, trials, and triumphs. While exploring the narratives of these participants, this study provides a venue where the stories of five African American women with terminal degrees were heard, connected and analyzed to show that there are African American women who have achieved the pinnacle of academic success. By drawing from the experiences of the participants, it is my hope that women recognize “the political demands of millions speak more powerfully than do the pleas of a few isolated voices” (Crenshaw, Gotanda et al, 1995, p. 357).
This study was not only concerned with achievements of the participants, but also revealed something about the impact of classism, racism and sexism on African American women. The stories of the participants provide support for others, faced with obstacles, to understand how tradition and life experiences have impacted these women through socialization and how they have succeeded against covert and overt adversities.

In *Nature of a Sistah*, Strother-Jordan (1999) proclaims that “people of color, specifically Black women often experience alienation in the academy” (p. 36). It was further suggested by McGary (1992):

> Alienation exists when the self is deeply divided because the hostility of the dominant groups in society forces the self to see itself as defective, insignificant, and lacking the possibility of ever seeing itself in positive terms. (p. 36)

It remains my hope that this study provides support for those who aspire to complete various goals in spite of the obstacles that line their path.

From my research participants I hoped to learn of their childhood and education experiences, family and community connections, as well as their struggles and triumphs. By listening to their stories I expected to grasp five life histories from personal, experiential, and cultural perspectives. Although each participant is an African American woman, it was imperative to realize and note that social class, demographics, and personal experiences influence the cultural perspectives brought to the research.

Additional significance for this study – the actual participants and optimistic influencers. Nettles (2000) asserts that “a neglected area of resilience research is the influence of...correlates of resilience such as optimism” (p. 49). She believes that “participation in activities that offer the most frequent opportunities for developing
support…are beneficial.” My inquiry explored the claim of the importance of optimistic attitudes and strong support systems. Dr. Saundra Murray Nettles states that much research has been done on resilience and students; however, research exploring resilience or resiliency of adults (women) is limited. This study adds to the limited research on resilience in adults.

**Conclusion**

Life changes daily, and the experiences we are privy to impact how things around us are perceived. For me, having to prove myself continually and knowing the constant battle between my personal identity and the stereotypical identity has made me extremely cognizant of how I meet and treat others. As I walk through the halls of my school, I instantly notice the influence of the media and entertainment world on the clothes, mannerisms, and dialogue between young adolescent girls. There seems to be an overwhelming air of disappointment and submission to the images presented in society. Amazing describes the time span of how quickly the media’s interpretations of others (and self) seep into our thoughts. I am very much aware of the pain and frustration that comes with being pre-judged.

We can view the heroic efforts of our forefathers and foremothers with pride and admiration, claim the gut muscles they used to survive the hardship of their times as our own, and exercise those muscles to improve our circumstances.

(Bridgforth, 2000, p. 34)

I believe it is important to know and be share this understanding that obstacles and struggles should make us stronger not failures.
Carter G. Woodson (1933) states, “real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better… (p. 29). African American women have been challenged to reject racism, prejudices, and stereotypes and make life better. Yes, there are obstacles, adversities, and oppression; however, this marginalized group continues to produce success stories. I am excited to be provided an opportunity to present the experiences of these five African American women with doctoral degrees that have accepted the challenge, rejected the stereotypes, and triumphed. By telling the stories of these African American women, I hope others will find relation and connection with perseverance to triumph and “Still Rise” over their obstacles.
CHAPTER 2
OUTLINING THE STANCE

*The Creed of an African American Woman*

*My eyes are filled with hope, desire, and fear.*

*Bright, black eyes that carry the shadow of time.*

*If you look deeply, you can see my past.*

*Do you see the women of generations past?*

*Supporting me with their strength.*

*Guiding me with their lives.*

*If you look hard enough, you can see my present.*

*Do you see me, my friends? Do you see the rainbow of women?*

*We have the support of our ancestors and we continue in the struggle.*

*We struggle for freedom, for voice, and understanding.*

*We know it is possible, our grandmothers got us here.*

*If you search deeper, you almost see my soul.*

*Even in the midst of mistreatment, I smile.*

*My image is grounded in hope, joy, and a strong belief.*

*Look deeper – can you see my future?*

*I can not be defeated. I cannot be stopped.*

*I am filled with the echoes of pain from my ancestor’s past as well as their hope for the future.*

*Because of them I continue to be strong, stand tall.*
Look deep into my eyes and tell me what you see?

Indeed, there is a confident and complex Black woman.

Look deeper – much deeper and much more you will see.

Paula Baker (April 2005)

Theoretical Framework – Focusing the Perspectives

Two of the theoretical frameworks that offer promise for understanding the intersecting identities of African American women and explaining ways in which [our] needs can be addressed effectively are Black feminist thought and critical race theory. (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 20)

Because of the rapport with these viewpoints, my research will be grounded in Black feminist thought (BFT) informed by critical race theory (CRT). I believe this to be the best structure for my research in view of the fact that appreciating the unique experiences of African American women requires one to understand lived experiences and situatedness as double outsiders because of racism and sexism (hooks, 1994; Collins, 1998, 2000; Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Akin to Black feminist thought, critical race theory builds on everyday experiences influenced by perspectives and viewpoints with an understanding that personal stories are powerful tools in knowing (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Black feminist thought could easily be presented as a subcategory of critical race theory; however, I find it important to remain cognizant of the tendency in society for the agenda of women to be subsumed under categories created for men. The stories of African American women need to stand liberated, equal to those of men and White
women. Consequently, Black feminist thought will be the bridge with critical race theory serving as support to help validate and authenticate the participants’ stories.

**Black Feminist Thought**

African American Feminism, Black Feminism, Black Feminist Thought, and Womanism are a few of the terms used to frame the voices of African American women as we speak about the complexities of demands for social, economic, and political equality. The aforementioned viewpoints have somewhat different positions; however, each philosophy recognizing the importance of locating and ending oppression.

Black feminist approaches...differ from their colorblind counterparts not only in closely considering issues of race, class, and culture, but in shifting the ethical and educational focus away from the idealized conception of caring to a more pragmatic model (Thompson, 2004, p. 29)

When exploring a few of the positions, slight “differences” will be distinguished in order to reveal why I choose Black feminist thought as the framework for this study.

African American Feminism focuses on equality – economic, political, and social – in regards to racism, sexism and other forms of oppression directed to women and men of color (AA feminism). Black Feminism explores ideological and global political issues of sexism and male oppression over women, as well as political issues encompassing voting rights, and human rights against violations such as torture and rape, custody and domestic labor. Womanism attempts to build a stronger relationship between Black women and men while supporting Black empowerment (Van Deburg, 1992). Each of these philosophical viewpoints has aspects that could support the direction I wish to go with my inquiry; however, I have a strong desire to develop literature to join the
sprinkling of work that focuses on individual stories of Black women. Moreover, I would like to use these stories to present accounts of the experiences of five African American women who have earned terminal degrees in the field of education. Black feminist thought recognizes theoretical interpretations of reality presented by all Black women (Collins, 2000). By using Black feminist thought the voices of the participants will resonate, thus validating personal stories as they also bring hope for success.

Patricia Hill Collins presents several causal needs for Black feminist thought. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000), Black feminism remains vital because Black women constitute an oppressed group, and collaboration in a dialectical relationship connects oppression and activism. Collins believes there is a connection between experiences and ideas. In other words, African-American women face similar challenges that come from an existence in a culture that historically and routinely derogates women of African decent. These experiences of prejudice allow for connections between Black women’s experiences as a heterogeneous group and any group standpoint. As a result of this connection, resistance is created as oppressed groups suppress individual standpoints and look toward the betterment of the group. In order to consider all perspectives, Black feminist thought recognizes the need to look beyond class, age, economics, education, and career positions to understand the perspectives of Black women. When considering various perspectives, there must also be a concern for the importance of change. Once placed in positions to see things from different lenses, beliefs and perspectives of the viewer ought to be affected. In order to promote change, Black feminists and social justice advocates maintain their convictions yet remain cognizant of the fact that as society changes, the
understanding of it must change as well. Finally, Collins (2000) asserts that Black feminist thought is connected with social justice. The voices of Black women have strengthened views that affect much larger issues of struggles for empowerment, human dignity, and social justice (p.29-41).

Through her work, Collins uses the term “outsider-within” to describe those who “no longer belong to any one group” (1998, p. 5). Understanding this complex positioning, Collins uses the standpoint theory paradigm because she believes this theory is significant in that it allows participants to use lived experiences and knowledge of community (1998). “Such a standpoint would identify the ways in which being situated between intersections of race, economic class, and gender, as well as those of age, sexuality, ethnicity, and region of the country constructs relationships among African American women as a group” (Collins, 1998, p. 228). For instance, all African American women share experiences of being Black women in the United States, a society that denigrates women of African heritage. This commonality will be prominent in the standpoint of Black women that identify with different groups and are influenced by factors such as age, class, region, etc.

Although all Black women may experience racism and oppression, academic status and social class may impact the type of discrimination experienced. Conducting research through the Black feminist thought perspective, I will remain cognizant of the influencers (classism, marginality, racism, and sexism) and how they impact the stories told by the participants. Because of the complexity of identity for Black women, I believe it imperative to use a philosophy that connects the experiences, influencers, and perspectives of Black women.
The elements of Black feminist thought that support the complexities of Black women also focus the lens as the spotlight moves to resilience. Through the Black feminist lens we must acknowledge the complex intersections of several social systems of power: class, gender, race, and sexual orientation. As with perspectivism, it is also important when exploring resilience that we acknowledge the ability needed to recover is just as diverse as the actual experiences of Black women. Contrary to some typical myths, not all Black women are unsympathetic “super” women that overflow with buoyancy. Indeed, every woman possesses an element of resilience; however a generalization ought not be created to develop a measuring tool to critique the level of resilience for all women.

**Critical Race Theory**

“Critical race theory (CRT) … [builds] on feminism’s insight into the relationship between power and the construction of social roles…” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 5). These philosophies are compatible in that both viewpoints look to understand the association between power and how it affects and is affected by society. I believe critical race theory and Black feminist thought will work together successfully for my inquiry. Akin to Black feminist thought, CRT has a focus on a group of people whose identities are influenced by “interlocking components” of race, gender, and class (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 22). Critical race theory enhances my framework by adding the ideas “that racism is ordinary, not aberrational… [and is an] everyday experience for most people of color” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7).

There are several beneficial components in critical race theory. First, I find compelling the idea that critical race theory believes in the power of words. Because of
this, the narratives presented can be used to create counter accounts of existing social realities. Secondly, there is importance in understanding that individual experiences of people of color should be recognized as unique. The participants’ stories will be powerful tools to show others that are positioned within marginalized groups healing, empathy, understanding, as well as an outlook from outside one's own ethnocentric perspective to see how others experience life.

Critical race theory holds the idea that racism is pervasive. This all-encompassing positioning makes it difficult to discern racist principles or to overcome them. Certainly racist preconceptions provide stereotypical images that are reinforced throughout society and present political interventions that seem to provide little resistance. We must remember that through criticism and questions, boundaries become flexible; knowledge is created and understanding advanced. Indeed critical race theory places racial issues at the forefront; however, it also works to eliminate other forms of oppression (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

The primary goal for informing my inquiry with critical race theory will be to study and challenge the relationships between race, racism, and power that are related to context, economics, history, feelings, with group and individual interests (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 2). Critical race theory posits that racial background has an influence on perspectives and experiences. Through CRT the stories of the participants will allow insight into lives and experiences of others and place the readers and researcher in a position to see unfamiliar worlds. Even though I am an African American woman, and I share the characteristics of gender and race with the participants, we each view life through different ethnocentric lenses because of diverse experiences. Indeed, we may be
grouped together because of gender and race; however, we observe and understand through personal experiences and beliefs, as well as society and class expectations. These aspects directly affect our discernment. Put simply, everyone is different.

As an African American woman, I am faced with racial issues daily. I further assert that other African American women are faced with similar obstacles. These offensive issues come whether we leave home or not. I hear the oppressive commentation and see the offensive mannerisms that glamorize “negative” views of gender and racial issues through music videos, on commercials, the news, radio or internet. Race and/or gender are also the focal point of issues in the work environment or in the community. With critical race theory, we recognize that race is not a “fixed” term, but one that oscillates, decentering social connotations that are shaped and changed under the pressures of political struggle (Calmore, 1992).

Critical race theory supports the idea that experiences presented by African American women are legitimate, appropriate and effective to analyze biases that are detailed as obstacles to be overcome in order to become successful. More over than just recognizing the influence of race, Critical race theory supports Black feminist thought by adding an “activist dimension” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 3). It is my hope for the results to “not only…understand our social situation, but to change it…” (p. 3).

This support of acknowledging all experiences provides a needed element as the focus moves to resilience. With CRT as the frame, all levels of resilience are recognized. The starting point for understanding resilience I believe is the understanding that everyone has resilience. Critical race theory takes the responsibility of deconstructing the narratives of the dominant culture, which challenges the ideology that all Black women
have the same level of resilience. According to CRT our knowledge and personal histories are connected, and through telling and retelling of our stories we are forced to self-reflect (Delgado & Stefâncic, 2001). Continual reflection and transformation creates a wider view as we begin to recognize other realities. Once we learn to think outside the box, I believe we are able to think and process different opportunities thus widening our level of resilience.

**Exploration of Theoretical Positions**

*Black Feminist Thought*

Feminism is an umbrella term that covers many varieties of feminists’ theories. There are many distinctions, and individuals can identify themselves with more than one label. Feminism encompasses the belief that women are full human beings and are capable of participation and leadership in the whole range of human activities. There are people that see feminism as operating exclusively within the White American feminist arena, and determine that feminist inquiries by women of color integrate class, gender, and race and therefore are different. Because of this impression, philosophies to explore issues for women of color eventually were created.

Liberal feminism was the movement to challenge the balance in the schools where women were teachers and men administrators. The liberal feminists wanted equal treatment within the school environment and society. During this period in history, laws were enacted to support equal treatment. Title IX was established to support girls’ participation in competitive sports and desegregated prevocational and vocational classes (Spring, 2001). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was established with provisions to forbid discrimination on the basis of sex as well as race in hiring, promoting, and firing.
Interestingly, research shows the word "sex" was added to the legislation at the last moment.

The late 1960s and early 1970s show an interweaving of liberal and radical feminism. The radical feminist focus was not on equality, but eradicating oppression. The radical social movement linked with civil rights, peace movements and new left politics in an attempt to break this cycle. Radical feminism became the cutting edge of feminist theory from approximately 1967-1975.

During the reign of radical feminism *Ms.* Magazine was founded by Gloria Steinem, a feminist who promoted equal pay and used her magazine as a catalyst to present this and other feminist goals ("Steinem," 1996). The non-problematic stance of this paradigm was to modify social behaviors and recruit young students for employment. The Civil Rights Movement set into motion events to demand equal education. By the mid-twentieth century, schools were focused on removing sexual oppression by patriarchal hierarchies. For instance, textbooks that showed only mothers in aprons baking cookies, little girls playing with "girls only" toys, and young women learning to type so they could earn some money before getting married were now incorrect and inadequate illustrations in teaching tools.

Paradigms shifted once again to reflect society’s actions to help those not in the dominant culture receive a proper and equal education. This shift almost returned society to the time when educational objectives were to promote economic wealth. At this point the socialist feminist politics points out the need for giving appropriate value to women’s labor. The focus was on how power had been denied to women because of their class
position. People saw capitalism as an institutionalized form of oppression based on profit for private owners of publicly worked for wealth.

Eventually people began to speak up because they wanted to see themselves represented in society. “An oppressed group’s experiences may put its members in a position to see things differently, but their lack of control over the ideological apparatuses of society makes expressing a self-defined standpoint more difficult” (Collins, 2000, p. 39). These desires led to the need to create more flexibility by including multiculturalism to attempt a conversion in society from the control of the dominant culture. The emergence of Black feminist thought arose in response to the unavailability of space within other areas of feminism. Patricia Hill Collins (1994) argues that a precondition for producing a Black feminist standpoint is living life as an African American woman. Through this approach it is important for researchers to acknowledge experiences that are particular to being Black women; it is equally important to accept that these experiences vary according to class, sexuality, environment and ethnicity. As mentioned in the stanza of The Creed of an African American Woman, the experiences of Black women may be similar, yet they are unique. These experiences are influenced by the experiences of ancestors and these realities must be acknowledged.

Black women have been involved with the feminist movement since its inception. Sojourner Truth asked “Ain’t I a Woman?” at a women’s convention in 1851 (Halsall, 1997). Following Truth were other strong advocates such as Anna Julia Cooper, author of A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South in 1892 to Nannie Burroughs, organizer of the National Association of Wage Earners. Echoing these women in the 20th century we find Amy Garvey, editor of the women’s page of Negro World and
representative of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), and contemporary advocates such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and countless other passionate defenders of Black womanhood.

*Critical Race Theory*

Critical race theory developed from two previous movements, radical feminism and critical legal studies. This philosophy takes the issues of legal indeterminacy (every legal case does not have one correct outcome). The belief is the outcome is influenced by the emphasis of one fact (or facts) over others. Feminist insight is placed in the relationship to expose the connection between power and the construction of social roles (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The combination of these philosophies during the post Civil Rights Era in the 1970s became know as Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Derrick Bell, attorney and Father of Critical Race Theory began in the 1970s to construct legal arguments to change laws (Bell, 1993). He began by questioning the basic postulations of the law’s treatment of people of color. Bell used three major arguments to support his point. First, Bell asserted that constitutional contradictions reward property over justice. In the educational setting intellectual property is undergirded by “real” property and justice. Kozol (1991) asserts schools that serve minority and poor students are more likely to have less access to “real” property (i.e. school supplies, highly qualified teachers and staff, computer labs). Secondly, Bell states that the interest convergence principle maintains White people promote racial advances when their interests are also promoted. Delgado contends that the dominant group justifies its power with stories that construct reality in such a way that maintains their control and privilege
This idea is supported by Delpit (1988, 1995) who believes one of the tragedies of society comes from the silencing of dialogue of people of color. Finally, Bell emphasizes the price of racial remedies that assert Whites will not support civil rights policies because of a threat to social status (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Delgado (1989) points out that there are differences in the perspectives of Blacks and Whites. He continues by postulating that Whites do not see their knowledge as a perspective but as the truth.

Critical race theory began as a movement with student protests, boycotts, and an alternative law course at Harvard University (Crenshaw, Gotanda, et al, 1995). When Bell left Harvard for the University of Oregon Law, the students were faced with inarticulation as they could not critique the color-blindness Harvard administrators used to justify not hiring a professor of color. This void of vocabulary led to more boycotts and explorations into race issues by scholars from other schools (Crenshaw, Gotanda, et al, 1995). “The Alternative Course was in many ways the first institutionalized expression of Critical Race Theory” (Crenshaw, Gotanda, et al, 1995, p. xxiii) because many scholars of color began to work collectively to address issues from a critical perspective.

Derrick Bell and Robert Delgado are two scholars that began to challenge the philosophical positions of liberal civil rights – the colorblind approach to social justice. The earlier works are linked to legal debates in reference to civil rights strategies. Delgado & Stefancic (2001) proclaim, “Unlike traditional civil rights which embraces…step-by-step progress, CRT questions the very foundation of the liberal order,
including equality theory, legal reasoning …and neutral principles of constitutional law” (p. 3).

Richard Delgado and Kimberle Crenshaw joined Bell in his quest in the 1980s. During this period, scholars gathered to synthesize a theory that was grounded in critical theory and remained responsive to the realities of racial politics in America. Considering the influence of Bell, the organizers decided to keep “Critical Race Theory” as the focus (Crenshaw, Gotanda, et al, 1995). As more scholars became interested in the issues, critical race theory began to expand to include issues of understanding the complexity of law, racial ideology, political power, theoretical vocabulary for practice, and affirmation for current racial regimes.

Critical race theory is now used instructively as it uncovers racialized power and links racism to practices and values. One charge of CRT is to persistently illustrate how embedded issues of racial ideology are in society. “Critical race theory recognizes…the multiple ways in which people of color are situated (and resituated) as communities, subcommunities, and individuals” (Crenshaw, Gotanda, et al, 1995, p. xxxii).

**Overview of Philosophical Framework**

*Epistemology*

From an epistemological point of view, how Black women know affects not only what we can know, but how we know it. The knowledge that we gain in spite of struggle, oppression, and racism, affects our confidence, resiliency, and perceptions. Through examples set in stories, we are acquainted with positive ideals, beliefs, and values. By listening and communicating with others we learn empathy, understanding, and perseverance.
Black feminist thought analyzes issues by integrating concerns of class, gender, and race, and our knowledge has been influenced by these issues as well as our outsider within positionality. The epistemology of Black feminist thought is based on experiences Black women developed from epistemic privilege from living as double outsiders.

Members of oppressed groups...have a perspective (an epistemically privileged perspective) on the world that is not just different from the perspective available to members of the ruling class...Their perspective allows them to see not only the lives of the ruling class but also lives and experiences of the oppressed (Janack, 1997, p. 126)

These experiences directly and indirectly influence how we live, interact and learn.

As an “outsider” I have learned to constantly take notice of my surroundings, others in my presence and their perceptions, both verbal and nonverbal through gestures. I notice that I am leery to accept mainstream perspective as law without considering other alternatives. In the back of my mind I question the answers presented as absolute to see if they actually improve situations for people they claim to represent. I believe this stance is strong in my philosophical being because I have been subjected to mainstream answers that confine (not release) me. Although the experiences of African American women are diverse, Black feminist thought posits that we are able to learn from many experiences. As Black women share personal stories, we are able to find connections and see through a slightly different view. “We are filled with the echoes of pain from our ancestor’s past as well as their hope for the future” (Baker, 2005, April). This philosophy also makes a case in support of accounting for the economic history of Black women’s (mis)representation
and resulting stereotypes. This will be possible with interpretation of Black women's experiences and ideas by those who participate in them (Collins, 1990).

Through an epistemological view, critical race theory looks at how we know reality by exploring the relationship between the knower and what is known. For the critical race theorist one way of knowing is by listening to and experiencing the stories of others. Knowledge and perspectives are developed under circumstances in which people live and learn. Through their stories we gain experiential knowledge. From this viewpoint, life conditions of oppressed people are different from those in the dominant culture. Because of negative issues of race and gender oppression as well as marginalization, many African American women strongly push for social justice. I have noticed in many instances Black women question essentialist perceptions and adjust standpoints in order to examine situations through multiple lenses. As a personal realization, I have noticed a strong internal monitor that constantly reminds me that my position ought not be the only position. I believe it is important to continually include the voices of others by soliciting comments, opinions, thoughts, and participation.

**Ontology**

How do Black feminist thought and critical race theory define the situation/environment and structure of reality? By understanding the ontology I hope to review the relationships of the participants and find ways that positionality, bias, and resilience impact the participants’ relations in society. Resilience takes on many meanings. In this particular research project, resilience refers to the ability to recover from change and misfortune.
According to Black feminism, the lives and experiences of African American women are manipulated by societal influences. From this standpoint we assert that Black feminists’ ontology is connected to the experiences of self and indirectly influenced from the stories of others’ experiences. Black feminist thought challenges societies that position African American women in subordinate positions academically as well as financially.

When exploring critical race theory, reality is interpreted as being shaped over time and history by cultural, ethnicity, gender, political, and social factors. I realize CRT is not the only position to take; it is simply the researcher’s choice. The decision was made as Delgado and Stefancic (2001) present the idea that through storytelling, others may “apply their own perspectives to…master narratives (p. 9). By engaging in stories from others, we understand what life is like for others, and this understanding may change us. Through dialogue and growth, we see our lives through different lenses. The stories of marginalized women provide strength, as opportunities are provided and voice is given to connect with others who have had similar experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). From beginning to end, the power of connection begins to adjust “our system of beliefs and categories” by naming discrimination and refocusing on commonalities.

I would assert that both of the aforementioned viewpoints would support the idea that Black women do not have fixed natures. These philosophies also assert that Black women create individual natures by societal, historical, and academic influencers. The majority of African American women encounter racism in schools and society and obtain views from family, community and the racial “family” that help shape perspectives (“What’s in a name?”, 1996).
Critiques of the Theoretical Framework

*Black Feminist Thought*

Black feminist thought surfaced because of the lack of space within other feminist philosophies that focused on the plight of White women and Black Nationalism which had a primary focus on African American men. In order to fit into the spaces of these philosophies, Black women had to take on the causes of White women or Black men, usually leaving our specific needs and desires stifled. Collins (2000) maintains that a prerequisite for producing a Black feminist perspective is living life as an African-American woman. Glinda Bridgforth (2000) supports this point in her book as she quotes Nancy Boyd-Franklin, author of *Black Families in Therapy*. Boyd Franklin proclaims

> It is difficult to convey fully to someone who has not experienced [it] the insidious, pervasive, and constant impact that racism and discrimination has on the lives of Black people in America today. Both affect a Black person from birth until death and have an impact on every aspect of family life, from child-rearing practices, courtship, and marriage, to male-female roles, self-esteem, and cultural and racial identification. They also influence they way in which Black people relate to each other and the outside world. (p. 47)

One criticism of Black feminist thought is the idea of essentialism. Expressing a collective consciousness could be problematic when the dominant group controls much of the media and other societal establishments that present viewpoints of marginalization for Black women. hooks (1984) asserts that, even as it is apparent that many women suffer from oppression, there is little indication that this forges a universal bond for all women. Black women vary according to class, geography, national origin, and sexuality
as well as experiences, and these influencers too have direct impact on perspectives. In order to maintain fairness, we must be cognizant of the fact that what constructs us as African American women and accounts for our realities are the same diverse experiences that make us unique from all others. We become from our experiences and through understanding the experiences of others.

