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Counted Out, but Counted On: the Hidden Academic Journey of Millennial Black Women in Majority White Urban Universities

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COUNTED OUT, BUT COUNTED ON: THE HIDDEN ACADEMIC JOURNEY OF
MILLENNIAL BLACK WOMEN IN MAJORITY WHITE URBAN UNIVERSITIES

by

Danielle L. Apugo

A Dissertation Submitted in
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ABSTRACT

COUNTED OUT, BUT COUNTED ON: THE HIDDEN ACADEMIC JOURNEY OF MILLENNIAL BLACK WOMEN IN MAJORITY WHITE URBAN UNIVERSITIES

by

Danielle L. Apugo

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2016
Under the Supervision of Professor Larry G. Martin

Eighty percent of Black women (BW) enrolled in colleges and universities attend majority white institutions (Hill, 2009). Though seemingly highly represented in higher education, research studies cite BW as having a graduate degree completion rate of less than 30% (Aston & Oseguera, 2004). A phenomenological study involving 15 graduate (master's degree candidates) millennial Black women aspiring and/or acting leaders (MBWALs) was conducted to explore the *types* of peer relationships--*A mutual relationship of similar hierarchical status--in terms of educational level or age group--where both parties perceive themselves as equals*--(McDougall & Beattie, 1997) MBWALs experience. The study also sought to understand how these relationships functioned and positively influenced their existence