This criticism is also addressed as Collins expresses her concerns that the voices of “all” Black women be included in discussion. She postulates that this deliberate attempt will counteract the tendencies to essentialize and canonize the view of a few Black women. Collins maintains the importance of remembering that “despite the common challenges confronting African American women as a group, individual Black women neither have identical experiences nor interpret …[these experiences] in a similar fashion” (Collins, 2000, p. 27). Instead of homogenizing women, knowledge will emanate from a range of the culture. These differences produce diverse experiences which in turn shape different perceptions and responses to core themes.

A second criticism is found within the meaning Patricia Hill Collins presents for Black feminist thought. According to Collins’ definition of Black feminist thought other groups – other people of color, Black men, and White women and men will not be able to produce versions of Black feminist thought. However, when we look at the stories these African American women tell, all people are involved in the development of experiences and consciousness of the Black women. Their being is included in the stories. Collins postulates that there is no neutral standpoint because no individual or group can exist “unembedded” in the world (Collins, 2000) I do not consider this development to be a
weakness in Black feminist thought considering, others may use the premise and stories articulated to develop unique standpoints to explore their positionality.

When we see through oppressive views our perspectives are allowed to accept assorted views; however, expressing control over beliefs is made more complex (Collins, 1990). Patricia Hill Collins continues by explaining that oppressive groups are frequently positioned to be listened to “only if we frame our ideas in the language…familiar to and comfortable for the dominant group” (2000, p. vii). Once this is done, the ideas created for African American women are no more, as they have been changed to represent the ideas of the dominant group or at least to represent ideas in a manner understandable and accepted by the dominant group.

Collins (2000) explains that omittance of sexuality and social class were criticisms of the first edition of Black Feminist Thought. Specifically Collins says that through the later edition she “broadened [the] analysis beyond race, class, and gender and include sexuality as a form of oppression” (p. xi). The realization that these issues are also significant, add to the assemblage of oppressions that affect the perspectives of African American women. With the second edition of the text, she was cognizant of this weakness and “more effectively (explored) these issues” (p. xi). Therefore in my inquiry I have included concepts from both editions.

Critical Race Theory

Some of the racial tenets presented in Delgado and Stefancic (2001) could be the basis of criticisms. According to critical race theory, racism is “ordinary,” in other words, it is “the usual way society does business…” (p. 7). Even with a plethora of sources, I am sure there are researchers that would argue that racism is not commonplace. As I reflect
on this statement I instantly remember discussions with members in my doctoral cohort. I recall colleagues that truly believed racism was not commonplace. However, once other members shared personal experiences of racism, those who initially insisted that they could not “see” racism were able to recall situations from their lives differently. Because of storytelling and listening, the lenses of several people were refocused to allow a new look. This new analysis revealed—indeed, racism, whether overt or covert, is commonplace. In one particular instance a cohort member made the comment that after hearing the personal racist encounters of several African American cohort members, she was able to reexamine several past experiences and distinguish racially prejudiced actions and environments. She recognized that the discriminatory acts were habitual and therefore invisible to her ethical consciousness.

Critical race theory insists that racism advances the interests of White elites and working class people. Because of this widespread use for personal gain, “large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Brown v. Board of Education (1954) was explored as an example of litigation that may have resulted more for the interests of Whites and capitalism than to assist Blacks. As a Black woman I believe it is important to attempt to understand racism as well as potential uses for racism. Throughout the years scholars have maintained knowledge is power. I assert that by having knowledge, I will be provided a door to access power as I gain a greater understanding of self and others while I strengthen my perception and add vocabulary to articulate important issues.

Additionally, critical race theory asserts that race is produced by social constructs and is not inherent or fixed. In other words, races are categories created by society to be
manipulated when convenient (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical race theory contends that people share commonalities such as physical traits, but these count for a small portion of being and have little to do with behavior, personality, or the like.

Finally critical race theory proclaims differential racialization. This concept alludes to the idea that “everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9). Under this belief, no one has a single identity that is easily stated. I, an African American woman, could also be identified with Black feminists, pragmatists, doctoral students, teachers, married women, Southerners, Christians, Tuskegee University alumni, Troy State alumni, or Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority members. We all have such diverse characteristics; we must be cognizant of the intersectionality and resist essentialism while we explore influences on race.

**Literature Review – Observing the Domain**

Within our environments, African American women shape an understanding of self, community, and society. This awareness is interwoven with cultural, historical, and social constructs. Through these structures we learn our way of existing and develop our social reality. Racism and prejudiced obstacles exist as social constructs in the lives of people of color. Responding to these social constructs, African American women develop identities of strength, perseverance, and resiliency.

There has been a large amount of work written on the experience of African Americans in the United States. The literature ranges from traditional studies of African American experiences (White, 2003; Walker & Archung, 2003; Zuriff, 2002) to documented life experiences (Breland, Collins et al, 2000; Rainey, 1997; McKinley, 1990) as well as those studies centered in the educational systems (Evans, 2003; Berry,
Though research is available on African American women and higher education, it is not often explored in depth and rarely includes the perspectives and stories of the participants. African American women have gained personally and professionally because of higher education and the status that accompanies it; this area deserves exploration. The academy is more diverse because of the new perspectives brought forward by African American women scholars. However, when I think of my journey and the stories of other African American women I can say this has not been an easy journey. We have to withstand tremendous adversities and challenges to survive and triumph academically and socially.

In order to draw attention to the experiences of five African American women with doctoral degrees or careers in the field of education, we must begin by understanding the unique experiences of African American women. Collins (1990) declares Black women must not accept the definitions provided by others, but create self definitions. We must explore the specific acclimation issues we face; the issues that include accomplishing personally set goals while negotiating a sometimes hostile and unaccepting environment. This realization must also balance with the professional existence, personal life, institutional expectations and stereotypical standards. When we think of institutional expectations, the concept includes African American women satisfying specific job requirements as well as often being seen as the minority expert to support and assist all minorities with any issue of concern. Though it is clear that each participant has different lived experiences and perspectives, the phenomena of African American women and education, the impact of Historically Black Colleges and
Universities (HBCUs), resilience, and success will provide connections with which to view their experiences.

**African American Women**

In order to understand African American women as a group, it is imperative to understand the historical role played in society. In 1908, W.E.B. DuBois stressed the importance of the historical relationship of African heritage and that of the Black family. During his exploration, he scrutinized the mind-set of American Blacks. Omolade continued DuBois’ research and in 1994 narrowed his focus as he chose to scrutinize the experiences of African American women. He revealed,

>African American women have a curious way of turning disadvantage around to make it work for themselves and their families. They have attempted to make social spaces for their own intellectual development in the margins of colleges and universities while struggling against combined systems of oppression. Their presence is an unrecognized witness to the blindness of traditional scholarship as well as testimony to their perseverance. (Omolade, 1994, p. 137)

Black women faced constant opposition from racism, sexism, or classism. Confronted with these obstacles, two choices emerged: remain in an oppressive position or persevere and overcome. Proof of perseverance can be seen in the creation of the Black Feminist Movement and through the achievements of numerous African American women.

Several aspects of culture for African American women seem relevant when constructing a sense of self. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) discusses the existence of a culture of silence in which African American women are supposedly seen but not heard. This positioning makes us outsiders within our own race. Throughout her work, Collins
Resilient Lives

(1998, 2000) provides an essential understanding of how Black women as "outsiders" must resist mainstream perspectives as well as remain cognizant of the fact the dominant culture can learn from us and our experiences. Black feminist thought demonstrates the emerging power Black women have as negotiators of knowledge (Collins, 1990). With this approach, we can interweave both supposition and action for Black feminism, emphasizing the belief that thought is ineffective without actions.

The dualism which characterizes the way in which the Black woman is perceived by the dominant society (the towering pillar of strength and an "immoral" person who cannot approximate the White woman, who has become the adorned symbol of femininity in American society) is responsible for many of the conflicts and problems she must endure. (Ladner, 1995, p. 30)

Andrews (1993) found that Black women have historically and culturally been encouraged to seek higher education so as to not have to engage in domestic work for members of the dominant culture or to be free from depending on men. The education of African American women continues to be seen as an investment for the future, so I find it peculiar that “most academic and non-academic reports about African Americans usually ignore the countless individuals who have overcome adversity to become successful members of society” (Thompson, 1998, p. 1). If education is seen as imperative, why is the focus elsewhere and the success stories limited?

**African American Women and Education**

Gregory (1995) believes it is important to contextualize the structure of perceptions of African American women by analyzing past components that will help to identify beliefs, outlooks, and experiences. Historically, research can be produced to
show that African American women have repeatedly taken the initiative in providing educational opportunities for uplifting our people. Giddings (1994) and Peterson (1992) outline the struggles faced by some Black women in the 1800s and early 1900s. Among the women presented, Lucy Craft Laney, director of Haines Normal and Industrial Institute for Boys and Girls opened January 6, 1883; Nannie Helen Burroughs created a national Institute for Colored Girls in the early 1900s and later the National Trade and Professional School for Women and Girls in 1909; Mary McLeod Bethune founded Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls (now Bethune-Cookman College) in 1904. These women, as well as other trail blazers, encountered their share of prejudices, hardships, and obstacles to gain personal educational enrichment and provide opportunities for others (Giddings, 1984). As a child I remember being told you must know where your people have come from as you mark your future path. I believe African American girls of today need to know that there were women who beat seemingly insurmountable odds to succeed, and they too can overcome the obstacles in their paths and succeed.

As we continue in the 21st century, many of the same issues are prevalent for African American women. A look at the limited material on African American women who have completed doctorate degrees should serve as some validation for a need to continue inquiries into this area. There were a variety of studies that connect African American women with doctorate degrees. Two studies relate to particular institutions and Black students (Townsend, 1994; Burrow, 1997). Townsend’s participants were African American women, White men, and White women that attended Berkeley, while Burrow focused on one African American male. One study (Wolf-Wendel, Baker, Morphew,
explores the relationship between institutional resources and the production of women doctorates. The researchers completed separate analyses of African American women, Latina women, and White women. Two studies investigate the importance and influence of *Brown v. Board of Education* (Lindsay, 1994; Garibaldi, 1997). Lindsay (1994) explored racist and sexist practice experiences of deans who were also women of color. Garibaldi (1997) concluded from his study that the performance of Black students has shown progress and regression over the past four decades. He states that contributions of HBCUs have continually had a positive affect towards the progress of education for Black students. Gail Robinson (2004) conducted a study that investigated strategies used by African American women to overcome racial, gender, and class barriers. The investigator used several open-ended questions to structure the interviews with six participants. One study related to Black feminist scholars (Schiller, 2000), and six studies linked African American women faculty and administrators (Wolf-Wendel, 1998; Thompson & Dey, 1998; Kulis, Shaw & Chong, 2000; Ards, Brintnall & Woodard, 1997; Park, 1996; Anderson, Astin, Bell et al, 1993). A longitudinal study into factors relating success and women at women’s colleges and coeducational colleges (Smith, Wolf, & Morrison, 1995) considers many influencers to success, yet does not explore racial issues that may be relevant. These studies investigate the issues of higher education of women, and some studies narrow the focus to explore experiences of African American women. Studies have documented that racism and discrimination are faced by African American women in various aspects of daily life. Essed (1990) explored the experiences of African American women in the United States. She concluded in universities, African American women consistently are faced with poor treatment from Whites. According to Essed,
“poor treatment” included continual judgment by negative stereotypes, constantly having intelligence and qualifications questioned, and exclusion from university activities. However, none of the studies reviewed specifically address the link of African American women who receive doctorate degrees with perseverance and their resiliency. My study will fill this gap in the research.

This study seeks to explore the experiences of African American women with doctorate degrees and career experiences in the field of education. How do African American women with terminal degrees interpret their experiences with regards to race, gender, and class? How are the interpretations of these experiences different before and after life on a Historically Black College/University campus? Also, how might these experiences be used to help create a cultural saga of perseverance and strength for other women of color?

**Resiliency in African American Women**

A number of books, research studies, and articles have been published about the resiliency of African American women. Researchers seem to know a lot about why people end up with detrimental and undesirable outcomes (Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). It is unfortunate that we know very little about what helps some people beat the odds when faced with adversity. Thirteen related studies on resiliency have been conducted. Six of the studies dealt with depression (Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994; Hill-Jackson, 2003; McKnight, 2003; Mentes, 2003; Striepe, 1997; Baez, 1999). Hill-Jackson (2003), an ethnographic case study interviewed 11 African American women participants; McKnight (2003) used several depression scales to gain data for Black women college students, while Mentes (2003) used information from a database to secure
statistics for her study. One hundred eighty three African American women were presented with a family adaptation model to tests psychological adaptation for the Striepe (1997) inquiry. Baez (1999) used equation models to measure variables. In the aforementioned studies, there was no inclusion of participant stories in the analysis. African American adolescent females was the focus of one study (Sterba, 2003) African American women teachers in public schools (Duren, 2002), while one study focused on the resiliency of women administrators in higher education (Carey, 2002), and one study focused on the strength of Black women (Gillem, 1996). There also was one study that related to resiliency and domestic violence using “womanist ethnography” to gather and interpret the narratives of 21 participants (Taylor, 1998). One inquiry related to economics and used secondary data from a previous study (Nichols, 2002); one study related to leadership from the perspectives of African American women (Gostnell, 1996), and another study related to characteristics of success for African American women in nontraditional professions (Wells, 2000). The aforementioned studies explore the issue of resiliency and African American women; however, the exploration remained general in nature.

None of the previously mentioned studies explored the relation of specific resiliency characteristics with women who have completed terminal degrees. Moreover, the voices of the participants seem to fall silent behind the statistics that emerge from the information gathered. How would African American women interpret their experiences with regards to resiliency? My study will allow the stories of the participants to supply the answer to this and similar questions.
Several inquiries involved case studies, data from a database or secondary data. Sterba (2003) conducted a critical ethnographic study with PowerPoint presentations, interviews, group discussions [including male participants], and video-taped interactions as she researched experiences of African American adolescents in city schools. To research resiliency among African American women administrators, Carey (2002) used critical theory to analyze stories [through interviews and portraiture] of resiliency presented by three African American women. The connection of resiliency and achievement of doctorate degrees interwoven with research studies on African American women narrows the focus of studies completed. There are an abundance of articles, books, and research related to African American women. I conducted searches of literature from the following locations: Academic Search Premier, Conference Papers Index, ERIC, JSTOR, ProQuest, Sociology Collection, and Sociology Abstracts. Academic Search Premier produced 1438 articles related to African American women with a limited number including studies on resiliency, doctorate degrees, or higher education.

Once the sources were narrowed down in order for the focus to be more aligned to my research, there were 12 articles related to resiliency and two related to African American women with doctorate degrees. During the course of the studies, implications were made to characteristics of resiliency. None of the studies explored specific categories of resiliency. Four of the studies had participants that were African American women with doctoral degrees (Holmes, 2001; Tarule & Castenell, 1997; Benjamin, 1997; King, 1994). My literature review revealed three significant categories for my study in relation to African American women: resiliency, spirituality, and education.
Historically Black Colleges and Universities

The formal education of African Americans was in effect absent before the Civil War. Yes, there were Black people who received schooling; however, they repeatedly were in hostile environments ("Origination of the HBCU, 2000-2005") Many African Americans were taught informally or taught themselves. In the early 1830s only two historically Black private colleges existed, Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and Wilberforce University in Ohio. This changed following the Civil War and the 13th amendment which abolished slavery. Several years later Alcorn State University opened its doors in Mississippi to serve the Black population in the south. Over two decades later the second Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1890 provided federal funds for 16 Black institutions ("Origination of the HBCU, 2000-2005"). Today the United States is home to 105 HBCUs, most of which have been educating African American students for more than 100 years.

Barger and Mayo-Chamberlain (1983) found that a positive faculty/student relationship directly influenced the professional and academic growth of students. Ladson-Billings (2005) maintains that:

African American teacher educators may represent exceptions in the college or university classroom, they also represent a kind of proof. The fact that they are in the academy means that it is possible for African American students to succeed in school. Their mere presence should erode beliefs about the presumed deficiencies inherent in race, class, and culture. (p. 20)

African American faculty members are present in all higher academic settings. Many of these educators carry the personal charge to help marginalized students. Indeed, there
may be sympathetic beings in various settings; however, there remains an element of “difference.” In all discussion and research the question continues to surface, “What is unique about Historically Black Colleges and Universities?”

In HBCUs, we see the metaphor of family being used differently. The African American extended family provides a model for non-parental relationships between older and younger people that are close but respectful on both sides. (Whitten et al, 2004, p. 240)

Indeed, the HBCU was once the home to many students who rose to prominence from Langston Hughes, Ralph Waldo Ellison and Zora Neale Hurston to Martin L. King, Jr., Andrew Young, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby, Alice Walker, Julian Bond and Vernon Jordan. Historically Black Colleges and Universities were created to educate Black Americans when an appropriate education was denied through other venues. Today, 50 years after the Brown v. Board of Education and 40 years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, HBCUs continue to offer excellence in education and opportunities. In 2002, HBCUs enrolled 14 percent of all African American students in higher education (White House Initiative). This number increased to 16 percent or approximately 400,000 students in 2004 (Grant to Help).

Historically Black colleges and universities began at the crossroads of education when Black people were excluded from institutions of higher learning. The beginning objective was to teach freed slaves to read, write, and survive. Now in the 21st century, the HBCU has a new mission along with graduate and post graduate degrees. The HBCU facilitates students’ development of heritage, identity, and community.
As a graduate of a HBCU I must agree with the aforementioned idea as I recognize that my academic education was interwoven with social and emotional growth. Issues were presented with a cultural sensitivity that was undergirded with a silent strength that sung of the belief that oppression ought to be fought and that we, African American students, were capable of completing the task. How did these overt and covert messages of pride and strength influence African American women students that attended HBCUs? Few studies have compared the experiences of students that attended HBCUs and predominantly White universities. In my research I found no studies that compared the experiences of students that attended both HBCUs and predominantly White universities.

**Resilience**

Regardless of social class or educational attainment, life forces us to deal with things. Whether it is the constant and relentless pressures of daily living, health concerns, change, or misfortune, at some point, we must cope with complications. This generalization definitely includes the participants of this study, African American women with terminal degrees. Gregory (1995) wrote of Black women’s history as one that is best described as a struggle for identity, survival, and continuing effort to protect and sustain the family. Elizabeth Peterson (1992) continues the thoughts of Sheila Gregory as she explored the “will” of African American women and discussed perseverance as our reason for survival.

Will Jordan and Saundra Murray Nettles (1999) investigated resilience/resiliency and adolescents. In their study, the researchers found that “conventional wisdom has some merit” (p. 19). It was their belief that adolescents respond to structure and
positiveness. Furthermore “personal investment in education and self improvement motivate students to achieve well academically, and also help them foster a positive outlook for the future” (p. 19). The research further concluded an impact on resiliency based on religious activities and the perception of life. From this research I raise the question: Are these results transferable to resilience with regards to adults?

How do people deal with obstacles that appear in life? At some point everyone will have to exert resilience. What makes some people successful on their personal journey to develop and strengthen resilience, while others seem to let the trials of life overtake that “innate” resilient nature (Benard & Marshall, 2003)? As an African American woman, I believe my personal philosophy must embrace the idea that life is comprised of complexities and contradictions. Indeed, racism is a constant; however, I must not use this as an excuse to give up or settle. In order to work with this reality, I find it necessary to strengthen my resilient nature.

Sheila Gregory (1995) and Elizabeth Peterson (1992) view African American women as resilient based on the ability to transcend obstacles. Combining their work with the goals of this study I take resilience to be the developmental process of adaptation that improves people as we strive to triumph when met with adversities, difficulty, or tragedy. The adversities in this study will include issues of classism, racism, and sexism as well as how to develop a professional existence (strict academician, academician-advocate, advocate-academician or strict advocate). Once this position is created the African American women must balance this existence with personal existence.
Resilient Lives

Success

Cornel West (1994) states that there is not one “grand” community for African Americans. Similarly, I believe when the time comes to define success, there is no one “grand” definition. What you end up with may be amazingly different when you ask different people to describe those they could consider successful. At the same time as success is being defined, it is important to realize that the course chosen to initiate success is as important as the goal – success.

Success

*Success is more than a materialistic thing.*

*Although fame and fortune can be nice.*

*Have you laughed a lot?*

*Achieved something you deem worthwhile?*

*Is someone in a better place because of you?*

*As you look over your shoulder you can plainly see,*

*The dark spaces where barriers and obstacles use to be.*

*Success is the journey and not the destination.*

*Success is more than a materialistic thing.*

*It is a personal thing that penetrates to the center of one’s being.*

Paula Baker (December 2004)

Regardless of the definition of success, African American women from various socioeconomic backgrounds must battle barriers of low expectations and negative stereotypes that provide limited opportunities. In this study, “success” will be fluid as presented in the poem above. Success will be defined by the participants and could refer
to anything. For some, success may be defined in financial terms, goals accomplished, personal or professional recognition, career satisfaction, or obstacles overcome.

Completion of a graduate program could be considered among the “goals accomplished” criteria for defining success. This goal could be further subdivided by the number of semesters needed to complete the work or the sheer completion of doctoral studies. Valdez conducted a study in 1982 that concluded that many students experience either a moderate or major crisis during the beginning of a doctoral program. The results showed that students dealt with the events in different ways and that the level of “success” was different for the students.

When we believe that our work is important, that it matters, and could possibly make even the slightest difference, there is created within job satisfaction. Mowday and Nam asserted in a 1997 publication that “high motivation results when individuals believe that effort will lead to successful task accomplishment and that successful task accomplishment will lead to outcomes with positive valence” (p. 115).

Conclusion

Literature has shown that the experiences of African American women in higher education have been historically complicated. Racism along with sexism remains facts in access to academic and career advancement for African American women. I firmly believe the existing condition of African American women with terminal degrees have been shaped by classism, racism, and sexism; these entities will continue to influence. In conjunction, African American women are directly affected by relationships with family, community, career, and the way we are viewed in the world. These issues should not be ignored, yet reviewed and critically analyzed in order to be addressed appropriately.
As long as publishers, producers, cartoonists, and other people continue to create stories and caricatures that demean others, there will be a need for counter stories (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Black feminist thought and critical race theory will be ideal in presenting the actual success stories of those that are typically presented in a negative light. These philosophies will help insure that the stories of these African American women are heard. As stated in the poem that introduced this chapter, the stories of the participants will “support” and “guide” as we continue to look for support from our ancestors and add our stories to the arsenal. As a scholar I believe I have a responsibility to acknowledge and integrate the perspectives offered in order to create a clearer picture of society.
CHAPTER 3
SKETCHING THE COURSE

Women

They were women then

My mama’s generation

Husky of voice – Stout of Step

With fists as well as hands

How they battered down doors

And ironed

Starched white shirts

How they led Armies

Headdragged Generals

Across mined fields

Booby-trapped ditches

To discover books, desks

A place for us

How they knew what we must know

Without knowing a page of it themselves

Alice Walker (n.d.)
Methodology – Arranging the Passage

As I read the aforementioned poem I gain a sense of the struggle women of the past had to endure. The words from Walker add resonance to the notion of sharing the sheroes of the past with young girls today.

If we learn to model the courage and tenacity of our ancestors, whose traits are a big part of our very being and substance, we can persevere through today’s challenges with our self-esteem intact and...in control. (Bridgforth, 2000, p. 37)

Women from past generations maintained the faith as they struggled for what they had faith in and what they believed was deserved. The imagery within the poem allows us to understand the strength of these women as they “battred doors down” and “led armies” even without knowing what was required. As I analyze the story portrayed in the poem I glimpse proud Black women that may have been denied a “proper education” or the freedom to decide their goals for life. However, with these and other seemingly impossible constraints these women had a strong desire to provide their descendants with a legacy of hope and opportunities to find the successes they would never know. Indeed, Black women had to sacrifice. Yet in many stories I hear the determination and desire that overshadowed the obstacles and struggle. These stories withstand time and hover protectively for future generations to learn that women, Black women, were not weak and provide a legacy of courage, determination, and strength.

I believe women from past generations wanted us, the future generation, to learn from their experiences. Attached to these lessons is a charge to continue the legacy by sharing our stories with generations yet to come. Casey (1995) believes in order to understand others their struggles must be taken into account. In order to make the charge
of enlightening others a reality we must preserve and share our stories of struggle and success. Indeed, this poem attests to the struggle of women from past generations; however, as a woman in the present time I read this poem and see hope, through the stories that have been passed to me.

**Discovering a Task**

This project is developed from my own concerns, experiences, and questions. How have I become the person I am? This key question began my personal exploration. Questions like this keep me continually reflecting and redefining what I know, what I believe, and what I value. When some people think of life defining events, it usually revolves around family and tradition. The same is true for me; however, I must add school to the equation. When I think of school, I remember the pressure being the only person of color in many classes. Like many African American adolescents in my school, I was trapped by stereotypes. Ladson-Billings (2005) believes

> For many students school is the unreal world. Its language, rules, and practices do not resemble anything that people engaged in day-to-day living participate in. Sometimes that world is hard and unyielding, and sometimes that world is protected and filled with resources, but make no mistake, it is the real world of the students’ experiences. (p. 17)

I can vividly remember my school experiences, the sinking feeling I always had when my work was prejudged. I was caught between three strong oppositions – a school identity, a home identity, and a social identity. As life brought on changes and growth, this triple opposition slowly transformed to a dual pull as I realized that I could achieve academically and that I was not alone in my desires for success. I realized it was socially
acceptable and advantageous for me to strive for academic success. This defining moment came when my extended family joined my immediate family to show me that success can be mine.

At this point I must clarify my stance of “extended family.” Indeed, when I think of the origins of my desires, goals, and choices, I am more likely to think of my family than my school. Funny though, when I think of “family” influences, I include life lessons taught by my professors and fellow students at Tuskegee University. Because of this realization, personal connections to a HBCU and predominantly White academic institutions are also significant elements of this study.

While reviewing the literature for my study I read Crazy Visitation: A Chronicle of Illness and Recovery, a personal narrative written by Saundra M. Nettles (2001). During the first and second reading of this work I continually was drawn into events of Nettle’s life and lured back into my past. As I continued to reflect on events, I began to relive and retell my experiences from a slightly different perspective. In one of the final chapters Nettles was asked how she raised two intelligent and “down-to-earth” daughters. As I read her response I began to laugh to myself as I heard my mother’s voice echo with her, “I and the rest of the family loved them, allowed them to make decisions appropriate to their abilities and let them experiences the consequences, encouraged their spiritual progress, took it for granted they would do their best…” (Nettles, 2001, p. 139). Indeed, my family loved me unconditionally, supported me through the bad decisions and consequences as well as the good. My life was surrounded with caring, high expectation, opportunities, and support. As a researcher I now ask: Did my participants have similar
experiences? Do other African American women have stories where their families instilled the same or similar beliefs?

No one ethnic-racial group hears the whole truth nor only the truth, but African Americans do acquire a partial superiority of hearing and understanding from the particular place in which they sit at the world’s table. The imaginative listening to, caring for, and honoring African American voices are critical components. (Snarey & Siddle Walker, 2004, p. 146)

By capturing the experiences of participants in their own voices, I was able to uncover the complexity of their experiences. This new understanding allowed me to learn and have a greater respect for their accomplishments as well as those of African American women I have known from my past. Indeed, they overcame many obstacles and still maintained a graciousness, positiveness, strength, and faith. Seeing these powerful qualities in my participants, I began to think about my confrontations with racism. Although my conflicts may appear minimal in comparison to experiences of my participants that lived through the Civil Rights movement; they were indeed conflicts for me. Instead of remembering the anger and hurt I felt when my teacher accused me of cheating when I shattered his paradigm of minority students and female students being weak in current events, I recall the strength I gained when I was determined to destroy his stereotype. I was hurt, but my determination and resilience prompted me to desire success. Through the interviews I was able to better understand events from school curriculum (reading, writing) to social events (i.e. segregation, integration, the Civil Rights Movement), and other events from Black history. I was able to understand how
entities such as family, school, experiences, and environment promoted and encouraged success amidst challenges and obstacles.

As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) affirm, “Narrative inquiries are always strongly autobiographical. Our research interests come out of our own narratives of experience and shape our narrative inquiry plotlines” (p. 121). Although this project materialized from personal questions and interests, the issue was strong enough to carry over into investigations of five participants’ experiences and give strength to their stories. This project requires qualitative research in that it is grounded in the collective and personal histories of the participants and is built on subjectivities, interpretations and reinterpretations in the creation of counternarratives to the dominant culture.

With narrative research, participants are allowed to tell their own stories and the meanings are negotiated between the teller and the listener (Casey, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative research as explained by Casey (1995) provides “free spaces” where the experiences of the epistemic privilege of those marginalized would be valued and included (p. 214). Casey (1995) asserts that forms of narrative analysis include autobiographies, biographies, life histories, oral histories, and personal narratives (1995). This concept was important when preparing spaces for five African American women to share their experiences in order for the researcher to extrapolate: How do African American women with doctoral degrees and career experiences in the field of education interpret their experiences in the midst of racial, gender, and social oppression?

As indicated by hooks (1994), access, opportunity, and cultural voice in educational pursuits are critical to the liberation of African American women. I posit that by giving resonance to the participants’ stories and supporting the connectivity of
experiences of African American women that have beat the odds, we can reclaim a sense of self, community, and success. As different stories are combined a collective power is created which helps to ensure positive changes are made to create new realities.

**Negotiating an Opening**

Everyone faces obstacles. Gillem (1996) sees resilience as an opportunity for people to survive “and even thrive” in the face of difficulty (p. 103). I view resilience as fluid because this process of adaptation helps us to triumph when negativity is placed in our path. As we face difficulties our resiliency alters to meet and overcome new challenges. According to Ann Masten (1994), resilience usually refers to positive results in spite of threats. Before beginning this process I needed to place the term resilience in context. Resilience, akin to coping, refers to the process – the ability to bounce back from stressors, challenges, and trials. For this study, resilience will be viewed as the developmental process that improves people as they adapt to adversity in order to triumph. The adversities in this study will include issues of classism, racism, and sexism as well as the need to develop a professional balance with a personal existence.

It will be important to also note these variations in adversities may be affected by class status, mores, or upbringing, which will in turn affect resilience. People do not have the same obstacles or viewpoint, nor do we react the same way to circumstances. Sheila Gregory (1995) postulates that resilience is a part of the struggle for Black women with regards to individual identity, survival, and sustenance of the family. According to Gregory’s definition, Black women are able to cope despite impediments because it is a part of our character. Looking through the lenses of Black feminism and critical race theory, we remain cognizant of the struggle being individualized based on how much the
individual wants something, as well as, how much she is willing to sacrifice or how hard she will work to achieve the goal.

My narrative is speckled with adversity, and resiliency is a constant in my life. As I began this project in storytelling and questioning, I continually reflected on my story. In order to support this process this study pulled from Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory since the cultural knowledge and experiences of the participants were essential to the analysis (Collins, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Black feminist thought acknowledges theoretical interpretations of reality offered by all Black women, and critical race theory believes in the power of words. Intermingled together these theories impacted how the stories were viewed and analyzed.

**Creating the Course**

The researcher and five participants; each had stories to tell. The obstacles, experiences, and triumphs of each account are considered individually, after which they were amalgamated to observe similarities and differences. Kathleen Casey (1995) notes that narrative research may be elusive in nature; however, it provides references that help move toward multiple perspectives and ways of knowing. Audre Lorde (1984) says that if women truly want to dialogue, we must “recognize the needs and living contexts [experiences] of other women” (p. 126) because we all know based on our experiences and beliefs. Once we communicate with others, we begin to analyze perspectives of others which in turn require us to re-examine personal beliefs. Casey (1995) believes in order to understand narratives; the listener must take the struggles of the teller into account. Knowing is facilitated through reflection, and this reflection is constituted when
we look back on experiences with a different focus. Hence the researcher is a part of the story.

Inevitably, narrative inquires experience this tension, for narrative inquiry is relational. They [inquirers] must become fully involved, must “fall in love” with their participants, yet step back and see their own stories in the inquiry, the stories of the participants, as well as the larger landscape... (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 81)

**Rationale**

Why was such a study needed? Surely, at some point in everyone’s life one will overcome challenges. What makes some individuals successful while others succumb to the pressures? While synthesizing the research and narrative analyses I hoped to detail the strength, optimism, and hope that allowed some people to overcome tragedies and triumph. Together with noted theories, my plan was formulated to show how different environments, initiatives, policies, and beliefs helped initiate positive change. In a society that focuses on the negative when it pertains to African American women, positive retellings of experiences are essential to provide encouraging counternarratives to the dominant culture. The chronicling of stories and counter stories provide spaces where others establish connections with the presented stories and also recognize the differences in their own stories.

If telling a story requires giving oneself away, then we are obligated to devise a method of receiving stories that mediate the space between the self that tells, the self that told, and the self that listens: a method that returns the story to the teller
that is both hers and not hers, that contains herself in good company. (Grumet, 1991, p. 70)

Through narrative inquiry, we are allowed to gain insights into the world of those to whom we engage in dialogue as we negotiate the stories. As Grumet explains narrative research, we see the undertaking as a shared experience between the teller and the listener. Each person contributes; each is altered by the exchange.

The individual experiences of each participant was considered separately and then explored collectively with the experiences of the other participants. Each African American woman participant brought a unique perspective with personal stories of successes, obstacles, and learning experiences.

**Participant Selection**

Beginning the selection process was unique as I felt an immediate connection with the potential participants. All women selected were African American and had completed terminal degrees in the field of education. Early in Spring 2005, I contacted several peers via email to ask if they knew of African American women that would possibly agree to participate in my study or could recommend another person that may be interested. Those contacted included several students in the doctoral program in Curriculum Studies at Georgia Southern University, colleagues that work with the researcher, and an associate that has recently completed an education specialist counseling internship at Tuskegee University. These people either presented me with contact information of women or forwarded my request to others. By using a word of mouth, snowballing technique I was able to create a list of potential participants.
From the initial list, potential participants included fourteen African American women with doctorate degrees in several fields. Of the fourteen potential participants, eleven participants were contacted in regards to the study. I was unable to reach three of the women by telephone, email, or postal mail. Selecting participants with experiences from HBCUs, predominantly White universities, and work experience in the field of education eliminated several potential participants. One of my personal goals is to work in higher education; therefore I chose to further limit my study to African American women with experiences in higher education. In addition to the aforementioned qualifications, the researcher found it compelling to establish meeting locations that were unproblematic for the researcher and participants. Their availability had to permit time for a minimum of four interview segments equating four to eight hours of their time. The time in itself was a large undertaking, and I wanted to let my participants know that their agreement to participate was appreciated. I attempted to show my appreciation in the initial conversations by asking each participant where and what time of day they wanted the interviews conducted. This question was simple, but I wanted to make sure my participants knew I was grateful for their willingness to partake and that I would go to great lengths to ensure their comfort. For the study I interviewed the participants in their comfort zone at an agreed upon time. Each interview was followed up with either a phone call or email to clarify points and expound stories.

As mentioned earlier, fourteen African American women were contacted based on communication from colleagues. As an insider to this group, I found the initial contact with the eleven women exciting yet comfortable. I contacted each potential participant by telephone, and talked with them about the nature of the study, the significance, and my
desire to have participants decline anonymity and allow the inclusion of accurate
information. I then asked whether they would be willing as well as have the time to
participate in the study. Several women verbally agreed to participate and stated they
would be available for requested interview sessions. I then asked for email and mail
address to maintain personal contact. All participants who were contacted in reference to
the study were contacted via postal mail and thanked for their time and participation
during the initial phase of the study. The fourteen participants received an Informed
Consent (Appendix A) and letter expressing thanks for taking time to complete the first
step in my dissertation process. Eight participants returned the signed consent form and
completed data form. One potential participant attended HBCUs for undergraduate and
graduate studies; a second participant attended PWI for all academic studies, and a third
participant had no work experience in higher education. The women selected for the
study received letters of thanks and an “introductory packet” that included a Personal
Data Form (Appendix B). This form was included so that the participants’ valuable time
would not be used responding to short answer questions. All participants, including the
three that would not be interviewed, were thanked for their time and participation in the
study. Those that were chosen for one on one interviews were thanked and provided
information detailing the interview phase.

The five women that were most interesting to the researcher were selected as
participants. They were contacted by mail and again thanked for their agreement to
participate in the study. Next, the participants were contacted by email or phone and
initial interviews were scheduled. Before each interview the participants were presented
with a list of interview questions and the topic for discussion (see Appendices C, D, E,
and F). The first interview delved into getting to know the participants. The subsequent interviews with the participants lasted longer than the initial interviews. The second interview explored the participants’ experiences at an HBCU and predominantly White institution/s. The third topic of discussion explored family ties, and the final topic of discussion concentrated on the participants’ challenges and successes. The discussions also included their personal views on current education, class, and gender issues. The participants were asked to tell general stories about their experiences.

By using a conversational interview tone in a calm and inviting setting, I was able to learn about the women and their experiences. I began each interview with a prepared list of general questions that were geared to the information obtained from the introductory meeting. The participants were also provided with a list of the questions in order to think of their experiences before the actual interview took place. This would allow space for important stories as well as the spontaneous responses that normally emerge from conversations. This dialogue was used to create field notes and develop more structured questions to use at future interviews. After each interview, the participants were contacted by the researcher and thanked for their time and participation.

The goal of this study was not to study African American women with doctoral degrees, rather to learn from them and their experiences. Each meeting was scheduled at a time that was convenient for the participant. These interviews constituted the primary source of data used to answer the primary research question. The design was intentionally qualitative and narrative to provide the participants the opportunity to express their beliefs and present experiences from their perspectives.
The stories shared swept me up in a craft of their memories. This event is documented by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) as a “three dimensional narrative inquiry space” where thinking moves from interaction (personal and social) thru continuity (past, present, and future), to situation (place or sequences of places) (p. 50). There were times I applauded, cursed, and fought my own tears as they recounted events from their lives.

When African Americans are made aware of the phenomenal work of sisters…our spirits are lifted, our hearts warmed, we feel better about each other as a people, and we felt better about ourselves. (Bridgforth, 2000, p. 45)

With this quote in mind I set off on an exploration for knowledge and growth. Every meeting had the objective of learning of the experience of African American women that triumphed over obstacles.

Many times I found myself reflecting back on my experiences and viewing them anew from slightly different lenses. This complex role was the one I played as I listened, learned, and experienced. Remaining in the vein of Black feminism, I found a place to step outside my feelings and the participants’ stories.

**Contributions Offered**

It seems as if researchers and the media more readily explore the negative aspects of African Americans.

Stereotypical images of African Americans presented in the media affect the way people perceive us and the way we perceive ourselves. As a people, these images make us feel like we contribute negatively to society, or even worse, have nothing to contribute at all. (Bridgforth, 2000, p. 46)
Lisa Delpit (1988) believes, “People of color are, in general, skeptical of research as a
determiner of our fates. Academic research has…found us genetically inferior, culturally
deprived, and verbally deficient” (p. 286). Negativity and hopelessness seem to be
wrapped in our society through media images, technology, and research. The classrooms
textbooks depict more traditional Eurocentric perspectives, and the successful Black
individuals seem to be replaced by tales of slavery and oppression. Will the children learn
of the Black people that succeed against these obstacles? The current study will show a
more balanced portrait of African Americans. Specifically this study will focus on
African American women. This decision does not intend to minimize the important
contributions and success stories of African American men; however, the researcher felt a
need to focus on an in-depth exploration with a personal connection.

Data Collection Methods

Narrative Inquiry

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000) interviews are widely used in
qualitative research. They contend that “narrative inquiry characteristically begins with
the researcher’s autobiographically oriented narrative associated with the …research
problem” (p. 41). The narratives in this study were constructed from one-on-one
interviews with the participants that derived from personal experiences and questions.
Through the participants’ stories I found connections which allowed me to explore their
attitudes, behaviors, and personal experiences as well as how they overcame obstacles as
they matriculated through academia to achieve terminal degrees in education. As
indicated by Newnan, Benz, Weis, and McNeil (1998), qualitative research designs
present and accentuate elaborate descriptions of the phenomena and their meanings for the people or the culture under examination.

Narrative inquiry proves to be essential to this study as it brings fluidity. “We know what we know because of how we are positioned. If we shift our position …our knowing shifts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). Also, through narrative inquiry we recognize that our knowledge is always open to review and revision.

As Casey stated, “Whether implicit or elaborated, every study of narrative is based on a particular understanding of the speaker’s self” (1995, p. 213). The narratives that created this context included the experiences of five participants. Their stories were seen through the eyes of the researcher, storyteller. As a narrative inquirer and researcher, I experienced the occurrence at the same time became a part of the experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative ways of knowing work cooperatively to affirm the ideals of connection and multiplicity (Witherell & Noddings, 1991). “Storytelling is the way to put shards of experience together, to (re)construct identity, community, and tradition, if only temporarily” (Casey, 1996, p. 216).

“Life histories are valuable in studying cultural changes that have occurred over time, in learning about cultural norms and transgressions of those norms and in gaining an inside view of a culture” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 121). Through exploration of life history and lived experiences, the participants’ realities were constructed through their stories. Although I share race and gender with my participants, I listened to their stories as an “outsider.” I conducted person-to-person interviews in order to shade my lenses to better understand the participants’ perspectives. The dialogue for interview sessions had roots in open-ended questions and conversations.
Letters, vitas, and photographs were accepted as data. Some participants chose to share them, because these tangible items provided a source for important memories. However, the interviews remained the most prevalent data collection method. The one-on-one interviews produced detailed explorations into the experiences of the participants and provide opportunities for them to share their stories with the knowledge that their experiences would be heard in the tone and manner they approved of. Direct quotes were included in order to preserve the participants’ voices, unique personalities, and approaches to describing.

During the interviews and other exchanges, the participants were asked structured and unstructured questions about family, life, educational experiences, trials, and triumphs. We discussed their views on their educational experiences as well as contemporary education; their views on class, gender, and race were also discussed. The participants were asked to tell general stories. If they left the question presented, they were encouraged to continue with their narrative. After reviewing my notes and the audio tapes more specific questions were added to the pre-developed question bank. There were times in each interview where the participants seemed to interview me as questions were directed towards me. These instances provided more A Ha moments where I re-experienced occurrences from my life.

The interviews and conversations were audio taped in order to provide limitless access to the stories of the participants. Tapes and transcripts were replayed and inspected in order to better understand the dialogue (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). “The best way to develop analyses is to use both tape and transcript. It is harder to isolate and study
phenomena when working only with a tape, and much information is lost when working only with a transcript” (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997, p. 70).

Creating Field Texts and Transcripts for Data Analysis

Whole interviews and conversations were taped. Audio tapes were transcribed in their entirety. Hard copies and electronic copies of the transcribed notes were reviewed by the researcher in order to code ideas which allowed easier scrutiny of notated themes. Coding the data allowed opportunities to look for emerging themes as well as self reflect and reevaluate personal perspectives.

The hard copies of the data were coded manually with the use of color codes identifying themes; the electronic version was coded using the computer’s highlighter tool to identify themes. The primary themes include: family, education, friends, spirituality and HBCU/PWI experiences. As part of the coding, I highlighted reoccurring terms, phrases, or sentences in the transcript and field notes. Themes that overlapped into more than one category were listed in each corresponding category. The common characteristics were documented and presented in the data analysis. Copies of the transcripts and field notes were presented to the participants for verification of facts. This reflective period also served as an opportunity to gain feedback and clarification. Data analysis was ongoing during the collection and transcription processes. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest revisions are continual while additional field texts are composed to further develop points. This process allowed for the narrative to emerge in a free flowing manner.
Limitations of Study

This study is limited by the number of participants involved. This study only had five participants which limits the applicability to other African American women with doctoral degrees. Also, the African American women were asked to reflect on life experiences as well as experiences at the HBCU and predominantly White universities. It must be noted that time has passed since many of the occurrences and the memories may have become blurred and a touch of nostalgia may have allowed the participants to forget some of the painful experiences that would have been beneficial to the study.

Another limitation resulted from the selection process used to find the African American women with terminal degrees in education. The people who presented names of potential participants were known to the researcher. Other contacts may have suggested different women whose experiences would have combined to produce different connections.

Additionally, there was a limited amount of existing research available on the experiences of African American women with doctoral degrees as well as African American women that attended HBCUs and predominantly White universities. Because of the sprinkling of literature, there was no set guide for the researcher to follow. However, while the pre-existing literature was limited, the interviews facilitated sufficient information to complete the analysis.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed and coded, data analysis began. The narratives were obtained from several interviews with five African American women and were analyzed through the Black feminist and critical race lenses. Each transcript as well
as personal field notes was analyzed individually to develop a more precise listing of
table elements. The initial themes (1) family, (2) community (counter stories), (3)
HBCU and PWI experiences, and (4) success stories were identified. Additional themes
that emerged from the study included the presence of racism and sexism. The
identification of obstacles, impediments, or constraints that affected the experiences of
the participants were also captured and coded. Analytical notes were taken during the
analysis process. These questions were presented to the participants for clarification. This
additional information enabled me to develop and refine the coding.

My discussion began with an introduction to Drs. Juanita Sims Doty, Fanny
Richardson Cooley, Joyce V. Rhoden, Francina L. Williams, and Anna P. Atkinson.
(These names are not pseudonyms.) In Beyond the Big House: African American
Educators on Teacher Education, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2005) featured several of her
colleagues voices and did not “follow the traditional protocol of blinding their identities”
in order for readers to see the participants as “three dimensional scholars who struggle
with some similar challenges related to their racial and cultural affiliations” (p. xvii).
Akin to Ladson-Billings, I believe the participants in my study are absolutely fascinating.
I strongly believe my work would provide a disservice to their stories to use pseudonyms
and modify their narratives, experiences, or names. I have been touched by this
experience and would hope others could learn from their successes. To not allow the
participants to receive the accolades deserved for their commitment to family, education,
and community actually goes against one of the goals of my study: to create a channel
where voices of African American women can amalgamate for others to find strength,
connectivity, and resilience to beat the obstacles and challenges.
With this study I provided insight into the family and education backgrounds of the participants. Also presented were the connections found between family and school experiences with resiliency and academic success. When analyzing the stories of the participants, the words of the participants were emphasized instead of the interviewer’s questions in order to accentuate the voice of the participants. As the responses were categorized, cohesive stories began to emerge. Denzin’s (1989) autobiographical analysis approach was used along with Black feminist thought and critical race theory. The researcher selected Denzin’s method because it also focuses on the importance of stories and experience. Denzin (1989) used the term “biography” to include all recorded stories, personal experience stories.

**Conclusion**

Narrative research is fluid, not unbending. In line with He (2002), I believe it is important to see experiences as “changing rather than fixed, as contextualized rather than decontextualized” (p. 81). As I think of He’s river metaphor I view the participants’ experiences as the yachts, ferries, and rafts that carefully follow the path of the river, always prepared to change course with the current and waves. Within these changes, stories are presented and represented. Because of the constant transformation, we are allowed to examine the personal, social, and political constructions that shape us.

Narratives are critiqued by many contemporary researchers for being apolitical, for discounting the larger social contexts from which the stories derive. Marshall and Rossman (1999) believe “this method is critiqued for its focus on the individual rather than the social context” (p.123). This exploration joins Casey (1995) in her belief that the roots of narrative inquiry are political. Narratives of the lives of people do indeed have
political overtones and often bring transformative potential. This exploration notes that the participants, African American women, have different experiences and different interpretations of their experiences. Each person that hears the stories will develop slightly different perspectives and understanding from that distinct view. My challenge is to present the findings in a way to honor the differences and, articulate their stories without essentializing the women, their experiences, or stories.
CHAPTER 4
VIEWING THE PERSPECTIVES

What Do You Know?

Tell me what you know?
There is so much to learn.
Tell me what you see?
I have so much to learn.
Tell me what you think.
Silence.

Do you really want to know?
I believe everyone deserves respect.
So simple are the truths of life.
Love is beautiful.
Innocence is easily lost.
Deceit is often found.
Why are we so desensitized?
Why is uniqueness taboo?
Diversity is a gift from God.
We awe at the colors of the rainbow,
When you see me the term is “colorblind.”
Why do you choose to ignore my blessing from God?

_He chose to make my hue rich and warm._

_Look closely at the rainbow,_

_My color is there._

_Silence._

_Do you still want to know?_

_It does not matter now._

_You need to know._

_Others look at me differently._

_I wonder what they see._

_Can they see beyond the skin of rich mahogany?_

_My experiences are unique._

_They are meant for only me._

_These obstacles and challenges have polished my character._

_Made me stronger,_

_A success I intend to be._

_Silence._

_I see your silence and challenge you to learn._

_It is time for me to speak._

_I will share my experiences with others._

_We all must learn._
Do you still want to know?

It does not matter to me.

Someone wants to know.

Someone wants to learn.

Someone wants to see.

Paula Baker (May 2005)

Data Presentation – Positioning the Spotlight

Within the following pages I present written images of Dr. Juanita Sims Doty, Dr. Fannie Richardson Cooley, Dr. Joyce V. Rhoden, Dr. Francina L. Williams, and Dr. Anna Pearl Atkinson. Their experiences are reflective of the aforementioned poem as each woman has unique experiences that intermingled to make them the unique persons I met. Each participant’s story is created with pieces of personal narratives from her experiences that have been altered by context, experiences, memory, and the process of sharing the stories with me.

Just as we may have different characteristics and perspectives, the stories shared were never about one thing. The discussions may have started on the importance of education and veered to the family, spirituality and perseverance. These stories within stories are a feature well known to African American culture. Growing up in an African American household and community, I have numerous memories of family, friends, and others in the communities telling multi-leveled stories. As children we were entertained, enthralled, and taught. Each person took something different – what was needed from the tales. I have great respect and value for this cultural characteristic in storytelling;
therefore, I will summarize the participants’ stories and not rely on a data driven question/response format.

In 1994, Lawrence-Lightfoot discussed the historical perspective of narratives in the African American community. She asserted that narrative presentation or storytelling continues from Africa, where stories were filled with adventure, entertainment, cultural knowledge, and customs. The participants in this study used the same channel, storytelling, to share the development of their cultural, personal, and professional being. The journey of each woman was a multilayered tale that explored self; a journey of shared lives that recreated many aspects of their experiences.

There was an understanding between the teller and the listener (participant and me). When I decided to use this format, I was concerned about the lack of connection that the words on the pages will provide for the readers. Ladson-Billings addressed this point in *Beyond the Big House*.

One caution I must offer about my rendering of the participants’ words is that it is important to remember that words on a page, even when they are verbatim statements, cannot fully capture the speaker’s meaning and connotation.

(Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 25)

Akin to Ladson-Billings I would like to offer the same admonition. As I read the transcripts I am also privy to my memories of the actual interviews and audio tapes. I can visualize the facial expressions and hand gestures that accompanied each story. The conversations allowed me to ask clarifying questions to enhance my understanding. As a reader, you must use your imagination and perceptions in an attempt to capture the meanings woven through the words and find the profundity of the stories.
I began this inquiry with the idea of storytelling, a complex act of telling the stories of several African American women with doctorate degrees in order to bring new perspectives and multifaceted understandings of experiences. By listening to their stories, sharing what we know and how we know and understand, the participants, I and the readers of this study will be able to make connections with personal experiences and learn from the stories presented. The stories and poetry presented will work together to show the spaces available to make new connections.

As the reader, one must try to embrace the magnitude of strength, involvement of families and others, and the experiences of the participants. The participants put me in the mindset of mother and grandmother when I look at their age and wisdom, care and support of my project. Although I grew up in a different time period and somewhat different geographical location, I identify with their struggles and triumphs. I not only understand their journeys, I have traveled along many of the same pathways. This was not a sterile interview process where the questions were asked and I remained silent during the response. There was a sincere dialogue between me and the participants.

The first participant presented in this study was Dr. Juanita Sims Doty. Sims Doty served (and continues to serve) on several Boards of Directors. She was named as National Program Chairman of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, a 170,000+ member organization. Sims Doty received the 2004 Ambassador for Peace Award presented by the Interreligious and International Peace Council of Washington, DC. She received faculty tenure from Jackson State University June 1993 as well as faculty recognition for “Working for Academic Excellence” in 1991 from Jackson State University. In 2000 Dr. Sims Doty was recommended by Senator Trent Lott and
Nominated by the President of the United States to serve on the Board of Directors of the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Following, Dr. Fannie Richardson Cooley was introduced. Cooley was named an “Outstanding Personality of the South” in 1973, 1974, and 1988. She was named to the World Who’s Who of Women in Education and was a recipient of the Gilbert and Kathleen Wrenn Award for Humanitarian and Caring. She received the Distinguished African American Award from the Mu Sigma Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated. Cooley was inducted into the Alabama Senior Citizens Hall of Fame as a Golden Eagle Honorary Member. She is listed in Alabama Achievers: Studies for Character Development. She is a Life Member of Chi Sigma Iota Counseling Academic International Honor Society and is the founder of the Interdisciplinary Forum at Tuskegee University. Dr. Cooley coordinated this forum for 24 years and remains active with it.

The next participant in the study, Dr. Francina L. Williams, worked as a teacher, counselor, mental health school consultant, mental health program director, mental health therapist director, and returned to education as an Ameri Corp Director for Troy State University Dothan. Currently, she serves as the director and executive administrator of the George Washing Carver Interpretative Museum. One of the most rewarding to Williams is the number of organizations she founded (or co-founded) that continue to positively support and enrich the community.

Dr. Anna Pearl Atkinson follows. Her work accomplishments include coordinator for Exceptional Children Services in Atlanta Public Schools. Atkinson studied at two HBCUs and four PWI. She pursued post doctoral studies on emotionally disturbed
children at the University of Virginia. She was a co-organizer and remains a board member for the Socitus Doctor, an international organization that was established to encourage, motivate, and inspire young women to pursue doctorate degrees in their area of interest. In her retirement, Dr. Atkinson volunteers at the Innes Harlow Hospital for behaviorally disturbed children.

Three of my participants are members (as I am) of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated. This organization, Sorority, is a Greek letter organization that admits only women. Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (AKA) was the first sisterhood for African American women founded with the purpose of cultivating high scholastic and ethical standards; promoting unity and friendship among college women; studying and helping to alleviate problems concerning girls and women to improve their social status; and maintaining a progressive interest in college life. A recent survey showed 8.8% of the sorority members hold a doctorate degree; 50% of those Sorors that responded to the survey indicated careers in the field of education.

The term “Soror” used by members of Alpha Kappa Alpha to address each other is also originated from Greek terminology that means sister. This term is used by women of all sororities who are members of the National Pan-Hellenic Council, the governing council for traditionally African-American organizations.

**Accumulating the Tales**

**Juanita Sims Doty**

The time spent with Dr. Juanita Sims Doty was extremely limited; consequently, my telling of her story focuses more on the details of her life and a litany of her many accomplishments. Nevertheless, her ability to overcome obstacles in order to gain the
pinnacle in education and become successful, to remain positive in spite of the obstacles as well as her desire to “give back” to the community justified me keeping her in the study. Even with limited face time Sims Doty revealed a strong family connection, fervent spirituality, and an intense drive to support others. Indeed, her drive and energy lingered on far past our conversation.

Sims Doty – academician, advocate, entrepreneur – dedicates her time and skill to serving her family and community. As chair of the National Program for Alpha Kappa Alpha, she will manage the sorority’s program committee 2002-2006. The focus on the committee centers on the traditional areas of education, the Black Family and health. She is also the co-host with Ms. Pat Fordice, former first lady of Mississippi, *Woman to Woman*, an issues related talk magazine. *Woman to Woman* is a statewide show in Mississippi that spotlights the women of Mississippi and their families. In 2004 she was named a Role Model for the Middle School GEAR-UP students in Mississippi. Sorting through her accomplishments to present as many as possible in a limited space, reiterated the thoughts that this woman is definitely a success with a wealth of experiences to share.

I was determined to find a way to include Dr. Sims Doty, “Soror of the Year” 1992 and 2001, in my study. Learning the details of her story sent charges of determination and perseverance through my being and I felt the need to share her experiences. As I learned more I realized I had another success story from an African American woman to add to my internal cache – more proof that there are successful women of color that overcame obstacles. Sims Doty was very supportive and excited about my study; nonetheless she was extremely busy and unable to meet face-to-face for all the interviews. To supplement the personal data form and condensed interview, she
supplied me with a written narrative and extensive vitae. She graciously responded to follow-up questions via email which provided additional information and clarification.

Juanita Sims Doty was born and raised in Mississippi in a two parent household where neither parent completed a high school degree. Her immediate family consists of twelve sisters and one brother; her two eldest siblings, a brother and sister, are deceased. She has no biological children; nonetheless she has been a beacon of light for many children in the Mississippi area. In spite of their abbreviated education, Sims Doty’s parents encouraged and supported the education of their children. All children completed their high school education and nine of whom (including Sims Doty) attended institutions of higher education. She has two sisters that received Masters Degrees; Sims Doty along with a brother received doctorates. While her parents had high expectations of their children, she does not recall undo pressures to achieve. There was, nonetheless, always the feeling that higher education was expected. As I looked over the academic accomplishments of Sims Doty and her siblings, I thought, indeed, her parents did a great job. A major obstacle her parents conquered was the difficulty of supporting their children through an education process where they had no background of knowledge. As the education of the children continued, additional challenges emerged as Sims Doty’s parents also had to accept the reality that the children moved to different geographically locations in order to pursue higher education. This close knit family had to sacrifice and separate.

From a humble beginning, Dr. Sims Doty continues to push for excellence. One way to gain excellence, success and distinction was through knowledge. She attended the University of Southern Mississippi from 1969 until 1974 for Undergraduate and Graduate
studies; her emphasis for Bachelor’s and Master’s work was Speech-Language Pathology. Sims Doty completed doctoral work in 1985 with an emphasis on Early Childhood Education from Jackson State University, a HBCU in Mississippi.

One component of this study explores the impact of educational experiences at Historically Black Colleges and Universities; Jackson State University (JSU) is a four-year Historically Black University. This institution was founded in 1877 as the Natchez Seminary by the American Baptist Home Mission Society in Mississippi (Boston Phenix.com, 2000-2004). The institution moved to Jackson, Mississippi in 1882 and eventually changed the name to Jackson College. After operating as a private church school for sixty-three years, the college became a state institution for training elementary school teachers. In 1944 the state institution awarded its first bachelors degrees (Jackson State University, 2000-2004). Another name change was Jackson State College. In 1974 Jackson State College received university status and became Jackson State University.

Experiences at Jackson State University allowed Sims Doty to participate in the activities that supported her career and passion of serving others. While there she honed her leadership and gained recognition as just that – a leader. After completing her degree work, she served as an associate professor, clinical supervisor, director of the Speech and Hearing Center, a Fellow of the American Speech-Language Hearing Association, and Chairman of the Board of the National Black Association for Speech-Language and Hearing (NBASLH). During her tenure at Jackson State University, Sims Doty was featured seven times for the Spotlight on Scholars in the School of Liberal Arts.

Dr. Sims Doty contends that education has always been a priority for her and her family. She also believes that we each have obstacles that must be overcome; these
obstacles when viewed from positive perspectives become areas of growth. An obstacle, Sims Doty presented was “the finances needed to continue into higher education” (Sims Doty Email Correspondence, 2005). There's no escaping the fact that college costs. “Having enough financial resources is always an issue,” nevertheless she believes that finding the resources to achieve the goal of higher education is attainable. We need not focus on our lack of or but on our options.

Her dissertation, *An Investigation of Language Assessment Instruments Used with Black Children in Head Start in Mississippi* (1985), was a part of the scaffold that continues to support her community involvement. Through her investigation Sims Doty examined the use of language evaluation instruments that assessed the language skills of young Black children in Head Start in the Mississippi area. She sought to see if the children were assessed without penalty for cultural and linguistic differences. Her findings suggested that indeed, there were biased and problematic items listed on the language assessment instruments used for the children. With this knowledge revealed, Sims Doty became more equipped to see the needs of Head Start children through yet another perspective.

Continuing to fulfill a passion to help children, she serves on the Advisory Board of Hinds County Head Start Health Component and the Health Advisory Committee for Friends of Children of Mississippi. Her work for the children continues as she currently serves on the Board of Directors for Friends of Heard Start in Mississippi and the Board of Directors, Mississippi Head Start Association. Sims Doty has presented several hundred seminars and workshops for local, state, regional, and national organizations as well as community presentations for Head Start.
When Sims Doty was asked about her motivation to continue through obstacles in order to succeed, she responded

My main motivation comes from a Higher Power. God in His infinite wisdom gives me the courage and strength to move forward and He has placed that within me. My family is always there for support and encouragement and they are a big part of my life. Additionally, I am always motivated by seeing others happy because of the services we provide for them. When someone's life is better because of the assistance we give them – that continues to motivate me.

(Sims Doty, 2005, Email Correspondence p. 1)

Sims Doty definitely exudes confidence. She has an attitude, not cocky or rude, just a pure determination interwoven with poise and strength. There were no words of self doubt or of doubt by others. She reaches many children today and communicates her message of perseverance and success. One avenue Sims Doty uses for sharing is through participation in community activities. Community involvement and examples of “giving back to the community” penetrate other avenues of Sims Doty’s life. As a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, she served as Co-chair and organization committee member for the United Negro College Fund. Together with the sorority, Dr. Soror Sims Doty was granted a $1.5 Million 3 year grant from the United States Department of Education to implement a nationwide after school reading program for grades K-3. The Ivy Reading AKAdemy, an after school reading tutoring program for students in grades K-3, consists of nine federally-funded demonstration sites across the United States. Each site serves a different region by providing one-to-one or small group after school or Saturday tutorial/mentoring program for primary level students that have
been labeled “at-risk.” The students considered "at risk" have either low self esteem, failures/or potential failures, poor school attendance or grades, and/or suspensions from school. The objective of the AKAdemy is to provide students the guidance, reading time, and support necessary to enable them to read at or above grade level upon their departure from the primary grades.

_Woman to Woman_, a television program co-hosted by Sims Doty, described her as an advocate for civil and human rights, a dedicated academician and educator as well as a “tireless activist” (Doty, n.d.). As I studied her catalog of community involvement and extensive listing of awards and honors, I read pages and pages of accolades that attest to Sims Doty’s successes as she served the children, her community, and her culture. Sims Doty does not look at her voluntary obligations as jobs, but challenges to serve. Instead of focusing on the lack of time or struggles, she says she finds “there are no particular obstacles.....just [the technique of] balancing everything I had to do” (Sims Doty Email Correspondence, 2005).

From the family and community, Morning Star Baptist Church, Jackson, Mississippi and the local Head Start Program to the state and national affiliations, Mississippi Head Start, Mississippi Health Care, the Corporation for National and Community Services, Dr. Sims Doty leaves a growing legacy for promoting equity and helping others. Her experiences and life story depict the steps from life as the second to the youngest daughter in a family of thirteen children through academic work at two higher education institutions in Mississippi to a distinguished woman who remains supportive of her hometown community – Jackson, Mississippi, family, friends, and community.
As I reflect on the information gathered from Sims Doty I must embrace the magnitude of strength and support for and involvement with others she conveys. I respect and appreciate her journey as I now begin to understand the power of the calling to “give back” to my community and others without looking for outward reward, but – the knowledge and hope that others may benefit from what I have to offer.

**Fannie Richardson Cooley**

Dr. Fannie Richardson Cooley appeared for her interview with a warm smile, a welcoming hug, and a gift for me that proudly showed the colors and emblem of Tuskegee University. I was immediately at ease and excited because of her sweet and calming nature. I was aware of her past and current position with Tuskegee University and the community. To support higher education, *The Fannie Richardson Cooley Interdisciplinary Forum Award* and *The Fannie Richardson Cooley Award* are presented annually for academic support to deserving students and faculty. The first award was initiated by Dr. Cooley to strengthen relations within the University community. The later of the awards is presented to a Tuskegee University student.

As we discussed the structure of the interviews I asked Dr. Cooley to “tell her stories.” She was concerned that she may drift off point, but I assured her that this would be perfect because you never know where the story may lead.

I found it amazing how the mere presence of Dr. Cooley commanded that extra touch of class. Even now as I review the transcripts and organize my thoughts, I must let that respect and admiration flow through the pages. Fannie Richardson Cooley pictorially reminds me of a doting grandmother that everyone wants to please. Her support of me and my project was evident; this realization made me more determined to attempt and
capture her grace and wisdom on the pages of this work. Because of this I found it very uncomfortable to call Dr. Cooley anything but that – Dr. Cooley, during the interviews as well as in the presentation of the data.

Dr. Cooley was born in Tunnel Springs, Alabama in 1924; the home of her maternal and paternal grandparents of Tunnel Springs, Alabama. All of her family was “education oriented, and all completed college” (Cooley Personal Data Form, 2005, p. 2). She earned a Bachelor of Science in Home Economics Education and a Master of Science from Tuskegee Institute in 1947 and 1951. Following, she was a General Foods Foundations Fellow at Purdue University from 1962 to 1964. She earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Counseling and Behavioral Studies from the University of Wisconsin Madison in 1969.

Family is definitely the strong framework that provided motivation as Dr. Cooley achieved the many goals put before her.

My parents instilled in me what I call self-respect. My mother was hands on and she monitored my social activities. When I think of my childhood and my friend Rachel, there was always a mother to supervise our play. Her mother as well as my mother decided how long we were going to play. It wasn’t as if we were kind of running loose. When Rachel was at my house there was a mother to care for her and to care for me. (Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 1)

Her childhood was full of love and structure which she believes had a direct impact on her life experiences. Dr. Cooley began with a smile as she described a typical day in her childhood home.
My time was pretty much structured. You would go in, put your books down and wait on the assignment. My grandfather had orchards all around. Either we were gathering the sweet potatoes, picking the pecans, or collecting greens, peppers or onions from the garden. I did whatever she [my mother] told me to do. She was in charge; I did what I was told. (Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 6)

For entertainment, Dr. Cooley recalled activities that were family oriented learning experiences. Her family would gather in the living room to listen to the grafanola. The grafanola, explained by Dr. Cooley in a description befitting a classroom teacher, is a record player that had to be wound up with the fingers. She also told of the grandfather clock in the room. “The clock would strike on the hour and the guests would hear its chimes. The chimes were very familiar to us children because we always knew what was expected of us when” (Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 6).

The respect of the elders went much farther than that of the immediate parents. Dr. Cooley grew up in close proximity to her material and paternal grandparents. They too had an influence on her childhood and education. As she reflected on free time, Dr. Cooley recalled the times when she would listen to her grandfather tell stories and engage in conversations with her mother. He would also spend time reading the newspaper. Dr. Cooley admitted that she did not spend a lot of time reading because there was not a lot of reading material available. “I want to say I spent a lot of time reading, but I didn’t because we did not have that much reading material there. “You had the ‘good book’ [Bible] and whatever Sunday school books that were available” (Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 7). Periodically there were catalogues; but there was only one weekly
constant, *The Grit*. The Grit was a weekly publication that her grandfather would read aloud. Once her grandfather became unable to read because of his vision, she took that responsibility to read the paper to him. “I was the hostess, I called myself the hostess” *(Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 7.)* and she always acted as such.

Dr. Cooley recalls the schools continued the same structure as the home environments.

Now we say junior high, but I attended a co-educational boarding school. Even there everybody had responsibilities. We all had work to do, something to do to make the *family* go. We lived in the dormitory. My duty was to make the biscuits for breakfast. Of course we had chores as well as our duties. We had our clothes; we had to clean our rooms. There was a bell that would ring to let us know. *(Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 5)*

When Dr. Cooley began to discuss her early academic experiences, she began by clarifying that she completed the 12th grade at Tuskegee Institute High School which was located on the campus of Tuskegee Institute. Many of her high school teachers were also college professors which allowed the high school students early experiences at the university level. When discussing her time at the Historically Black College, Dr. Cooley has many fond memories.

To help with the school structure there were daily bells that chimed. The first bell was to get ready. When it rang the students knew they had five minutes to get ready for the next scheduled activity, class, or duty. The second bell chimed to alert everyone that they should be at the designated location. The third bell represented the start of the activities. The routine was dictated when students
were to study, move between classes, and even relax. The schedule even dictated play time. The bells even told us when we could leave campus and when we were to return. When students did not return to the campus on time they were assigned extra duties. These activities, duties, and the added duties as consequences helped build character. (*Interview with Cooley*, Baker, 2005, p. 9)

As Dr. Cooley reminisced and shared the unique experiences she had at Tuskegee Institute, she began to interweave her academic and life learning with the potential opportunities that could be provided for students today at Tuskegee University.

Tuskegee University, "the pride of the swift, growing south" was founded in one room in a building, near Butler Chapel AME Zion Church. Thirty adults represented the first class of Dr. Booker T. Washington in 1881. Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute became Tuskegee Institute in 1937 and Tuskegee University in 1985 (Tuskegee University, 2005). Presently Tuskegee educates 3,200 students from 34 states and 28 countries. Tuskegee University is now designated as the only college campus in the country that is a National Historic Site (Tuskegee University, 2003-2005).

I want to tell myself that I’m not saying this just because I finished here or because I worked here, but it is my opinion that Tuskegee is the kind of place for our children. Many individuals say that Tuskegee is the place to get a window on the world. I have heard and believe if you can make it here you make it anywhere. At Tuskegee we have a diverse population of people. When I remember my past at Tuskegee and think of the present here, I have a good feeling, a very good feeling. (*Interview with Cooley*, Baker, 2005, p. 8)
There are always obstacles that must be faced in professional and personal lives. Dr. Cooley explained that she too met her share of obstacles. “Every experience that I had was quite different from previous experiences” (Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 3). Of course Dr. Cooley presented stories in which obstacles were presented because of her race. Once again she decided to take the optimistic approach. She asserted, “In my case I tried to take these opportunities to teach. I…was in some kind of mist… I believe I was so naïve I couldn’t see, or I was so intent on enriching my own experiences that I had planned for myself” (Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 1).

I wonder if at the time I was somewhat naive. There was not a big lethargy about minorities; of course eventually they got better ways of handling business. At the University of Wisconsin they started making some changes before they had to. Wisconsin always knew where they were based on what was happening in the larger world; everybody was looking, talking about what the actions were on campus. I recall the time when the rule was to count the Black students every time they passed. Somebody stood on the corner and they count the Black students every time they pass – when they pass back going to the library they count them, and when they pass by coming back they count them again.

(Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 3)

For Dr. Cooley there was not time to focus on the possible racial encounters, she recalls, “there was never a time for hanging around kind of waiting to be accepted” (Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 1). She had an agenda and her time was spent getting the most education and enrichment the university could provide. One semester her focus,
dedication, and hard work were recognized as she was asked to become a house-fellow in one of the dormitories.

One day out of the blue the first semester that I was there, the teacher of a class I was taking asked to see me. While we were talking she said that she would like me to be a house-fellow in Elizabeth Waters Hall. I said I would be honored, but I was confused about the request. I said to my teacher, you know I am older than the residents. The teacher she said that’s what we like; that’s what we’re looking for. I continued to question and said I’m a divorcee. Her reply was oh, that’s what we need. She wanted the students to know that their marriages are not going to always work out and they need to be able to make a way for themselves. I’m thinking to myself, my goodness, it is me. I’m the one that’s holding back. They are pulling me along, they are selecting me. *(Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 1)*

After the dialogue with the teacher Dr. Cooley accepted the position as house-fellow for Elizabeth Waters Hall. In this position she worked with nine other house-fellows to tutor and mentor 536 residents. In this environment she recalls the exposure that she did not recognize as vital until after the experience has begun.

The house-fellows there had a system, a take on the Cambridge system of education. We were supervised by a head fellow and a dorm director. In our resident hall there were five pianos, even a baby grand and special dinners on the weekends. You know at that point I didn’t even realize I needed that kind of school. Besides academics I received life lessons. Eventually I became a head fellow. With this position we got to train the other house-fellows. We received
$75 cash for helping; that was good money back then, indeed, big money. Really it was a beautiful, beautiful experience. (Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 2)

Finances and tuition seems to always be categorized as an obstacle. However, as Dr. Cooley talked about this issue she continued her reflection in such an optimistic and positive way. When attending Tuskegee, Dr. Cooley remembered working to help supplement her financial obligations. “I worked in the library. Once my classes were over, I would go and put in my hours. I remember after a raise we made 25-cents an hour” (Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 8).

Of course experiences and ideas are based on individual perspective. There are challenges when you recognize that others view individuals based on their color or culture. According to Cooley’s recollection, people in Wisconsin really did not have much experience with African American people. Dr. Cooley recalls a situation regarding color.

They had not had many experiences with people of color. You could tell at first glance; it was almost as if their stares asked, ‘Who are you?’ and ‘Why are you here?’ Of course they began to stand off a little bit. So in some instances I had to transcend some of those glances and move on. Depending upon whom, where and when you could sometimes embrace them, say come on in, have a seat and just talk awhile. There were times on the weekends I would go driving. One of my major professors told me of a beautiful road to travel with winding roads and scenic views. For some reason I stopped at a gas station and I saw a mother and her children. One child came up to me and asked, “Why are you so tan?” And
the mother began to whisper to the child to shut up. I said to him that’s my color. I explained to him that mine is one of the colors of the races. I told him about the different races; I taught him that lesson right there. He smiled and just said oh. Of course I could just feel that mother’s relief. I wasn’t offended, but I knew that he had not had been accustom to seeing people of color. There were Indians in that area, but they were not as brown. (*Interview with Cooley*, Baker, 2005, p. 3)

As I looked over Dr. Cooley’s accomplishments, I realize she has published several articles, book reviews, and reports in professional journals. Dr. Cooley is proud of her many affiliations, one of which is her participation with the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) where she currently serves on the Board of Directors. This counseling association is comprised of professional counselors who believe the spiritual, ethical, religious, and other human values are essential to the overall development of the person. She speaks fondly of her professional experiences as an assistant instructor at Tuskegee Institute (that continued through the transition to Tuskegee University), Alcorn A & M, and other work experiences as Purdue University and the University of Wisconsin. Even today in retirement, she explores her current research interest of “The Psychological Aspects of Aging” (*Cooley Written Narrative, n.d.*, p. 3). From our conversations I feel her love of learning, sharing, and helping others. I asked Dr. Cooley to share with me what she would say to students that had a desire to pursue higher education. Her reply:

Well, what I would say is one, prepare yourself. Prepare yourself and in more than one discipline. I do believe in interdisciplinary preparation. I believe in
specialization, but I think that there is a foundation in the humanities and in the arts that all of us need. We ought to be able to articulate proper views. When I stop and think about it, everybody has something to say. We don’t have to agree with everyone’s opinion, but everybody has something to contribute to the conversation. If you disagree that means that you thinking and it is our responsibility to think and develop an individual position. We ought to be able to find our position as well as any other information that we need. (Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 11)

Reminiscent of her past experiences, Dr. Cooley links preparation to experiences. She believes that all things influence who we are and what we become from “the selection of reading materials” to the type of “programs that we choose to attend.” She believes we need to engage in events that are “enriching and enlightening” and “we ought to appreciate” these experiences.

You’ve grown from where you were to where you are now, and it is imperative we realize the next experience begins the process again – and that’s alright.

Growth is alright. One enriching experience I recall now that I would recommend would be that we do more studying in different languages. I have to admit that I don’t remember all these things that I had started down in that boarding school, but I learned another language and that experience broadened my perspective. (Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 11)

According to Dr. Cooley, the boarding schools and academies were known for their Latin because at the time the Latin language was “the language of scholars.” All students were required to take Latin classes. Cooley admits that now she has forgotten
some of it, but she is proud that she learned it. She recognizes that we “can’t hold all these things in the fore front of the memory” (Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 8). However, she quickly added that she found this language returns “from the recesses within” when summoned.

The language requirements continued for Dr. Cooley as she progressed through grammar school until she completed doctoral work. She has found “a greater appreciation for the differences of others.” Her language study was interwoven through her entire academic journey beginning with secondary education; however, the most intense language studies of course occurred during her doctoral studies.

The PhD program that I was under required reading and comprehension in two different languages. At Perdue the students could substitute statistics for one of those languages because statistics was necessary to help process your data and understand it. (Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 11)

So, even though many students did not receive exposure to two different languages; everyone had one. This exposure helped broaden our perspective of people from other cultures, from this experience I realized “understanding the underlying thought is more important than raw memory.”

From tales of Dr. Cooley’s life we come to the conclusion that life long learning is imperative and educational experiences are found in life experiences. To be successful, Dr. Cooley believes it is imperative to “prepare yourself and continue your education…not for once and for all” (Interview with Cooley, Baker, 2005, p. 10), bit forever. She also believes in recognizing the importance of time and change. “Remember when things become obsolete don’t hesitate to go on and get the newer versions.”
Joyce V. Rhoden

I arrived early for my meeting with Dr. Joyce V. Rhoden and sat in the outer office to organize my notes and thoughts. While I waited, I began to remember my time at Tuskegee and my experiences with Dr. Rhoden as a freshman. As I remembered her soft spoken tone and positive demeanor, I suddenly realized I was missing the notepad where I had jotted down specific topics I wanted to include in the discussion. After a pleasant exchange with the work study student I told J. Rhoden about my dilemma. Of course she was extremely gracious and her soft spoken tone put me at ease as I rummaged through my bags and folders to find that vital piece of information. Once I was able to locate the missing paperwork and reorganize my folders and notes, I entered the office to begin the formal interview.

In my opinion her office reflects her position of importance at Tuskegee University. A huge desk sets in the center of the room filled with papers, books, and journals. She had chairs available for a one-on-one chat or small group dialogue. Once she shut the door we sat in these chairs as I began to catch a glimpse into the experiences of Dr. Joyce Rhoden.

Well, I’m Joyce Rhoden and I am a family person; I think so much of my husband and my children. I don’t want my family to see me as a perfect being, but to recognize their mom gets up every morning and goes to work. I want my children to recognize that sometimes I go to work not because I want to, but because that is what life is all about. Nothing comes on a silver platter; you have to work hard. I am from Jamaica. I was born and raised in Jamaica and came to the United States to study twenty-seven years ago. Before I came to the United
States I was a school teacher and was trained to teach math with a minor in English, but for some reason I ended up teaching English. I realized I enjoyed teaching English and did that for seven years. (*Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p. 1*)

One belief of J. Rhoden is that everyone should have a structured work ethic; this ideal remains an essential component in her classroom and counseling sessions. Dr. Rhoden maintains

I am a very structured person. My work ethic is such that it scares other people, but when they get to know who I am they recognize that it is not because I’m bossy, it’s just my wanting things done right. I feel that you should give 100% when you can, especially if you’re healthy and capable of doing such. The students say that I am Ms. Perfect and that I want everything to be perfect. I really don’t want things to be perfect I just want the best out of people, so I push a little bit harder when people are pulling back. (*Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p. 1*)

J. Rhoden believes in the power of optimism. When the discussion moved to weaknesses, she says “I wouldn’t say that, [weaknesses] I think that everybody has something that they can work on” (*Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p 2*). She uses this same optimistic view and push attitude with regard to family. She has been married for 34 years and is very supportive of her husband, son, daughter and grandson. She works on Tuskegee University’s campus in the counseling center and resides in Tuskegee as well. Support branches out to the extended family that consists of an older sister, two younger brothers and her father.
We were a close knit family, you know, you went from house to house. I lived with my parents, but the summers were spent at my grandma’s. She lived just down the road (walking distances), and at any time you visited there would be a million-and-one cousins. My grandma would cook a lot of food and we would all eat together as a family. When it was time to play, you never had to go outside the family for friends because there were so many of us. (Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p. 10)

With regards to family, life in Jamaica was “typical” – emphasis was on family, structure, and education. Dr. Rhoden recalls that her family would often invest in the extra things to insure that she and her siblings received the best education that was offered.

If I had to think back, I would guess the difference in my grandmother’s children would be that my mother was the one who had a little more money. My father worked in the bauxite industry. Growing up we had electric lights; many of my cousins had oil lamps. When we would go to my cousins we used oil lamps to do homework. No matter whose home – we did homework; we had to sit at the table. Once the work was completed my parents made sure it was done completely and correctly. I received private lessons, my parents would pay a fee and after school we would stay and someone would teach us. It was very much like tutoring. Yes, I would say my sister and I were a little better off. (Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p. 10)
The same love and devotion that was shown to J. Rhoden and her siblings can be seen as she shares stories of her immediate family. Through her tales it is easy to see that education and family support are imperative.

I think we as adults short-change the younger generation in that we do not give them the kind of environment they need. By that I mean young people are not exposed enough to different activities; parents need to take an active role in the lives of their children. My children went to Tuskegee public schools; as parents we received much condemnation from those who could not understand why our children did not attend private school. We believe in the education system and the responsibility of parents. My husband and I worked on the university campus, we would be at their PTA meetings; we would visit their teachers at school without anything being wrong to make sure that our children were getting what they were suppose to get. Both children left high school with college scholarships. You know I made sure that they had balanced meals, completed their homework, stayed focused and on task. I was such a part of my children’s life. (Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p. 13)

From this point J. Rhoden began to postulate that if perhaps parents today would push their children and make sure they had exposure, some of the deficiencies linked to the young people could be reversed. She pointed out that everyone has “flaws” and that we need to make sure children know flaws are okay and they “should not crawl into a corner. They need to understand that even with deficiencies they still can be successful in the world out there” (Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p. 8).
She firmly believes that everyone needs a support system, and everyone is capable of succeeding. In her own case, she credits family for the initial push in the direction for her advanced educational studies.

Looking back I realize now I was a very smart student. I remember my teachers saying to me that I needed to bring my mother to school because they were going to skip me at least one or two grades because I was doing more advanced work than the other students. I did very well in school and eventually went on to teachers’ college. I did very well there and started teaching. In my system you began as a student teacher for a year or so and then moved up the ladder to senior teacher. While working as a student teacher my husband said Joyce you don’t need to stay in this system. I had to academically fight to go to the local university. There was one university on the island and the competition for space and acceptance rate is very strict. I had no intention of leaving my children in order to pursue higher education. My husband completed my entrance application for Tuskegee, signed my name, sent off my application, and returned home and said you can leave the children. He was already a student at Tuskegee, so, I traveled to Tuskegee. (Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p. 2)

Other than the family, Dr. Rhoden believes spirituality provides a much needed support and stability. J. Rhoden finds her inner spiritual strength at church in Tuskegee. Washington Chapel, her home church, was built with materials donated by Booker T. Washington. The church, in the early 1900s, originally had a different name. When a new church was constructed, the name was changed to Washington Chapel to honor
Washington in appreciation of his donation of building material for the first place of worship.

I am a member of Washington Chapel AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church in Tuskegee, Alabama. I have been member of the Board of Trustees for five years. I have served as a Sunday School teacher for several years. I am willing to serve and have served on other committees as appointed by the Minister. (Rhoden Email Correspondence, 2005)

J. Rhoden’s experiences at Tuskegee were described as positive. She recalls that she was not the “typical 18 year old student” because she was grown with a family and adult responsibilities. She came to Tuskegee with a plan to remain focused and complete her studies in the least amount of time. Indeed there were challenges, but her goals helped her to keep a clear focus.

At Tuskegee I was very focused; I could talk to the professors. I would go to a professor’s office and have a conversation without being scared of the professor. This was partly because I had experiences in the classroom; I had worked with several principals, so I felt sure of myself. I honestly felt the professors had a sincere interest in my success. Yes, my experiences at Tuskegee were very, very positive. (Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p. 3)

One of the most important things for J. Rhoden at Tuskegee was the nurturing environment. At one point she remembers the nurturing from a different perspective when she left Tuskegee Institute for Oklahoma State. She wrote back to Dr. Cooley (the participant presented earlier) and said “I think Tuskegee may have babied us too much.” (Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p. 3). Now she thinks back on her Tuskegee
experience she understands that the nurturing allowed her to grow and do things that perhaps she would not have done at another institution.

In terms of if you wanted to be, president of a club, member of an organization, or an agent for change, you had a chance to do that. There were so many things open to students. Because of the nurturing and acceptance I felt I spoke out on behalf of international students. I was an international student and was not afraid to speak out. (Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p. 5)

The nurturing and support also provided the support needed to help overcome racial obstacles. “It takes a lot of introspection for one to survive in a racist environment” (Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p. 5).

I started out at Oklahoma State very negatively; Oklahoma State saw my name, Rhoden, and made assumptions. I think they thought I was White; they promised me an assistantship. My family has had so many Whites to write to us tracing their family tree. Oklahoma State made the same assumption made by others in the past. When I got to campus and told them who I was, the administrative assistant explained to me that I was not the recipient of the scholarship. I was the only Black student in the doctoral program, and that in itself was very difficult. When the university denied me the graduate assistantship I had to use all my savings. I’m sorry about those experiences; my stay at Oklahoma State was very, very negative. Early in the program I got a hold of myself because I thought of dropping out. I just couldn’t stay there any more and went and talked to a professor who had given me an assignment and graded me extremely low. Her assessment included a question that asked if she would hire me; she said no
and I was devastated. I cried all the way home, and made an appointment to see her. When I went back I did not know how I was going to bring up the issue. I did not know if she would suggest that I leave school, but at that point I decided I was going to speak up. I went into her office and told her my concerns; my professor was shocked that I was this “articulate.” I explained to her that my classmates would come directly from their office in suits and ties; that I was the only one in that class that did not have a professional job. Most of those people were doing their doctorate to get advanced pay and not to go into another job. In discussions they had not asked me about my experiences or about my children. She said that she was so happy that I did come in and talk to her because she saw me for the first time. (Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p. 6)

Dr. Rhoden continued that there were a lot of set backs, but it was not acceptable to just sit back and feel sorry for herself. Instead of self pity, the repetitive phrase became “I’m going to try again, and I’m going to try again, and I’m going to try again” (Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p. 6).

As a counselor, mentor, parent, grandparent, friend, J. Rhoden believes in support and motivation. She recalls times in her counseling position when the hard moments would come for students and she would be at her “wits end” then suddenly it clicks for the students. That is the moment of satisfaction when you are rejuvenated and say, “ok I can go on tomorrow because I might be able to reach another student” (Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p. 2). In her current position, J. Rhoden finds that people sometimes genuinely want advice. She had strong words when it comes to academics. For the students that want to go to college or work in academia, she says
Do it. Especially young women, just do it. I want to see them with their first degrees, and I say to them over and over; it opens a door. When you have a degree or degrees – people listen. They listen not because of who you are, but because you have a terminal degree. There are some degrees that you think you can do nothing with, but they open doors and you become a role model for the younger generation. I really discourage them from getting jobs right out of college. I want them to go on to an advanced degree. If students go out and get jobs they tend to forget about higher education studies. I want students to maximize their potential and come back to higher education. There is satisfaction here. You may not get the money you’re looking for, perhaps, but there is a sense of satisfaction. I think each child out there has a contribution to make to this world. It is up to the child to begin to search self for the pattern. They should ask what has God given that they can be successful at. Once that child finds that thing, I want to encourage that child to work at it and not allow anybody to say to you, “you can’t do it.” Speaking realistically, it’s going to be a struggle at times because nothing comes easy. But every day you pound away at it a little at a time, a little at a time and you will get there. That determination has to be there, that motivation has to be there to do your the best. I say to students do not try to get over, get the best. Don’t allow a teacher to give you an easy grade. I don’t know what they will call it, but I encourage them to always push and push and push and push until they reach their set goals. (Interview with Rhoden, Baker, 2005, p. 3)
For Dr. Rhoden, a successful person is one who has set some goals (fair goals), defines them and strives to accomplish them. She was quick to point out that a successful person does not have to accomplish a lot of goals, but maintains a drive to continue to work towards the goals set. Once the targets have been accomplished, the process should begin again. She contends that it may not be what was accomplished as much as the actual process taken to try and find the answer or reach the goal.

**Francina L. Williams**

When I think of my childhood and attending events with my mother, there are memories that include Dr. Soror Francina Williams. If I had to describe her, I would have always used adjectives such as articulate, elegant, and commanding. When I walked into the door of the Carver Interpretative Museum, I realized my childhood description from over a decade ago still exists. Indeed, Francina Williams is articulate and intelligent; her presence commands respect, peeks the interest and demands attention of the listener.

Before we sat down for the interview, I was given a tour of the museum. In my mind I wished I had a portable camcorder, because Williams carries a wealth of knowledge on George Washing Carver, Black History, the continent of Africa, Egyptian kings and queens. We discussed the myths that surround Blacks, the forgotten heroes and sheroes of our past, the influence of the media on our heritage, and the geography and size of the continent of Africa.

Dozens of prints and artifacts are stacked in categories for future display. Williams’ office reflected her attention to detail and order. The elegant black desk and office furniture were neat and held papers stacked orderly. Placed throughout the room were illustrations of African culture.
Dr. Williams was raised in Gadsden, Alabama. She is married and has two adult sons and one grandson. Williams is the third generation of her family to graduate from college. Her mother was a teacher and made sure that education was a priority and “high expectations were always in place” (Interview with Williams, Baker, 2005, p. 4). Williams remembers education and frequent exposure to things, people, and sites that increase knowledge and broaden perspectives were incorporated into daily life. Her family did not take a lot of long trips; however, she recalls a lot of short outings.

You could take trips in a day, you know, drive. Growing up we lived close to a lot of touristy sites. Atlanta [Georgia] was approximately 100 miles away. We were 50 miles north of Birmingham [Alabama], 80 miles south of Chattanooga, [Tennessee] and 100 miles from Montgomery [Alabama]. These were some of the places we went because they had the events and activities of a major city. Because of the distance they were easy to access. In terms of lengthy trips, once my relatives moved to New York, I would visit them. Other than that we really did not have a lot of family trips. (Interview with Williams, Baker, 2005, p. 5)

When asked to describe herself, Dr. Williams say she was “back on the job scene” (Interview with Williams, Baker, 2005, p. 3). Williams explained that she was retired from her previous career and was now going in a new direction. She presented a brief timeline of her career experiences.

I guess you might say I started out in education, I taught school and served as a counselor. Then I left the education field to go into mental health. While in the field of mental health, I had a full career in two categories: one as director of education and consultation services and then later as the therapist director.
Eventually I left the mental health field to return to the educational field where I work in specialized areas, for example, I worked with grants, in the area of drug abuse prevention, and oversaw a grant affiliated with Ameri Corp. (*Interview with Williams*, Baker, 2005, p. 1)

Family – immediate, extended, and surrogate family was important. For Williams, the family provided love, support, and structure.

I don’t know that my life was rigidly structured. My mother taught school, so we were usually around a lot of people. Everyone in our environment was continually telling us that we need to do what ever was necessary to get a quality education. This in itself was an influence. My mother’s best friend, Mrs. Oden, was our first grade teacher. She did not have any biologically children, so she looked to us as hers. Mrs. Oden was always in and out of the house ‘childing’ us.

One thing I recognize in retrospect is that you are often blessed with experiences without knowing that you are being blessed. I grew up in a time when I was exposed to individuals who were very knowledgeable and who set high standards in education. As a result of my environment and experiences, the desire to succeed permeated all of us. We had a very authoritarian upbringing at home and school. When I think of home and school, the experiences were very strict and demanding, but I found it to be ultimately the best thing that could have happened. (*Interview with Williams*, Baker, 2005, p. 6)

For undergraduate studies, Williams attended Alabama A & M (Agricultural and Mechanical) University in Huntsville, AL. Founded in 1875, Alabama A&M, a HBCU, was organized by an ex-slave, William Hooper Councill. The school opened with
Councill as the first president as the Huntsville Normal School. In 1878 industrial education was added; the supplemental program generated financial support from private contributors as well as the Slater and Peabody funds. The second Morrill Act of 1890 allowed the university to become a land grant institution and move to its present location.

During 126 years the school’s name changed four times. Beginning as Huntsville Normal School, the school eventually earned junior college status in 1919 and became State Agricultural and Mechanical Institution for Negroes. Senior college level classes were added in 1939 and the school became Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College in 1949, eight years after the first bachelor’s degrees were awarded. The institution was fully accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools in 1963, then becoming Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University in 1969.

While discussing her time at Alabama A&M, Williams discussed the structured setting, challenging curriculum, and nurturing environment. During her time at this institution, the climate seemed “like a small intimate family. Everyone knew everyone else, students and faculty” (Interview with Williams, Baker, 2005, p. 4).

It’s interesting you know, I graduated from Alabama A&M and race was a topic I can recall being discussed in retrospect. Much of the ambiance I experienced was conducive with the climate of many HBCUs. The climate at that time was that of a small community. It was very intimate. People knew each other. They knew who was dating which person and all the social news. As students we knew who the faculty members were. The faculty and staff were more like a family connection; there was a great deal of respect inherent in all of that. I
would say though I found Tuskegee more nurturing than I did Alabama A& M. I learned something there, they latch on to you and support you and encourage you. They really did and I found that stronger at Tuskegee as I saw it and experienced it. (Interview with Williams, Baker, 2005, p. 4)

Tuskegee Institute became Williams’ home as she pursued her Masters degree in 1961 in Counseling. Akin to Alabama A& M, Tuskegee had that “family connection” and commanded respect. When comparing the two Historically Black Campuses, Williams mentioned that both were authoritarian and demanding educationally. “Tuskegee, however, was more nurturing than Alabama A & M” (Interview with Williams, Baker, 2005, p. 4).

During the summer of 1967 Williams attended the University of Tennessee. Attending this PWI was different in many ways. First, the actual size of the institution was a difference. Because the University of Tennessee was very large, it would have been difficult to have a nurturing, family connection. She was in the first class that integrated the dormitories. This sheer idea of being a part of “the transition for racial entry” influenced her experience.

My academic experiences occurred in different environments and at different times. I don’t think you can compare the experiences. First of all, the size of the institution had an affect on the student and faculty interactions. My experiences at the PWI institutions [University of Tennessee and Auburn University] were on large campuses; the PWI institutions were all large institutions. Also, differences can be found by virtue of the period of time. If the experiences occurred at another period, things would have been different. But along with that
I attended my academic institutions at a time when everything was in transition in terms of racial entry. I was treated very well; I didn’t encounter any problems or ever any kind of violence. But you know we were dealing with things, for example, I spent a summer at the University of Tennessee in ’67. This was during the time society was dealing with social changes that were in process. I was in the first group of students to integrate the dorms. So yes, we were going through transitions of that kind, you know, breaking down barriers. It was interesting because the thing we had observed when we first got there was although there were Blacks assigned to a particular dormitory it appeared that no Black or White students were being assigned together. It turns out that I was assigned a White roommate; that also was a different experience. I encountered in that setting, the actions and different experiences that had to do with the shifting of the racial scene. It was not comfortable; I was use to an environment that was close and this was very different. Around the same period of time there was a change happening on the HBCU campus as well; this change is why future students at HBCUs would not get the same experience my classmates and I had. For several decades, your HBCU operated under the in loco parentis act which meant that the school could act in the place of the parents because most parents were not on the school campus. (*Interview with Williams*, Baker, 2005, p. 8)

Historically, colleges and universities were seen as parental surrogates to the students that were enrolled. “Universities could control every facet of a student’s life…the courts did not question the authority of colleges over the students” (MacLachlan, 2000, p. 514).
When parents and guardians entrusted their students to the institutions, the parents delegated the school certain responsibilities for their minor children. The specifications of responsibility varied between institutions based on cultural and societal needs (Interview with Williams, Baker, 2005). Traditionally in loco parentis entails a temporary delegation of power to the entrusted person.

HBCUs operating in loco parentis had a lot of power; they were very strict with a lot of stringent regulations. This is not in affect today, so young Black students in HBCUs will not get the same experience that we got. The challenge of the in loco parentis changed educational practices throughout the country. That law changed the management of many institutions of higher education and a lot of people are not aware of this challenge (Interview with Williams, Baker, 2005, p. 5).

As Williams reflected on her experiences and decision to continue into higher education, she shared some information about “the person responsible for her continuing in education” as a potential candidate for my dissertation study. Dr. Williams shared her wish that I would have been able to speak with Dr. Hughes.

The person you really need to be interviewing was the person who really was responsible for me continuing my education. This person, Dr. Marvalene Hughes, was the sister of my sister-in-law. I recall that I had decided to not continue with higher education and just go back into the work force. She said no you need to go right on and go to Tuskegee. I said I can’t afford to do that right now. She said listen, I’m going to give you a number and I want you to call and talk with someone right away. I did and discovered he needed a graduate
assistant. Anyway she is the one who really planted the seed. (Interview with Williams, Baker, 2005, p. 9)

Williams recalls that one reason she almost did not attend Tuskegee for graduate work was because of a financial obstacle. She recalls that challenges are a part of life, and the goal is to get past those obstacles. Obstacles are going to be a part of life. We spend far too much time trying to avoid our obstacles and they end up stifling progress. In order to succeed, we need to realize obstacles are a part of life and they help us grow. Henry ford said, “Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goal.”

Going to college was always a challenge. For most Black families, at least at that time, did not have substantial financial support. My family did not have a lot of financial resources, but I did have family support. When I got to the graduate level I worked as a graduate assistant. The greatest educational challenge as I worked on my doctorate was not financial but the commute to the institution. I had to commute from here [Dothan, Alabama] to Auburn [Alabama], and that was daunting. You know the interesting thing though, I had said there was no way this was going to happen. I was working a job full-time and the idea of being able to get back and forth for classes seemed impossible. I really had given up the idea of getting a doctorate. I remember being in one of these improvement or development courses. I’m not quite sure how I got into that course, but all I recall is that I was in a course where we had to do self examinations. We had to list things we wish that we had done that we had never done. I wrote down that I wish I had gotten a doctorate, and one thing led to
another in terms me remembering my aspirations. Looking at that I found it interesting that I recognized I had not thought about it [doctoral work] during that time and then we were asked to really define it I recognize there was something there I wish that I had done. Then another thing happened. I was appointed to the President Commission and I was involved in all kinds of sessions with President and Mrs. Jimmy Carter and his staff. I remember in one of those sessions, a psychiatrist addressed me as “Dr. Williams.” I said no I’m sorry, I would not want to mislead you, I am not a doctor. She said that was shocked and that if I was not a doctor I need to be one. We went on to have a conversation later and she said if you don’t have one you need to get one, because what you’re doing is cheating yourself having the external credentials when you have all the other credentials. I was flattered because what she was saying played in my mind. I still did not think of it seriously until a fellow counselor announced one day that she had gotten into the doctoral program at Auburn University. I congratulated her and I said that’s wonderful. She told me she wanted to see me in the program. I told her it was okay for her because she was only about a mile away from the campus, but I’m a hundred or so miles from Auburn, there is just no way I could complete that program. One day this big package came in the mail, she had put a packet together for me with the applications and everything that I needed. So, I applied and went to Auburn. 

(*Interview with Williams*, Baker, 2005, p. 11)

Williams described her doctoral experiences for me and explained how she recognized the travel distance as an obstacle, but changed it to a positive by using this
time for reflection and organizing her agenda. She explained that her doctoral program at Auburn University had a somewhat modified schedule. Her schedule required her to have several on-campus class sessions during each course. Williams spent quite a number of weekends and large bits of her summers on campus. As she got further into her program, Williams made additional trips to meet with her instructors, major professor, and committee members. During the course of the program she had classes that would require her to drive the distance up to three times a week. At one point she recalls her doubt and apprehension for this new endeavor.

I remember sitting in class that first summer that my colleagues and I spent together. As I was sitting there, I was just thinking and worrying because I could not see how this is going to happen. I remember making a statement very similar to that to my major professor. I said I don’t how I am going to get all these courses in with the distance and working full time. I just did not see it and after then he made a simple statement. He said it’ll happen; it’ll happen. You know, along the way you need somebody who just says, it’ll happen. Even when you don’t see the way, that statement reassures you that it can happen. For me, it did happen. What happened was I began to get together with groups and found out there were other people commuting back and forth. We were able do a lot of carpooling; there was a big difference leaving here for a 4:00 class and returning home after it ended at 8:00 with a group. There were times that you had to drive along and dodge and veer to avoid the deer, but you know after awhile there was a transition where I enjoyed the solitude I could think, it was a way to get things
in perspective and I rather looked forward to it. (*Interview with Williams*, Baker, 2005, p. 9)

Earning a doctoral degree was definitely one of Dr. Williams’ greatest accomplishments. During our exchange I asked her to elaborate on the things that she would list as her “greatest accomplishments.”

Well, you know as I’ve said earlier, when I think of my accomplishments I don’t really see any great accomplishments, but rewarding accomplishments. When in retrospect I look at the number of organizations that I have been involved in the startup experiences. To see those organizations continuing to move along and make a big difference in the community is rewarding. Overcoming any challenges are accomplishments. You know, we interact and continually move so much that at times we must stop and reflect. I guess right now my latest challenge and rewarding accomplishment would be the museum. This has been the ultimate challenge both in time and marshalling resources. (*Interview with Williams*, Baker, 2005, p. 14)

In every stage of life there are barriers, hurdles, and obstacles Dr. Williams believes in order to persevere, we must remain optimistic and sacrifice luxuries today for attainment of our goals.

**Anna Pearl Atkinson**

Lost on the back roads and panicked I reached Dr. Anna Pearl Atkinson’s home in Lithia Springs, Georgia. When I arrived at her door, she greeted me warmly with a motherly smile and thanksgiving that I had found my way safely. My apprehension immediately left as I walked into the inviting surroundings of her home. I thanked her for
allowing me the time to converse with her, and she thanked me for the opportunity to share her life and experiences. Our previous phone calls clued me in to the wealth of knowledge I would gain academically and personally. She was extremely at ease as we sat down in her solarium to begin talking.

Known affectionately as A.P., Dr. A., or Momma Pearl, Dr. Anna Pearl Atkinson continues to add new people to her extended family. She believes that each extension to her family “extends her life at different stages” (Atkinson Personal Data Form, 2005, p. 2). As we made small talk I began to realize how everyone that comes into contact with this woman could wish to become familiar enough to address her as “Momma Pearl.”

My life is a journey, a journey of the soul that uplifts me to the mountain top experiences of life. (Atkinson Mail Correspondence, 2005)

Asked to tell her story, Dr. Atkinson sat with a big smile as she tried to determine where to begin. She had so much that she wanted to share; it took a few moments to decide her order. Once she began, Atkinson provided me with the particulars I needed in response to the interview questions and more.

Family expectations and support are key to the survival of African American students. Atkinson’s family took an active role in exposing her to people, places, and things that would give her experiential knowledge to strengthen her broaden her perspective and increase her knowledge base. Dr. Atkinson laughed as she recalled how her father was extremely protective of her. When she went out on a “date” he would always chaperon the couple and make sure her daughter returned home safely. Atkinson explains that when she went to the prom her Daddy took her and her date in his car and sat in front of the hall and waited until the prom ended. After which he drove the boy
home and then they went home. Thinking of these events she remembers still having a good time. Indeed, family was very important to Dr. Atkinson. Her youth experiences are colored with fond memories of her family.

I grew up in an environment with two parents and my siblings. I’m going to start with family because we are a part of a strong family and I was fortunate. You see, I didn’t know I was poor until 1960. Prior to that time I thought I was one of the richest, most beautiful girls in the world because I came from a home that had two loving parents and two brothers; I am the only girl. My father had spent two years at Tuskegee Institute where he graduated as a baker and of course he knew how to make all the good things in the bakery line. When I grew up he was chef at the community hospital. So, I didn’t know we were poor because we owned a home and our home had a bathroom in it too. All the kids who lived on my street had homes with bathrooms. I didn’t realize that Black people were considered poor until the 1960s when the news came out. (Interview with Atkinson, Baker, 2005, p. 3)

Although Dr. Atkinson never knew that she was considered poor by standard classification, she did know that she was going to college. Higher education was never a question in her family.

I knew from the time I was born I guess, but I knew from the time I knew myself I was going to college. I mean it just never was a question about it; I didn’t even have to make the decision. I knew I was going to college and I also knew that I was going to be an educator, a teacher. At that time in history, that’s all we could be, you know, either a teacher or a secretary, or a preacher or a
dishwasher or a maid in the White folks home. One of these was your only options. (*Interview with Atkinson*, Baker, 2005, p. 4)

Family in the beginning was essential to Atkinson’s parents, and family continues to be important to her, her siblings and extended family today. She was the first in her family to earn a doctorate; however, her extended family is proud to say they also have now added an orthodontist, pediatrician, and a doctor of education. As Atkinson talks of her family it is easy to recognize the strength and support of her family. She explains the depth of her family connection.

I had two brothers who looked out for me and a Daddy that did the same. One of my brothers has passed, but my baby brother calls me every Sunday at 8 o’clock in the morning. He has not missed a Sunday in the past thirty years. Every Sunday morning at 8 o’clock he calls and if I’m on the phone he says why are you on the phone you know it’s my time to visit. So we are a close family and we have been together all these years, and we stay together. In my family my father died in the 1940s and my mother saw us all out of school before she married again. When she remarried, she married a man who had nine children. Let me tell you what my mother told me when we were all home for the Christmas of 1951; she got remarried in 1951. She told us that she was planning to marry Pops, who we knew. He was a neighborhood man whose wife was deceased. Pops was raising eight boys and one girl, Ruth. My mother told us she and Pops had decided to get married and that she was telling us because we were all to be just one family. She expected us to look out for each other – no questions about it. She told us that she was an adult and could marry when she
was ready, but she wanted us in accord with it. We thought it was great. Now that we are adults, I talked to Eric, my baby brother weekly, and Ruth and I live together. Her husband is deceased and so it mine; it was the only thing to do.

*(Interview with Atkinson, Baker, 2005, p. 6)*

Family was a big part of everything; faith and the church were also forceful elements. Her family and faith were strongly intertwined to give her strong spiritual faith and personal confidence.

My mother was a Baptist; my father an Episcopalian. When we went to church, we went all day. Our Sunday started with our dad who took us in the morning for early service which was at seven. We went from seven to eight-thirty, then we’d come home and go with my mother to Sunday school at nine. We’d stay through preaching and through everything else that they had and then we would have Sunday dinner. We would come back home for Sunday dinner. In our house we never knew who was coming to dinner because my daddy was very, very outgoing. Wilmington, North Carolina is a seaport town which means that international ships would come and go daily from the harbor. My daddy would go by the harbor and see some of the fellows sitting around and invite them to our house for dinner, so we always had company for Sunday dinner because my father would pick up people from the wharf. With my mother we always had good food, but Sunday dinner was very special. The menu was like Thanksgiving. *(Interview with Atkinson, Baker, 2005, p. 4)*
In all things Atkinson’s mother and father found spaces to teach their children. Her father’s belief in life long learning was continual as he always found people with real life experiences to broaden their perspectives.

My father said he always brought people to dinner because it was one way of exposing us to the many cultures that were in the world, and the many people that were in the world. For example, we had a man come to dinner that taught me of the Jewish culture. It was not until he came that I discovered there were Black Jews. All the Jews I knew, and in my town there were plenty Jews, were White Jews. At that Sunday dinner I learned about the Jewish culture. I have forgotten now, but this man was not from Africa. He and his family were from the east. One afternoon, he brought farm workers. There was one fellow that I think of often who followed the crops, this was called truck farming. This boy could make a piano talk; he was very good and I often wonder what happened to him because his dream was to become a concert pianist. He was following the crops in order to get the money so he could attend the Julliard School of Music in New York. (Interview with Atkinson, Baker, 2005, p. 5)

The family introduced educational experiences that created the scaffold that was strengthened as Atkinson continued to grow and expand her boundaries as she attended several institutions of higher education. Her first college experience was at a HBCU in North Carolina.

Saint Augustine's College was founded in 1867 in Raleigh, North Carolina to educate freed slaves. The founder of this institution was a prominent Episcopal clergy. Grounded in liberal arts since its origin, Saint Augustine’s College first awarded
baccalaureate degrees in 1931. Academic emphases have shifted from early emphases in normal education, industrial education, and pre-theological training, to current emphases in community service, research and scholarship.

I went to St. Augustine’s College in Raleigh, North Carolina. This is an Episcopal school that’s comparable to Spelman here in Atlanta. I wanted to go to West Virginia State with the rest of the students in my class, but my daddy gave me a choice. He said you want to go and I want to help you go, but you are going to St. Augustine’s because that school helps women to become ladies. I was an honor student so I had a scholarship there. I had a good four years. I was a work student and my job was secretary for the Conference for the Colored Priests. This is what they were called in that day. So after school was out it was my job to set up for the conference. I did that for four years, so I knew every Black priest in the Bahamas and other islands, as well as Africa. There were very few from the United States. Even today there are still very few African American priests in the Episcopal Church; most of the Black priests are from Africa. Back to my job as secretary – it was my job to keep the minutes and then, type up the minutes. This took me about a month on a manual typewriter. The actual conference was five days and after the meeting that I would transcribe the notes, type them and mail them out. After that my job was finished and I could go home for the summer. (Interview with Atkinson, Baker, 2005, p. 7)

Most of the jobs that Atkinson held helped her financially with her higher education and also helped to broaden her understanding of different cultures.
I worked every summer and the best job that I’ve ever had in my whole life was a job that the librarian, my mentor, got for me. My friend Georgette and I went to Camp Tall Pines which is located in the Adirondack Mountains of New York. This is where people, who were in the New England blue book, would send their children for the summer and they would come in intervals and enjoy the Adirondack Mountains. There were no roads; you had to come to camp by boat from the clubhouse. Everybody had a boathouse full of boats and canoes. Camp Tall Pines had ten French Canadian guys who were there for us. They took us and the children all out in the woods for wood-type experiences. There were cabins all throughout the woods that were like homes. The men would do the outdoor cooking. It was the most unique experience because I’d never been around that kind of money or life style before and when we got ready to come down from Camp Tall Pines, we went to Ardsley-on-the-Hudson. It was so exclusive that in the train station, travelers to Ardsley, had refreshments. The commuters in the mornings had coffee and doughnuts, and in the evening when they came back they got a highball while waiting for the chauffeurs to arrive to take them to their mansions and estates. I was from a small town in the south and had never heard of the corn exchange; Mr. Miller, the man who owned Camp Tall Pines was president of the corn exchange. The corn exchange was compromised of those people that set the price on the international market for wheat, corn and legumes. When the chauffer took us to the bank I expected to see a bank like I’d been used to; I saw a whole lot of people walking back and forth but I didn’t see any bank. So, I told Georgette let’s go find out where we
supposed to go. I went back and asked the chauffer, he told us to get on the
elevator for the presidential suite. Now mind you the elevator doesn’t stop on
each floor it comes from the bottom up to the presidential suites. I think we
were supposed to get around $700 for the summer, and he gave us $1500. We
each got a check for $1500; I was rich. I had never had that much money in my
whole life. (Interview with Atkinson, Baker, 2005, p. 8)

It was experiences like the one described above that provided Dr. Atkinson with unique
opportunities to add fluidity to her perspective. Indeed her family belief that education
comes from within and outside the school environment.

Atkinson continued to increase her knowledge base and stretch her boarders as
she matriculated through Atlanta University in southern Georgia. Atlanta University,
founded in 1865. By the late 1870s Atlanta University had begun granting bachelors
degrees and placing Black teachers and librarians in public schools across the South. The
university began to offer graduate courses in liberal arts and social and natural sciences
during the 1929-30 academic year. As time passed, other programs in business
administration, library science, and social work were added. Eventually, Atlanta
University affiliated with Morehouse and Spelman Colleges, other HBCUs in the Atlanta,
Georgia area to form the Atlanta University System. Later, Clark College, Morris Brown
College, and the Interdenominational Theological Center joined the affiliation.

June 24, 1988, the boards of Atlanta University and Clark College agreed to
consolidation, and on July 1, 1988, CAU was established.

I never realized how much I had learned until I came to Atlanta University. The
time I was at Atlanta University, it was a great institution. For example, I had to
take a reading class because I was trained as a high school teacher and in order to work in the elementary school after I got my job I had to take reading, elementary school music, and another content course. In my reading class there were at least 120 students, and we met in the auditorium. It was there that I realized what a strong foundation I had in high school and college. Moreover, I was challenged. (*Interview with Atkinson*, Baker, 2005, p. 10)

The influence of Atkinson’s parents continued as she matriculated through several institutions of higher education. Some additional universities Atkinson attended other than those mentioned above were Peabody University, The University of Georgia, University of Virginia, and New York University. She always believed that “anything you want to do you should just do it” (*Interview with Atkinson*, Baker, 2005, p. 5). Dr. Atkinson always had an idea of what she wanted, but believed her work put her in the right location at the right time to achieve.

My principal said he had a grant that would send somebody to Peabody to study; Peabody used to be a university in Nashville, Tennessee but now Peabody is a college which is a part of Vanderbilt. He asked me to go and I told him I didn’t know if I wanted to do that or not, but he was the principal and he suggested that I go, so I went. My emphasis was exceptional children’s education in the area of the mentally challenged, or mentally retarded. I was definitely in the minority in the group. All of us were at the same age group, but they weren’t married and I was married. I knew my husband was subject to get in that car and come 300 miles any day, any hour, any time and I knew I’d better be in place. So I did not do a lot of partying at night. There wasn’t anything else to do in an all White
environment. Peabody wasn’t predominately White; it was an all White university. I just read and did my work. With all my studying every test we had I’d make a 100. I don’t care what it was I would make a 100. Essays had always been my strong point, and I didn’t have anything else to do. That’s how I met all the people who wrote the textbooks. Of course once we met they remembered me because they didn’t know any Black people but me. Because of my positioning I was the governor for the National International Council for Exceptional Children from the state of Georgia. Nobody knew how I did it, but it was just because I knew everybody. I went to the University of Virginia at Charlottesville to the get credentials for emotionally disturbed. Again I was in an environment that I choose to observe optimistically. (Interview with Atkinson, Baker, 2005, p. 12)

One obstacle discussed by many on the topic of financing higher education. Dr. Atkinson too explained that financing her graduate and past graduate work required though, effort, and work. These efforts were also applied to life in general during an era of change. She explained how there is a positive even in the negative situations. Many of her higher education experiences were during the era of segregation and desegregation and the tense change.

The reason that I have a doctorate I was an EPDA fellow, the federal government set aside some money, under the Education Professional Development Act, to train minority doctorates. This was a one year program that paid everything you could even dream about – even child care. They gave us our complete salary with all university expenses paid. We gained exposure as well
because we traveled all over the country. You had to either enroll at Georgia State or Atlanta University. I was at Georgia State pursuing my doctorate degree, but had to transfer to Atlanta University because they had 25 slots for minority students versus the 2-4 at Georgia State. During my doctoral program we did such unique things as taking trips to explore the places and educational programs we discussed. When we talked about parental involvement in education, we went to Boston to see parental involvement in the various communities. If we wanted to learn about something in Detroit, we went to Detroit. We traveled all over from Georgia; I recall even going to Michigan, Milwaukee and California. All 30 of us and the professors would travel and explore together. It was on the job training that you actually saw were participants (Interview with Atkinson, Baker, 2005, p. 20)

With academic experiences at several HBCUs and PWIs, Dr. Atkinson was asked to share her views of the differences she recognized within these settings.

I have attended both historically Black schools and predominantly White schools at the state and private levels. There are differences. Of course at the historically Black college the cultural differences aren’t as apparent because students most involved with these campuses come from African-American backgrounds which started in slavery and which have persisted throughout the period from slavery up to the present. In predominantly White schools, such as the institutions I attended: Peabody University, New York University, University of Georgia Athens, Virginia State University or the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, the differences between the schools are really felt by
the students. It’s also been in the behavior of the teachers towards students, especially African American students. Most professors at predominantly White institutions act as though if you’re Black you don’t know anything before they take the time to get to know you or before you have that first test. If you’re Black, you better make a 100 on your first exam or they won’t even know you are present. In predominantly Black schools if you had not have done so well, the teacher would make an attempt to find out why you’re having difficulties and give you guidance. The predominantly White schools come with subtle discrimination. Of course there are few teachers who just love students and love teaching, but most of them don’t. The objective is for self advertisement because they are so into who they are, what they have been and what they hope to be. In the institutions of higher education we see subtle racism at its best and at its worst. I use racism at its best because sometimes it’s so subtle you’ll think you are the cause of whatever happened. In the predominantly White institutions I’ve had some very good professors, some that I respected and liked very much. Their concern was genuine and they were most helpful. When I think deeply about this I realize that most of these professors were foreigners. My professors were either from the Scandinavian countries, one or two from England, and very few from America. It is important for Black students today to realize you can make it in spite of them. There is success beyond the professors that promote discrimination and inequality. (Interview with Atkinson, Baker, 2005, p. 42)

Just by looking at the seven institutions that Atkinson mentioned in her story, one would ask where does the motivation come from to continually ask questions and
actively seek out the answers. How do you continue to strive for excellence when those that surround you push for your failure? She is definitely a life long learner and was asked to share what events and experiences occurred to develop this insatiable need for learning and excellence.

I believe that children if they given the opportunity and exposure can become or do anything they want. That’s the key; you have got to have it in your mind that you know you can do anything. As a child I was taught that, and I truly believed it and continue to believe it today. These are the things I taught in my nursery. The children that attended my nursery, my children, truly believed they were special and could or be anything they dreamed of. This belief cultivated during childhood stayed with them and supported them during adulthood. *(Interview with Atkinson, Baker, 2005, p. 40)*

As a teacher, teacher educator, daycare coordinator, student, and counselor Dr. Atkinson appeared to have no trouble gaining support. When asked what were her strengths and secrets to success, she replied

Getting people to work with me is definitely a strength. I’ve never had a problem with that. I think that’s my gift and recognizing my gift is empowering as it enables me to work closer to potential. I’m very good in putting people, places and things together to be successful. I didn’t realize I could do that until I was being evaluated. My executive director who was asking me to stay on the consultant list when I retire brought it to my attention. He wanted my expertise in connecting people, places and things together. Think about school settings, some principals should never let some teachers in the door because you could
look at them and know they would not fit in that school. In one school system I worked we had almost 2,000 teachers. The teachers always did so well because we took the time and effort to place them appropriately. Certain teachers with certain characteristics need to be in certain locations. That’s my strength – connecting people, places, and things. Add to that my ability to teach. I can teach anything to anybody. I just feel that if you can make people feel good about themselves, the rest they will do themselves (Interview with Atkinson, Baker, 2005, p. 30)

Dr. Atkinson suggests that we as educators and teachers of future educators ought to recognize the subtle prejudices that penetrate our educational system. It is not enough that we talk about the continuing issues of racism; we listen, understand, and act to make positive changes. She believes that everyone should contribute to educating others to the subtle racism round in our society.

I guess it’s my time now to go write about it, because it is there and as I hear young people in predominantly White schools now talk about it. These students say its hell in that school and they recognize that no matter how smart they are they will usually come out with a C average. I don’t think that’s right and nobody has really ever challenged the faculty in the schools. Having worked at the University of Alabama, Georgia State, and the University of Georgia, I recognize what they say actually happens. There is a difference and it is an obvious difference in the attitudes about Black students. Maybe it’s cultural; I don’t know exactly what it is and I never even thought about it enough to analyze it. However, I know it’s there and that’s why if I had my way, I would
take the opportunity to write about some of the things that happen in a predominantly White school so that our children would be aware of it. I would ask questions why is it if you’ve had 20 African American school children to go into a predominantly White school of the 20 only 1 will probably stay. Schools are in the process of trying to entice African American students to enroll, but once the institutions have the students they need to have some training for their professors as to how to best serve those students. Just because the teacher knows how to split an atom doesn’t mean he knows how to get along with folk or that he knows how to be respectful. The word is respect; all the teachers need to respect all students as learners. The students are not there because they know everything, they are there to learn and the professor is supposed to have something to offer. If you so suddenly despise me and all you can talk about are issues that let me feel that you really don’t want me there, it would be impossible for me as the student to perform my very best. Today these children go to these schools, yes, they get the tuition and grant money. The kids are smart…I want that in my narrative, the students have the ability but they do not know how to cope with subtle racism. Now if the mistreatment is blatant, the students will say something and get themselves put out of class. This happens because they’ve never had to cope with overt racism and so they don’t know how to handle it. If I had a school for adults, young adults, I would offer a class called what they don’t teach you in books. Chapter One: How to live in a racist society and be happy and be proud and know that you’re the best. Chapter Two: Techniques and strategies for living in a racist society. You see there is no way
in the world you can say we don’t live in one because we do. It used to be overt
and legal and there wasn’t much that you could do about that, but since that time
racism has become more subtle. That’s how it is in 2005 and how it was the first
time I entered into Peabody in 1961. There was no difference in the racism then,
just the reality that we (Black students) knew how to handle it. (Interview with
Atkinson, Baker, 2005, p. 43)

In order to manage a racist PWI, Woodson (1933) insisted African American
students have a realistic self evaluation of their abilities. The argument further suggests
that students must accept their current ability and continue to improve while maneuvering
other obstacles, such as racist environments. In essence, Black students not only have to
achieve academically but recognize and overcome institutional racism. Dr. Atkinson
strongly supports these beliefs as she recalls how the children of her era were raised with
an awareness of racism and coping skills to continue in spite of it. She believes that we in
American society have fallen short with providing the appropriate education for our
students recognizing and dealing with racism as well as appropriate learning and actions
to eradicate it.

We learned about racism from having grown up in a segregated society; we
knew there was nothing in the beginning. Even today we as school leaders have
not done anything since the Civil Rights Bill passed to train staff. Years ago I
was a member of a team that trained staff throughout the state of Georgia. Our
mission was to help educators, counselors, staff persons to realize that they were
not asked to love others, but accept them as human beings who had come as
learners. Education has not made an effort to do that since that time directly
following the passage of that bill. We need to go back and start at kindergarten and train everyone, this includes going to the teacher training institutions and train the future educators how to work with minority students. *(Interview with Atkinson, Baker, 2005, p. 44).*

The goals of Atkinson’s parents are consistent with the findings of Woodson (1933) and DuBois (1903) that community service experiences and successful leadership in the background experiences help students succeed in higher education. Dr. Atkinson is in agreement with Woodson and DuBois as well as many others that believe in total education. When asked what advice she would like to give the young women today who were considering higher education and most specifically doctoral work, Atkinson quickly responded

Identify what you really want to do. First, you have to know what you want to do and do it. I’ll use you for an example Paula, if you really didn’t want to earn your doctorate, you wouldn’t be out here trying to interview me and other people. There is motivation on the inside. You know what you want, that’s your interest. In your area of interest you want to know more. So I would also tell them to be sure of what they want because if you are doing what you enjoy it’s not work but if you get in it and it’s not really what you want to do its work — tedious work. Once you make the decision and find your interests, talk with people who are in the area and be sure that it’s really what you want to do.

Next, I would say get focused. When you are sure of your goals, get focused and map out your plan. After that, find out what resources are available (tangible and intangible) to assist you in moving toward this goal and then start towards your
goal. Continue until you are successful. Don’t ever lose your faith and your confidence. Keep your confidence and your faith because you have faith in yourself and have faith in the Lord. With that faith you realize help will come and you won’t know where it came from. (Interview with Atkinson, Baker, 2005, p. 38).

Atkinson made it a point to reiterate her belief that a strong foundation does not start once children enter college. In order to be successful, the internal motivation and faith must begin developing at home at a very early stage of growth. She believes we must

Teach them [children] to walk with confidence. Honey, hold your head high and when you put your foot down put it down with purpose. I believe everyone has a purpose in life. My philosophy is that at each stage in your life there’s a purpose and it’s up to you to find out what your purpose is. I recognize that in my latter years my purpose now is first to help my fellow man in any way that I can. I can help by volunteering because I’m interacting with children. I like young people and I’m also having the opportunity to give something back to the community. My purpose is also to enjoy living and to know that I’m up and moving around; that is important. So I thank God every day, every morning that I get up I say thank you Lord for this day and let me do my purpose while I’m here on this earth today. I can say it because I tell everybody I’ve had a good life. If I go tomorrow I have had good life and don’t need one thing. So, I believe if we teach our children to walk with purpose, then we have provided strategies to overcome obstacles. Then we have to do something about this
subtle racism. We all need to find healing for the ill and eradication for racism as a collective purpose. If we can do something about the subtle racism in the schools we will make progress. We need to start at the university because that’s where you are training people who will go out and teach. If we make these changes, then we could possibly put a dent in some of this racism in our society.

*(Interview with Atkinson, Baker, 2005, p. 45)*.

**Conclusion**

As mentioned in the poem that introduced the chapter, I entered the interviews with an inquiring mind and continually asked the participants to share with me what they know because “I have so much to learn” (Baker, 2005, May). I listened; they required me to share. Our challenges were unique and yet the same. As I listened, I learned and was restored from some of my hurts. The communication made me stronger and more determined. Indeed, “IT is time for me to speak;” time to share my stories with others. 

*What Do You Know?* (Baker, 2005, May) suggested that I seize the moment and use my voice whether the audience is willing to listen or not. I agree. It is time our stories are heard.

The complexity of Black lives in the midst of overwhelming challenges rarely makes for a rational world. The ability to “make a way out of no way” and to overcome when it seems impossible is regularly and readily attributed to some force beyond individual effort…Black people throughout history have merged the sacred and the profane as the only way to live mentally, emotionally, and psychically healthy lives.” (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 137).
Through the conversations during the interviews with the above participants, I found that they too were in many times able to “make a way out of no way” and overcome obstacles in their path. As I organized the transcripts I found that I, like Ladson-Billings in her narrative inquiry with African American women educators, understood the connection of my participants to a higher power or strength. I am in agreement with her statement that if “I were an outsider to the culture, I would have probed more deeply to have them articulate their beliefs” (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 137). However, that was not the case, I, too am an African American women pursuing the pinnacle of academic success. My story also speaks of the higher power that “made a way out of no way.” Once again, connections are the ties that bind.
CHAPTER 5

INTERPRETING THE NARRATIVES

A Harsh Teacher

Experience is a harsh teacher.

Look at the changes you’ve been through.

Explore your reactions to events from the past

Have you changed?

Was the journey worthwhile?

Understanding comes and the cycle begins once more.

Experience is a harsh teacher.

Can you count the changes?

Do you remember who you once were?

It seems so long ago,

Struggling through the tears

Racing through the darkest fear

Stop – re-group, re-evaluate, learn

Lingering to celebrate the joy, triumphs, and the years

Have you changed?

Experience is a harsh teacher

With a dash of memory and imagination
A lot of determination, will, and faith

Experience is a harsh teacher

A teacher that changes the heart, the soul

Experience changes individuals

Experience changes the world

Paula Baker (July 2005)

Establishing the Consequences

This study was an exploration into the experiences of five African American women with doctoral degrees and career experience in the field of education. The study explored how these women achieved success and how they defined it. I utilized narrative inquiry grounded in Black feminist thought informed by critical race theory. This particular perspective allowed me to appreciate the unique experiences of the participants while remaining cognizant that their lived experiences and situatedness as double outsiders indeed had an impact on those experiences.

The study extended the research on African American women with doctoral degrees and career experiences beyond the institutional and career experiences to include personal characteristics, internal and external motivational factors, and lived experiences that influenced their achievement and analysis of success.

Findings

The findings of the study indicate that resilience, for African American women, is fostered through cultural socialization, affirmation individually and culturally,
experiential learning, optimism and faith in God. Resiliency, the actual set of qualities, was described as multifaceted and fluid. In order to be resilient, the participants suggested that one tailor the qualities of resiliency to meet the need. All five participants noted that spirituality and a positive outlook served to strengthen perseverance and protect during the trials.

The participants in the study attended a historically Black institution for a portion of their postsecondary education. All participants came from working class or lower with regards to their socio-economic backgrounds. Learning and continuing education was encouraged at each household, community, and within the extended families.

All of the participants talked of a mentor (or several mentors) who helped them find the way academically and for their careers. The nature of the contact these women had with their mentors seemed to have influence on their lived experiences. One participant, J. Rhoden, credited another participant, Dr. Cooley, as being a strong supporter for her as she transitioned from a HBCU to a PWI. Dr. Williams credits her mentor with nurturing her desire by building on her mother’s foundation on the importance of education. Her mentor also provided direction to assist in finding financial support and employment to help finance her education. The mentors of Dr. Atkinson guided her with their words of wisdom and directed her to events and activities that provided experiences to broaden her perspective. One of the greatest gifts she received was that of inquisitiveness. Black feminist thinkers offer the idea that the stories presented by others in the mentorship role present necessary tools that help African American women resist oppression (Collins, 2000).
A commonality among the participants’ responses was the recognition of obstacles and the racism within those obstacles. All five participants could identify incidences of racism in their academic career, and four of the five participants chose not to elaborate on the negative and rather discussed the positive educational experiences. They took negative situations and turned the encounters into opportunities to learn, grown, and gain personal strength. “Recognition of obstacles and racism as well as searching for the positive is a tenant of the Black Feminist Thought emphasis of the “ongoing interplay between Black women’s oppression and activism” (Collins, 2000, p. 290). Black feminist thought suggests that there is always a choice, there is always power to act, no matter how bleak the situation.

Family was extremely important to all the participants. They each talked of their parents, especially their mothers, who helped them “find” their way and stay focused academically and socially. This particular finding supports Black feminism in that Black families are categorized as places of collective effort and networks. The family support permeated the constructed home environments to the community associations. As children the participants did not have to dissociate from peers because of different beliefs and values. Most of the families monitored the friendships and playmates and the community groups had similar beliefs, values, and mores.

These women can each be described as advocates of higher education for all with an emphasis with people of color and women. They work diligently to eradicate biased educational practices and unfair treatment of others. Several themes continued to reappear throughout the research process: racial issues, family/community, HBCU/PWI experiences, support of others, financial obstacles, and spirituality. The themes will be
discussed in the aforementioned order; accounts from the participants will be interwoven with the themes.

*Racial Issues*

A commonality among the responses of the participants aligned with the relationship between academic success and cultural affiliation is the recognition and triumph over racism. One major difference, four of the participants chose to steer the conversations away from the issue of racism and particular acts of discrimination and focus on other topics. According to Patricia Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (2000),

Black women who make claims of discrimination and who demand that polices and procedures may not be as fair as they seem can more easily be dismissed as complainers who want special, unearned favors. …Moreover, with a rhetoric of color-blindness that defends…it becomes difficult to talk of racial and gender differences that stem from discriminatory treatment. (p. 279)

This idea seemed to run through many of the stories presented by the participants as they continued to describe their experiences with racism in an optimistic light. Dr. Cooley used her encounters as teachable moments to introduce those with negative opinions and racist attitudes. Rhoden, Williams, and Sims Doty used the encounters as boosters to remember their personal goals and objectives. They took the situations for what they were was and turned the encounters into opportunities to learn, grow, and gain personal strength. Indeed, racism is not a pleasant topic; however, it *is* interwoven into the fabric of our society. Dr. Atkinson took a different approach. She used the encounters as personal growth; however, she spoke strongly about the racism that crossed her path. She too remained optimistic, however, her belief was that we *ought* to acknowledge the
existence of racism. Atkinson continued that racism is in our society, and our children are short changed if they are not taught of this reality. Her words ring true with critical race theory that regards race not as a biological given, but a fact; race is a fact of life. Only after we acknowledge the presence of racism can we teach others to understand and overcome this intolerance in our society.

The avoidance of racism from the stories of four participants is reminiscent of a survival technique. “At times, [Black] women had to stand up for their rights, while at other times they might have had to silently reject negative comments and attitudes” (Higginbotham, 2001, p. 65). This approach was explored also by Calvin Henry (1995) as he asserted:

It is not easy for Black America to empower itself when all the odds appear to be against the community. Many members of Black America find themselves being afraid to participate openly in the political and economic processes that might empower the Black Community. This fear has led many in Black America to believe that they must exhibit a [neutral] persona in order to achieve vertical mobility in America. (¶ 2)

Consequently, many African American women believe in order to be successful in their own rights they must at times disassociate themselves from kinship found within Black communities. Exploring this assertion through a critical lens, I question if this line of thinking is subverted to benefit those of the dominant culture. By gaining knowledge and challenging the status quo and academia, why is it that we find it imperative to dilute racism? Indeed, optimism and positive perspectives enhanced the motivation to move towards the creation of concepts and paradigms that challenge the ideas of the dominant
culture. As Michelle Jay (1995) explains, transformative knowledge is what we need to question the knowledge presented by the dominant culture. She continues that this knowledge supports the maintenance of dominant structures, long-present inequities, and the current power arrangement in the United States that often serve to subordinate racial minorities. (p. 3)

The belief—or internal “duty”—that we must disassociate to protect ourselves and families from a racist reality by one perspective empowers the dominant culture even though individuals have success stories of transforming that dominant power. As Delgado and Stefancic (2001) found “our system applauds affording everyone equality of opportunity, but resists programs that assure equality of results” (p. 23). By remaining silent about conquering racism, those that are targets of racism stifle the power that comes from sharing stories of strength and resilience. The people are separated from themselves as their stories are remembered from a slightly different perspective, and they are separated from others by not encouraging “close, respectful, [sharing] communities” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 24).

When asked to share stories that dealt with obstacles they faced, I specifically mentioned issues of racism. There was no problem discussing obstacles; however, racism in academia seemed taboo. Reviewing the interviews and transcripts I thought of comments by Higginbotham (2001). She asserted that “identifying racist comments and individuals is one task; handling such encounters is another” (p. 82). Undoubtedly the participants had to tolerate racist teachers, administrators, and peers in educational settings where they did not have the power as students. Although the stories were not
presented when dealing with obstacles or racism or discrimination, the participants shared stories of racial discrimination during other areas of discussion. At times the culprits (teachers, peers, etc.) were confronted; however, there were instances in which the participants, then students, had to endure the bigoted treatment. During their early academic life, confronting racial barriers was a part of life. The optimistic approach and internal strength were the foundation that allowed the women to overcome these barriers. Because of necessity, many people of color develop skills to cope in a hostile and unreceptive environment, but at a cost of alienation from self (Collins, 1990).

This reality answers the shift in dialogue when racial obstacles were mentioned. Dr. Sims Doty discussed the financial obstacles she had to overcome during her academic process. Dr. Cooley asserted that she did not want to give the impression that she had no racial obstacles; she preferred to focus on the teaching and positive outcomes that occurred from the negative events. Dr. Rhoden discussed the negative treatment she received during her doctoral studies; however, I noticed a somber change in the aura as our discussions touched on racial issues. Dr. Williams discussed many instances of racism, especially when she was in the transition period between segregation and desegregation. The stories that she chose to share touched on the ills of racism, but the focus remained on positive interactions and experiences. After four interviews that tiptoed around the racism inherent in the educational setting, Dr. Atkinson hit the topic of racism in lived experiences head on.

Power and energy surrounded the room as Atkinson excitedly shared her experiences in racist environments. There was optimism in her story; however, there was no positive spin put on what she experienced. Yes, she turned the experiences into
“stepping stones” which produced positive actions, but the racist events themselves were not made anything other than negative acts of mistreatment based on her race and color. Discriminatory acts were just that – racist, injustices that she recognized and overcame. Atkinson strongly believes that one problem in our society is that people today can not deal with covert racism. According to her observations, students and teachers are taught that racism does not exist. They do not have the lens of reality nor the strength to speak out about these issues. She believes one reason for this inability to accept and transcend racism is that the topic is taboo, and we need dialogue in order to process experiences and learn from them.

There have been studies to document that African American women face racism and discrimination in our daily lives. In 1990 Essed found that in university settings, Black women consistently face poor treatment from Whites. In her text *Everyday Racism* “poor treatment” included 1) intelligence, qualifications, and authority are constantly called into question, 2) exclusion from important activities, and 3) judgment by Whites by negative stereotypes (Essed, 1990, p. 79). Although the participants stated that they have experienced racist environments, the conversation continued to take a positive side in the discussion. The focus would not remain on the racist practices, but the positive outcomes from the situation. Dr. Cooley added in her interview that she may have given the impression that she did not have many experiences with racism, and she quickly clarified that she did indeed experience racism in her life. However, she chose to not dwell on the negative and that every experience she had was different from any other experience. In order to progress, she chose to find the positive in all her experiences.
Similar to Dr. Cooley, Dr. Rhoden had her share of negative experiences. She did, however, go into limited detail about her experiences at Oklahoma State University. Before sharing her experience, she pointed out that the importance of reflection and release of the racism in order to overcome the prejudice. Akin to Dr. Cooley, Dr. Williams asserted that every experience is different and provides a learning experience. She admits that the time period in which she was educated was laced with prejudices. Instead of focusing on these incidents she chose to recall and discuss the people that rose above the hatred and accepted her and others of color. Atkinson approached the topic of racism in from a different vantage point that the other participants. She quickly asserted that overt and subtle racism is interwoven into our education system as well as society as a whole. To support her claims, Dr. Atkinson discussed several instances of racism that she experienced from her youth, adolescence, and adult life. Even though she experienced racism during several stages in her life, Atkinson echoes the other participants as she saw each experience through an optimistic lens.

In order to be successful, it is important for African American women to understand racism and yet not internalize racial denigration. In other words, we must confront and reject the oppressive negativity and continue to adopt a strong sense of self that is continually affirming and valuing.

*Family/Community Issues*

Several studies (Noguera, 2002; Steele, 1992, 2003; Cummins, 1985) showed students who were successful constructed their social identities in ways that were considered different from other Black students who were not considered academically successful. Baker (2005) asserts
The goal for most families is to present an opportunity for their children to receive a jump on acquiring knowledge to afford social mobility. The students on the opposite end of the spectrum lose assurance, may develop inferior beliefs, and experience academic failures. (p. 243)

I believe the families of the participants constructed the home environments and community associations in such a way that they (participants as youth and young adults) did not have to dissociate from their peers. All the participants discussed in detail how their families maintain structured home environments and monitored their friendships and playmates. These women were close to family, yet little mention was ever made of other children outside the community. Their environments were filled with other children whose families had similar beliefs, mores, and values. At this early stage in life, they were not faced with the need to disassociate themselves from other children.

Dr. Cooley mentioned that her mother monitored and controlled her play time and chose her playmates. Her playmates were raised in similar environments in that their families held the same values and goals that her parents held. Dr. Cooley mentioned that being at her best friend’s house was just like being at home; they always knew what was expected of them as young adults. Dr. Rhoden only recalls playing with her immediate and extended family members. There were no playmates from the community; the sisters, brothers, and cousins were both family and friends. Dr. Williams recalls an “authoritarian” environment where education was a focal point. All of all her friends and their families had the same or very similar views. Each participant recalls a limited number of friends; I believe there was a dissociation to model certain qualities into the character of the young to facilitate future success. Although this study presented an
either-or mode of thinking that encourages limited view, it still leads me to question the
binary mode of thinking. Atkinson recalls the influence of her family and church
community at teaching her who she was. Dr. Atkinson recalls race and culture were
always a part of the equation. In order to have internal strength, Atkinson believes one
must know and love self for what you are and recognize what you have to offer.
Atkinson’s approach led me to see through a both- and mode of thinking. She explained
that she was a Black woman and she experienced, survived, and beat the racist obstacles
in her path. The ‘and’ comes to play because she chose the active role to acknowledge the
racism and share her experiences for others to listen and learn. All participants were
active in their ability to tell stories full of wisdom and knowledge. Atkinson, however,
chose to stay focused on all; she shared the negative and interwove the positive in order
to produce a clear representation of her experiences. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) asserts
that “sustaining an independent consciousness as a sphere of freedom enables African
American women to engage in additional forms of resistance” (p. 205). By maintaining
her voice and opinion, Dr. Atkinson continues to resist racism.

From the narratives presented, I continue to believe there is a strong
interconnection between the African American family and community, especially during
developmental experiences. Collins (2000) found

Black communities as places of collective effort [with] more fluid boundaries
characterizing the relationships among households, Black family networks, and
Black community organizations such as Black churches. (p. 53)

The participants in this study each shared stories where the immediate family, extended
family, and community provided nurturing and support. Dr. Cooley explained how her
mother instilled self-respect. She explained that respect went much further than the confines of the home because the children had to acknowledge all elders in the community. Dr. Rhoden reminisces that her family was very close; they traveled from house to house visiting relatives. She lived with both parents, but her summers were spent with her grandparents who lived a short distance from her parents. Rhoden definitely believes everyone needs a support system, and the family should stand together. In her own case, Rhoden credits her family for the initial push in the direction to pursue doctoral studies. Dr. Williams added to the conversation that her mother always had high expectations in place. In their household, nothing less than 100% was accepted. Dr. Atkinson explains that her family made sure she and her siblings were exposed to different people, places, and things. Living in a port town, her parents made sure their home was a revolving door for the world. The people that dined at their table and stayed in the family home shared stories of different cultures and brought new perspectives and diversity. In agreement with Elizabeth Higginbotham (2001), the family and community were sources of orientation and values that “served [Black] women as they encountered mainstream messages that often devalued” (p. 14).

**HBCU/PWI Experiences**

The inclusion of experiences from historically Black colleges and universities would not be complete without mention of Booker T. Washington, the first president of Tuskegee Institute. Washington believed people needed leadership from within. His design was to combine industrial preparation with intellectual and ethical culture. Sanderson Beck (1996) quoted Booker T. Washington from his book *Working With the Hands...Covering the Author's Experience in Industrial Training at Tuskegee*, published
in 1904. Washington asserted, “I soon learned there was a great difference between studying about things and studying the things themselves, between book instruction and the illumination of practical experiences” (p. 12). He believed it was important to gain knowledge, but also to include experiences which took learning to another level by placing knowledge and lived experiences in a closer proximity. The participants of this study showed they too incorporated lived experiences with the information learned. Without the lived experiences and exposures, the stories and understandings would come from a slightly different perspective. If the participants would not have been raised in environments that acknowledged the importance of family and taught of the ills of society, they would not have had the strong sense of family, community, and self-pride. Because of family belief systems and optimistic attitudes the participants had high academic aspirations and found positives from the most negative encounters and experiences.

Undergirding this study was a discussion of lived experiences, interpretations of those experiences amid obstacles (i.e. racial, gender, and social oppression), and HBCU and PWI experiences. All of the participants used nurturing as a descriptor when discussing their stay at various HBCUs. Whether Jackson State University, Tuskegee University, Alabama A & M University, St. Augustine’s College, or Atlanta University, the participants lived and learned in a family environment that was full of nurturing and character cultivation. These findings support the research presented in the literature review that found Historically Black Colleges and Universities provide positive faculty/student relationships, excellent education and enrichment opportunities as well as
a nurturing environment for academic, emotional, and social growth for their students (Barger & Mayo-Chamberlain, 1983; Whitten et al, 2004).

While attending an HBCU when parents were not around, the authoritarian faculty and staff members were able to fill in the parent/family shoes. During the time period that most participants attended a HBCU, the school was allowed to act as guardian in the absence of parents (in loco parentis). The participants were asked to describe their experiences at HBCU and PWIs. Dr. Cooley recalls the strict control of her institution as the school bells dictated when students movement, provided time tables for study and even recreation. She positioned the school bells with the ringing of the grandfather clock in her home that was used to maintain order and manage time. Williams agrees with the family feel of the HBCU and recalled the “stringent” regulations provided for the students at her alma maters. Dr. Rhoden explained that she was indeed in a nurturing environment while attending a HBCU; however, she recognizes in some instances the nurturing could have become a hindrance. Students were provided opportunities to participate in any activity, yet the prejudices of the real world did not always penetrate the campus borders. This may have provided a false sense of security with regards to reality. Dr. Atkinson agreed that the HBCU was a community environment that reminded her of home. The teachers and staff were like family and expected the best academically and behaviorally from the students. She credits the institutions with reinforcing her family teachings that society is prejudiced and that knowing this reality does not demand one to lower their goals or expectations. Instead, the reality of injustices in society should be used as a stepping stone to reach higher goals.
Rochelle Woods wrote “Invisible Women: The experiences of Black Female Doctoral Students at the University of Michigan” (2001) which was featured as a supporting chapter in *Sisters of the Academy: Emergent Black Women Scholars in Higher Education* (Mabokela & Green, 2001). This publication provided evidence that African American women who pursue doctoral degrees at PWI face a plethora of challenges. The featured authors discussed many issues; two obstacles that stood out in my reading were the largely unsupportive environment and the lack of mentorship for African American doctoral students. It is my opinion that both environment and mentorship are designed to provide support and guidance during the doctoral process. Despite the obstacles of lacking support and mentorship, the participants self persevered by remaining optimistic and doing what was necessary to succeed. They credited a strong family for instilling strength and perseverance that allowed them to continue.

Dr. Cooley believes that Tuskegee remains the kind of place for *our* children. In agreement with Dr. Cooley, Dr. Rhoden remembers the nurturing environment of Tuskegee and the enrichment it provided for students during her stay. In retrospect, J. Rhoden stated that she understands the nurturing provided at Tuskegee allowed for growth. The students were exposed to more and allowed to participate in and undertake challenges that would not have been available at other institutions. Rhoden presented an example that if a student of color wanted to be an officer of a club or member of an organization, there were chances available at the HBCUs. She believes that in this environment students had opportunities to become agents of change. As a current faculty member of Tuskegee, Dr. Rhoden believes these opportunities still exist. Dr. Williams concurred with the opportunities presented and suggested that the HBCU provided (and
still provides) experiences that allow their students to gain broader perspectives. Atkinson was in agreement with the other participants and added the fact that in many instances students felt more comfortable in being assertive in the HBCU setting because they felt safe and valued. She asserted that students in this nurturing environment were not concerned with physical safety and racial injustices when running for campus offices or participating in social activism.

Given the environment of PWI, the participants were faced with several obstacles directly related to culture and ethnicity.

In predominantly White colleges, Black women often had to find their own supports for a more African American orientation to mobility, particularly one that stressed commitment to the broader Black community. Many of these women were isolated from Black communities at this time in their lives, although a few were tied to the local Black community either by employment or volunteer work. (Higginbotham, 2001, p. 221)

Dr. Atkinson concurs with the aforementioned point as she recalls experiences from her time as a student and professor on predominately White college campuses. She expresses her belief that Black students in PWI lack adequate support. Without the needed support during their matriculation at PWI, the Black students will be faced with some of the same obstacles and difficult choices the participants faced decades ago. All students ought to have an advisor/mentor. The participants recall they either had to choose a professor with the same ethnicity that was rare to the campus or non-existent, work with a professor of a different ethnicity, or cope with the environment and situation and not develop special connections with any of the faculty members. Indeed, it is understood that matching race
does not automatically deem one a superior mentor; however, we must be cognizant that race is an integral part of the individuals make-up. This connection provides emotional support, encouragement, and a trusting environment to plan strategies to overcome obstacles including covert racism. With a lack of available mentors with similar characteristics, minority students rely on colleagues and those outside the academy that share certain characteristics. This becomes an obstacle when the students are disenfranchised from the needed information and support.

**Support of Others**

One role for the participants that emerged was that of a nurturer, not necessarily the nurturer of children but just the responsibility for the growth and development of another. The women took on the nurturing positions as parent or parent figure (all participants), communicator for others (Sims Doty), counselor (Cooley, J. Rhoden, F. Williams), and support system for others (Atkinson). These expectations may have appeared implicitly and/or explicitly; however the descriptions assist us in defining a portion of the true essence of the “Black” woman. For many African American women the “superwoman,” role is expected (Feminism, n.d). The Black superwoman is not a contemporary phenomenon; we are continuing a long historical tradition. By the superwoman description, Black women are expected to do it all: the job, career, support of immediate and extended family, as well as care for the spouse and children. In this role we aim for success; we do not want to let anyone down.

Dr. Sims Doty insists that family support has always been a priority. When she provided me with family information for the initial personal data form she included a note to make sure that her family’s personal information would not be disclosed in this
study. Although she is the second to the youngest child, the protective nurturing nature of her siblings was obvious. Sims Doty believes we each have obstacles that must be overcome, and with family support we are more inclined to overcome the challenges placed before us. Because of her family connection that provided continued support, Sims Doty believes it is her duty to be there for her family.

At a young age, Dr. Cooley began to see herself as a nurturer. She became the family hostess as a pre-teen and developed superb knowledge of etiquette to continue successfully in this roll. Being an optimistic person, Dr. Cooley began to look for a positive outlet to even the most negative situations. She believed it her duty to educate those around; in any situation she took the positive outlook and grew from the experience. In numerous stories that could have been seen as negative, Dr. Cooley chose to find teachable moments and become an agent of change. To illustrate the power of teaching, she shared an experience where her teaching instinct transformed a could-be negative incident into a learning moment when an impressionable child asked why her skin was different from his.

Dr. Rhoden believes we “short-change the younger generation” by not educating them and providing the nurturing environment they need. She is a firm believer that as adults, we need to take a more active role in the lives of children. As a counselor, J. Rhoden knows the importance of nurturing and support of others and how these encounters affect everyone. She continues to display her nurturing nature as she always thinks of ways to help others. As a counselor and mental health counselor, Williams continued to hone her skills to support those less fortunate. Now as the executive director of the George Washington Carver Interpretative Museum, she intends to nurture and
support the community by providing knowledge of Africa and African descendants. Dr. Atkinson, affectionately known as Momma Pearl has countless children, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren because she believes it her purpose in life to support and nurture those in need. During her retirement she works diligently on several executive boards to counsel and support any in need from troubled youth to weary doctoral students.

*Financial Obstacles*

Each of the participants discussed financial obligations as an obstacle when considering higher education. The women in this study found the cost of education a particularly difficult barrier to overcome. Four of the participants during their educational careers were faced with financial pressures of providing support for young children while financing higher education. All participants had family obligations and home expenses. Dr. Rhoden talked about working two jobs while attending classes.

The one obstacle that Sims Doty mentioned from her academic career was that of financial costs. There is no evading the reality that college costs. Sims Doty remembers the finances needed for books, ancillaries, room, board, etc. were always looming issues. It was her opinion that in order to be successful we must not focus on the negative, our lack of finances, but the positive, our options to obtain finances to complete higher education.

Dr. Cooley recalls several ways her educational costs were managed. In boarding school, the students each had chores and duties. “Even there [school] everybody had responsibilities.” Dr. Cooley was in charge of making the biscuits for breakfast. At Tuskegee Institute the students once again had chores and daily duties. Also at Tuskegee and Purdue University, she was a student worker. Dr. Cooley worked in the library when
her classes were over. At Purdue University she served as a Library Assistant. While at
the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Dr. Cooley served as a House Fellow and Head
Fellow where she was paid $75 monthly to help pay school expenses.

Oklahoma State proved a financial challenge for Dr. Rhoden. She remembers
being the only Black student in the doctoral program. The financial aid department
denied her the graduate assistantship she had previously been awarded. Because of this,
she used all her savings to help cover the costs of classes. While in the doctoral program,
she was working two off campus jobs at nights to help provide some support for her
education and her family. For a short period she had an assistantship for a sociology
professor. Dr. Williams also had assistantships during graduate work and maintained full
time employment during doctoral work. Dr. Atkinson received several scholarships,
fellowships, and an assistantship to offset her financial obligations.

Spirituality

African American women’s spiritual base provides internal skills to adapt to
changes and situations that occur in life. “Religious faith was largely responsible for our
ancestors’ ability to sustain themselves through the many atrocities of our cultural
history” (Bridgforth, 2000, p. 54). The church was considered a “constructed”
environment that provided a safe space for African American families (Collins, 2000, p.
110). In these safe spaces, Black women were free from surveillance of the dominant
culture. They could talk freely and create an environment for their children to facilitate
the needed development of their children. In these spaces the participants grew
academically, socially, and spiritually.
Spirituality was discussed as an essential component in life for the participants. In an email correspondence Sims Doty expressed a strong spiritual belief as she acknowledged her higher power. “My main motivation comes from a Higher Power. God in His infinite wisdom gives me the courage and strength to move forward and He has placed that within me.” Dr. Cooley recognizes her dependence on a higher power and connection to spirituality as well. She was baptized at her home church Antioch Baptist Church at the age of four. When she was 31, she was confirmed in the Episcopal Church, Dioceses of Alabama at the Chapel of the Holy Cross in Huntsville, Alabama. While in graduate school at Purdue University she served the Alter Guild; she also held this position at St. Francis House at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. After Dr. Cooley joined the faculty of Tuskegee Institute (now know as Tuskegee University), she transferred her membership to St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in Tuskegee. At every stage of her life, Dr. Cooley found her place in the church. Williams recalls her parents made sure that she had a strong spiritual foundation. As a child she regularly attended Sunday school and church services. Sunday services was an all day affair for Atkinson family. Her family attended early services at her father’s church, then Sunday school and church service at her mother’s church. Afterwards Sunday dinner was a time for reflection, thanksgiving and learning as their house was always open for visitors.

My primary intent was to present the stories of five African American women with doctoral degrees and career experiences in the field of education; not just tell their stories, but use the tales to bring new perspectives and deeper understanding. My deeper awareness includes my acceptance that I am not a victim; the women of the study are not victims. Indeed, there were struggles and injustices and barriers. The focus need not be
on the obstacles, but on the power and strength that steer us through to achieve our goals.

I recognize also that it is acceptable to discuss the obstacles and racism. Through these tense conversations, the target and director of the racial discrimination are provided the space to revaluate their perspectives. With these discussions we share experiences with others and power is gained in the connection with others that empathize and triumphed over similar experiences.

The project was an exploration in developing an understanding of how five African American women were able to endure and thrive in the academy. The journey taken with each participant provides a unique byline for the rich narrative that combines their stories. Based on the interviews and other communications, the experiences of the participants were positive. According to Patricia Hill Collins (1991), the lives of Black women are inextricably linked to a past of racist and sexist oppression that institutionalizes the devaluation of African American women. This unique position allows us African American women the advantage of relating to different worlds because of multiple consciousnesses. Race and gender may have been among the obstacles placed before the participants; however, these obstacles were not given power by accentuation in the memory or their lives.

Cultural differences, even the differences found between African American women, emerge in subtle ways. For instance, people from different cultures have different styles of recounting past events, writing, explaining and arguing beliefs. I noticed that all the participants in the study remained cognizant of what they said and who may be affected. Each person was very protective of their families and past experiences. This action puts me in mind of the culture of power that Lisa Delpit (1995)
insists affects the way we, people of color, talk, write, dress, and interact. She advocates that we learn to express our own culture and style; however, she believes it is imperative we know the rules and codes – the power and code of the dominant society. Dr. Juanita Sims Doty, Dr. Fannie Richardson Cooley, Dr. Joyce Rhoden, Dr. Francina Williams, and Dr. Anna Pearl Atkinson know the power relationships that exist; they have succeeded despite the power relationships.

The study also revealed that the African American women with doctoral degrees that participated in this study have unique experiences that distinguish them from the larger population from which they are always associated – African Americans and women. The truth of the matter is that lived experiences work together to differentiate individuals. Research that includes African American women can not be instantly generalized to encompass all African American women. The differences become apparent as I had in-depth conversations with the participants. They continue to be a life long learners, community advocates, and mentors to others; these women continue to change. The women strongly believe in “giving back” to their communities; however, their lives, experiences, and goals can not be combined into one category.

Each of the participants in this study did whatever was necessary to complete higher education and become successful in their own right. In life too often choices are accompanied with personal sacrifices (i.e. family, loss of identity, silence). For the participants (and me), higher education, more specifically doctoral programs, require self awareness and self discipline. These are necessary not only in the academic settings but in the social environment. Each of the five participants was confronted with overt and covert racism, prejudged by stereotypes, received less than equal opportunity at least one
time during their journey, and financial obstacles. Their continual mode of action—tackling the obstacles head-on and one at a time they triumphed.

**Theoretical Contributions**

This study provided the background to explore the struggles and successes of African American women with doctoral degrees and career experiences in the field of education. Even though my study focused on the experiences of only five African American women, their stories added to Peterson’s (1992) discussion of the will and success of African American women. Her research was further supported by this study as I found that despite the challenges of racism and sexism, the participants of my study are quite capable in developing strategies to survive and achieve success. “To understand the will of a Black woman, one must look at her life and how her relationships and beliefs serve as a reference point for all that she does” (Peterson, 1992, p. 85).

Through the lens of Black feminist thought informed by critical race theory, I was able to view the experiences of these participants by listening, recording, and learning as their lives unfolded to identify circumstances, events, and people that impacted their existence. While these women had similar experiences growing up and in the academia, the experiences cannot be categorized in neat groups to explore issues of class, gender and racial obstacles. Connections are complex. Black families traditionally encourage values that fostered success in society with maintaining connection with the Black community. Social class was not viewed as a separating factor, but one that united those who wanted to provide their children with exposure conducive to success. The participants’ education span the time period of the mid twentieth century. These five women could be representative of the majority of African American women whose
educational options were influenced by gender. “Black women’s educational futures were shaped by gender restrictions by within their own communities and within the larger society” (Higginbotham, 2001, p. 12). During this time Black women were educated to work in the traditional occupations as teachers, nurses, social workers, and librarians (Higginbotham, 1987). The participants in this study have been teachers, counselors, librarians, and social workers. By viewing the small segments of their lives that were presented we recognize the differences that combine to make us all unique. Even with only five participants, it is easy to recognize the obstacles and challenges that faced Black women in a racist society. Collins supports this point in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) as she contends that Being Black and women in the United States provides African American women with some common experiences.

U.S. Black women’s similar work and family experiences as well as our participation in diverse expressions of African American culture men that…Black women as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female. For individual women in the United States can stimulate a distinctive consciousness concerning our own experiences and society overall. Many African American women grasp this connection between what one does and how one thinks. (p 24)

As unique as each participant was, I found a strong similarity in their resolve not to focus on negative aspects in life. I propose that one reason these women are successful is that they continue to remain optimistic by turning negatives into positives; moreover, they have refused to succumb to the negatives in their environment. Becoming privy to the reality that even the smallest events help in creating the total person, helps one
understand that each journey carries a story. There are other stories that help create the whole and they too need to be heard.

This exploration was limited because of the number of participants. However, the results suggest that success and inspiration are influenced both by internal and external motivations. The participants’ positive formative experiences, encouraging developmental education supported by encouragement and challenges enhanced the chances that the participants would overcome their obstacles and achieve their goals.

The study also found that the participants held strong faith in their abilities and determination in their capabilities. This strong faith in self and a higher power nurtured and supported them from early educational and social development. Sims Doty explained that her strength and motivation comes from a Higher Power. She asserts that with God and her family’s support and encouragement, she was able to overcome any obstacle. Dr. Cooley shared the support and strength she received from her mother as well as the spiritual strength she developed from a very young age. J. Rhoden exudes the same optimistic attitude with personal strength and motivation. She said that her motivation and work ethic is such that it may scare others, but this was instilled in her as a child in Jamaica. Williams remembers her mother as a deeply spiritual woman that made sure her children knew the importance of faith. Atkinson had many learning experiences centered on her immediate family through experiences with her church family and religious connections in the community. Sunday was a day dedicated to the spiritual learning and thanksgiving.

The participants all laughed that they grew up believing they were rich. Higginbotham (2001) suggests
Many people in the Black community…are only comfortable with defining social class as a group that shares certain values. Objectively, work-class families that express mainstream values are often accepted as middle class. (p. 21).

For the participants, it was not until they were adolescents that they realized they were not “rich” by the standard definition. They all grew up in a home with the basic amenities (i.e. indoor plumbing, electricity, plenty of healthy food), and their family had mainstream values. The participants’ parents had jobs, careers, and dreams for their children to be successful. Dr. Cooley’s father was a farmer; Dr. Rhoden’s and Dr. Williams’ mothers were educators; Dr. Atkinson’s father worked at the port and brought travelers home for hot meals and rest.

These five African American women had similar experiences growing up, in educational settings, and working in the academy. Yet we can not neatly categorize their stories in simplified charts. Studies on African Americans and women ought not be generalized to fit African American women. Those studies that have a focus on African American women must be cognizant of the differences and note them as such – differences not diminution. The number of African American women who attempt and succeed in higher education continues to increase, but there is still is much room for improvement. Indeed, the participants of this study had resilience and strategies for success. Their stories should be shared with others beginning their life’s journey.

**Recommendations**

By sharing the voices of African American women with doctoral degrees, this study has allowed the voices of a few from a marginalized group to be heard. Through
accounts of their struggles and successes I have been able to continue to explore the questions that guided this study. Following are the recommendations for future research:

1. According to this study internal and external motivation is an important element when exploring the achievement of African American women. I propose additional research to study this phenomenon, with a focus on the influence of the family environment and personal characteristics. Also the research may include more participants.

2. The participants each mentioned the support of their parents but continued to specify actions of their mothers. Greater insight may be revealed by exploring the relationship between African American women with doctoral degrees and their mothers.

**Reconciling the Story**

The perspectives presented in Resilient Lives were gathered from a unique position. I, as the researcher and Black woman concluding my doctoral studies, have been allowed to listen and appreciate the participants’ stories from multiple positions. As I concluded my interviews I began to revisit my doctoral journey. Listening to these strong Black women I began to recognize my strengths. I recalled growing up thinking and believing one thing or another about myself. As time passed I learned so much more about who I was, what I believed, and what I desired. One thing became crystal clear for me – things will continue to change as I live, learn, and grow. When obstacles come my way I hear my mother’s voice – “This too shall pass.” Instantly I am reminded that the challenges will come and I directly or indirectly change me – who I am, what I believe, what I know, and what I desire. The challenges help me grow. It is up to me to put a positive spin on the outcome.
As we tell and retell our changing stories, our culture narrative theories about the nature of identity are constantly developing. The time we know who we are might be the time we do not know who we are. As our life experiences evolve…our roles shift accordingly. (He, 2003, p. 76).

Because of the injustices I experienced during my public and higher educational journey I questioned who I was. In a time when racism was supposedly something in the past, it continues to take place in some form in our everyday lives. The distinction of being Black in the south in the United States has changed how I converse, interact, and view people and things. Being an African American comes with a unique set of experiences as does being a woman. I am what I am; you can not divorce my Blackness from my womanness. In society when you combine the two qualities, Black and woman, the position still remains within the larger Black community. There are no specific characteristics for all Black women; therefore our complexities and individualities seem to be often overlooked as we are placed in one large group. Is this a conspiracy? I often ask this question as I am continually placed in a large homogeneous group. I now see positioning as a ploy from the dominant culture to confuse. Being unable to find a secure position or understand my multiple identities, it becomes easier to conform to stereotypes. At this point I truly understand Collins’ (1991) plea that Black women not accept other people’s definition of them. Through Black feminist thought we use our specialized knowledge to create a stand point to embrace what we are.

According to Nobles (1986), African American females must know who they are in order to know where they have been and where they plan to go in life. I agree with Nobles in that we must know ourselves and what we want in order to have a true
understanding of where and how we fit. This type of knowledge re-ignited my passion to know me and my accept inquisitiveness. In this new space I became passionate about my doctoral journey and finding answers to my questions.

As I matriculated through Georgia Southern University I wanted to find the answers to my questions, find a way to give voice to my silenced voice, express my beliefs, and share the stories of others that had been silenced. The search for answers has changed my understanding of identity. Now I have a more fluid definition of identity as I recognize that experiences influence identity; experiences are continual, so our identities are continually changing as we grow from these experiences. Akin to the five participants, my upbringing supported and strengthened my need for learning and my urge to give back to the community. I recognize that these beliefs are not universal for African American women. Wanting to give back or support others is a distinctive part of me; it is okay to be unique. This awareness is powerful.

I too have experienced injustices, I understand my participants and stand in agreement with them that we should remain optimistic and strong. I see myself as a part of the solution and not the dilemma. Like my grandmother and mother, I am the bearer of ambitions, dreams, and change. As long as I can remember I have had a sense within to help others. It is quite possible that my foremothers knew the importance of self-help in order to help family and community.

As a child I remember having a passion for knowledge, learning, and stories. I was always taught that knowledge is power; knowledge has power – the power to make changes. Because of this belief education was one focal point of my upbringing. In my household advanced degree attainment was a natural progression. As a child I enjoyed
reading and writing, creating stories to tell my personal journey. At some point in my public education career this passion for storying and dreaming disappeared. I really began to understand that no matter what is said, skin color is material.

In my home, education was the key to achievement of most dreams. My mother, aunts and grandmother were educators, community activists, and life long learners. As I child I remember a dream was to receive a “doctorate.” Even when I lost my dream because teachers along the way tried to deter me with stereotypical beliefs that “Black kids don’t get doctorates,” my mother continued to ask me where I was going for doctoral study. Her questions of “where” and “when” instead of “if” shattered the negative projections and opinions that were presented to me as fact. This dissertation, the story of my participants, my story, is the culminating act to gain my dream deferred - my doctorate.

Several decades have passed decades since Sims Doty, Cooley, Rhoden, Williams, and Atkinson were in my position of completing the final steps for the doctoral degree. Rhoden experienced blatant racism as her financial award was stripped away; Atkinson continually had her intellect questioned when a face was put with the written work. Have things changed in the institution? As I question myself I sit carefully on the fence to answer. I am a Black woman that demands my voice not be silenced, but when asked the difficult question directly, those familiar butterflies in the stomach began to flutter. My experience at Georgia Southern was unique in that I attended a PWI where the professors seemed genuinely interested in my story. Financial rewards were not taken from me, as a matter of fact; I was the 2004-2005 recipient of the Bryan Deever
Memorial Scholarship. My ability to complete work was not questioned; in fact, several of my professors praised my abilities and raised the bar to demand more.

The participants all reflected on the importance of mentorship, yet recognized the challenges when the mentors were of different cultures and held different beliefs. Similar to Cooley, Williams, and Atkinson, my most devoted mentor and continual support came from my mother. In the PWI setting I found mentoring and support; however, I recognized that I was always aware of everything I said. At times this put an internal strain on me in that I could not or would not discuss issues of concern out of fear that my position would not be understood or accepted. The reality that I was a Black woman at a predominantly White institution in a pilot program was constant; I felt that I must represent Black women to the best of my ability. As I think about my experiences I see how several of the participants chose to steer the conversation away from issues of racism. As I question myself, I recognized an uneasiness as I confirmed the reality that color is accounted for. I steered my reflection off the direct path.

Several of my professors acknowledge the importance of recognizing gender and race. There have been several instances during class and online debates where the topics were intense as we discussed issues of class, gender, and race. The overall atmosphere was accepting of differences; however, I remained cautious and doubtful. My opinions were solicited; and my views were acknowledged. As I reflect on the positives from this program I am reminded of Dr. Cooley when she wanted to make sure I did not take her stories as meaning there were no negative experiences. Was I stifling negative experiences?
Indeed, Georgia Southern University was a challenging and life – changing experience for me. While I was focused on my task at hand, and remembered the positive I was forced to ask myself again- were there any negative experiences? Yes, there were times I thought the professors did not understand my experiences as a Black student. I recall times being asked to essentialize about how Black women, Black men, or Black students would act/react to a particular situation. Of course even if I had no experience in that area I felt obliged to respond. I did not place this in a negative lens in that I believed those who asked the questions wanted to learn and felt comfortable to open dialogue with me. In some classes I felt that my work was held to a different standard that that of my White colleagues. This has been a standard for me since I began primary school; I do not consider it a negative, but a reality. I even had an opportunity to experience being a part of the dominant culture (computer literates) because of my technology skills when I took classes with no face-to-face meetings. Instead of being the Black woman in the doctoral program I was the woman with the first-rate computer skills. In this environment, I believe I was treated somewhat differently as I was only a screen name and electronic presentation of my intellect instead of a person of color that had to continually prove her intellect. This was one opportunity when I did not have to work against a standard stereotype for Black women. I must admit though in some classes I was always conscious of how I responded to discussions because of the covert undertones of the conversations. Remaining attentive is something I have grown accustomed to. As a result of living in a prejudiced environment being marginalized as both a woman and as a person of color I have learned many things about self-preservation and survival.
From experiences, I have found that even in the most liberal situations I must be aware of what I am saying, what others are saying, and the covert undertones of what is not said. Could this be a hindrance? Indeed it could. But looking through the positive lens, this reality in my life taught me to be sensitive to others, empathetic and determined. Satya Mohanty's (2000) asserts this awareness or knowledge is derived from epistemic privilege. Mohanty believes that our positioning in life affects our interpretations; this position is affected by characteristics such as gender, race, or sexual orientation. Epistemic privilege takes the optimistic by moving the perspective from the survival mode to the active mode. Instead of focusing on the negative (racism), the oppressed use this new consciousness to institute change. With my epistemic knowledge and cache of experiences, I find the interpretation of my experiences falls in line with that of my participants. I believe this positiveness pivotal to “success.” In life we have obstacles and injustices, and choices. Each of the participants interviewed for this study experienced injustices, racism, and obstacles, and each of them chose to interpret these experiences from an optimistic perspective. This revelation leads me to ask, if the participants chose to interpret their experiences from a pessimistic lens, would they still be successful? During the interview process, Cooley, Williams and Atkinson declared that it is impossible to focus on the negative and be successful. Undeniably, I assert attitudes – positive and optimistic attitudes – are one feature in successful African American women.

Feeling this pressure was one of the determining factors of having a committee of women. Being women in higher education is a characteristic we shared. Also, my committee would be able to recall their doctoral experiences when their abilities were
called into question because of gender. With this commonality, I hoped to focus more attention on my perspective as a Black woman in pursuing a doctoral degree. When I think of my committee, I see a fluid group. These four women, one African American, one Chinese, and two White, each provided a different type of mentoring. Whether by phone call or email, I believed my study and voice were important to them and to educational advancement. I found it helpful when my chair, one of the White women, had issues with my work that could be perceived as cultural. Instead of shutting down dialogue and stifling my ideas, she suggested that I discuss the topics in question with the African American committee member. Having the acquiescence to discuss issues with any of the committee members afforded me a level of comfort to honestly explore the topics at hand.

In the beginning of this study several questions were raised based on personal inquisitiveness. The significance of these questions satisfied the inquiry of the researcher while exploring the experiences of five African American women who have reached the pinnacle of academic achievement and acquired success as defined by their terms. From these narratives it has been implied that there should not be importance placed on the number of generations of family members who have college degrees or large endowments. What matters more is the personal will and drive to succeed that has been instilled in the individual. Furthermore this study suggests that resiliency and success call for perseverance, faith in individual capabilities, and a support system. The participants maintained their support systems consisted of family and religious faith. This study explored the lives and experiences of five African American women with doctoral degrees and career experiences in the field of education in an effort to learn from their
experiences and understand how they overcame overt and covert obstacles. More African American women seem to be making the decision to begin the journey to obtain higher education. The stories of women that have already met the challenge span several decades and each provide examples of how these women who chose to pursue this degree accepted the challenges, overcame the obstacles, and made the needed sacrifices to succeed.
I Bequeath to You

I bequeath to you my sisters:

**Patience** to challenge the unjuts that cross your path

**Enlightment** to recognize your strength and grace

**Recognition** that “this too shall pass” when obstacles continue to appear

**Spiritual strength** to sustain when the nights seem long and dark

**Endurance** to stand up for what you believe, even when you stand alone

**Virtue** built strong over a lifetime of blessings.

**Embraces** from family, friends, and faith

**Respect** for yourself and others. Respect for diversity, obstacles, experiences.

**Actions** that are allowed to speak for you. Let your achievements brag.

**Never forget** the source of your strength. In all things give thanks.

**Command respect** and emanate respect in all you say or do.

**Experiences** are meant to teach. Proudly share what you have learned.

For you my sisters I bequeath the **perseverance** that was given to me.

*Use it.*

*Share it.*

Paula Baker (June 2005)
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Companies, Inc.


http://www.discriminations.us/storage/001952.html


http://www.galegroup.com/free_resources/whm/bio/steinem_g.htm


Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT

COLLEGE OF Education

DEPARTMENT OF Curriculum, Foundations, and Reading

My name is Paula Booker Baker, and I am a doctoral student in Curriculum Studies at Georgia Southern University. My proposed dissertation is entitled Resilient Lives: A Critical Narrative Inquiry into the Triumphs and Struggles of Three African American Women with Doctoral Degrees. The purpose of this research study is to explore the childhood and educational experiences, family and community connections as well as struggles and triumphs faced in the lives of African American women that have received terminal degrees. My dissertation purpose is to study not only the achievements of the participants, but also explore the impacts of classism, racism and sexism. This dissertation will help to understand how tradition and life experiences have impacted these women through socialization and how they have succeeded against covert and overt adversities.

Your name was given to me by a mutual friend as a potential participant for this research project based on your completion of a terminal degree in the field of education. This letter is to formally request your assistance in my dissertation research. If you agree to participate, please sign and date the consent form and place it in the envelope I have provided. A copy of this information will be returned to you for your records.

I will narrow the participant group based on several qualifiers. If you meet all criteria, I will contact you to schedule four interview segments each lasting approximately one hour at a time and location that is convenient to you. Whether you have been selected for this study you will be contact by me to thank you for your participation in this study.

The benefits of this study to participants include opportunities to collaborate with the researcher and present personal success stories. Telling and retelling of your stories will allow you and me as well as those who read the finished to reevaluate what we know and how we know. These opportunities to reflect on lived experiences may allow me to locate connections that could shed light on how we, as educators of today, can work effectively with young students.
The only risk to you as a research participant in this study is identification as a participant. **One essential qualifier is that you decline anonymity.** Pseudonyms for your name and the colleges or universities you attended will not be used; however all transcripts of interviews and field texts will be provided to you for approval, and any changes you request will be made prior to the analysis of the data. Additionally, all results of this research project will be made available to interview participants upon completion. Because of generalizable knowledge, the results are intended to be published. You will have an opportunity to approve the text submitted for publication. At the conclusion of the study, audio tapes, transcripts, and field notes will be stored in my home office in a locked file cabinet. No one will have access to this information. The tapes will be destroyed by the year 2008.

If you have any questions about this research project, please call me, Paula Booker Baker, at 678-479-5463 (home), 770-401-7113 (cell), or feel free to email me at paula.baker@comcast.net. You may also contact my dissertation advisor, Delores Liston, at 912-871-1551 or listond@georgiasouthern.edu. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, Contact Georgia southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-486-7758.

There will be no costs to result from participation in this research study. Neither will there be any compensation for participation.

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You may withdraw from this study by informing me of your desire to longer participate. You have the right not to answer questions posed, as well as the right to withdraw from this study at any point during the research process without penalty.

In order to consent to participate in this research study you must be 18 years of age or older. If you consent, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

**Title of Project:** Resilient Lives: A Critical Narrative Inquiry into the Triumphs and Struggles of Five African American Women with Doctoral Degrees  
**Principal Investigator:** Paula Baker, 1096 Wynnbrook Lane, Jonesboro, GA  
678-479-5463 (home) 770-401-7113 (cell)  
paula.baker@comcast.net

**Faculty Advisor:** Delores Liston, Georgia Southern University, P.O. Box 8144, Statesboro, GA 912-871-1551 listond@georgiasouthern.edu

______________________________________  _____________________  
Participant Signature     Date

________________________________________________________________________

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

______________________________________  _____________________  
Investigator Signature     Date
Appendix B

Personal Data Form

This information will be used only for the research study entitled: **Resilient Lives: A Critical Narrative Inquiry into the Triumphs and Struggles of Five African American Women with Doctoral Degrees.**

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**You may attach paper if additional space is needed.**

Tell me about your immediate family.
### Personal Information

Tell me about your extended family.

Tell me about your family members to complete higher education?

Summarize your work history.
Appendix C

Interview 1 – Life / Introduction

1. Tell me about yourself. How would you describe yourself? Follow up: do you consider yourself to be successful?

2. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses?

3. How would you think a colleague would describe your strengths or weaknesses?

4. What was school like for you as a child? Were you ever given a special award for academics as a child? If so, could you tell me about that experience?

5. What motivates you?

6. Who was the person that had the most positive influence on your life? What did they do?

7. What organizations do you belong to? Do any organizations that you belong to have special importance to you?

8. What accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction in life?

9. What are the focal points of your life?

10. What advice would you give others in relation to life, family, graduate work, and academia?

11. Is there anything you have always wanted to do but haven’t done yet? What has kept you from doing this?
Appendix D

Interview 2 – HBCU/PWI Experiences

1. Where did you earn your undergraduate degree? Why did you choose this institution? Did any of your family members attend this institution?

2. Where did you earn your graduate degree? Why did you choose this institution? Did any of your family attend your alma maters?

3. Tell me about your HBCU experience. Let’s start with academics. What do you remember most about your classes, classmates, and professors? Did these connections impact your undergraduate experience?

4. Socially, how would you describe the social life, dating, and clubs (sorority)? What do you remember most about social life off campus when you were an undergraduate? Did these things impact your experience?

5. What three things were most important for you at _______ (HBCU)?

6. Tell me about your experience at the White institution? Academically, what do you remember about your classes, classmates, and professors?

7. How did the connections with classmates and professors affect your graduate experience?

8. What three things were most important for you at _______ (W/I)?

9. What do you remember most about your social experience during graduate school? What type of impact did these experiences have on you?

10. How did experiences growing up influence your HBCU experience?

11. How did your life experiences influence your W/I experience?

12. How did your HBCU experience influence your W/I?

13. How have both college experiences affected your career and life?
Appendix E

Interview 3 – Family

1. Use the form to individualize question. Tell me about your immediate and extended family. Ask follow up questions about siblings who attended HBCU or W/I.

2. What is your earliest childhood memory where you tackled adversity? How was the situation handled? How did it affect you?

3. What holidays were celebrated with your family? How would you describe connections with your extended family?

4. Did your family move when you were growing up? If so, how did you deal with the stress of adjusting to new surroundings?

5. Where would you go on “family outings” or vacations? Were locations decided on based on tourist sites, extended family, educational opportunities, etc?

6. What was it like growing up in your environment? What was your schedule on a typical school night? On a weekend?

7. Use the form to individualize question. How did your family view education? How did your parents influence your educational accomplishments? [Did they attend the same institution(s)?]

8. What kind of family support (i.e. emotional, financial) did you get when you decided to pursue your advanced degrees?

9. Are there stories of famous or infamous members of your family?

10. In my study resilience is the process of adaptation when obstacles block our progress. This includes classism, racism, and sexism. When I say “resilience” what memory stands out most for you?
Appendix F

Interview 4 – Challenges / Successes

1. Why did you choose your particular career? Was this profession your first choice? If not, what made you go into education? What was your first choice?

2. When you think of the path towards this career, what were some obstacles in your way? How did your overcome these obstacles?

3. How would you describe a resilient person?

4. Several authors say that everyone has an innate resilience? What is your opinion as to why young people do not exert resilience when faced with challenges?

5. Tell me a time when your resilience strengthened. (a challenge/obstacle)

6. In your opinion, what makes a successful person?

7. Are you successful by your definition?

8. What accomplishments are you the most proud of? What goals are in your future plans?

9. Tell me about major obstacle you encountered and defeated. How did it affect you to overcome the problem and continue on your course?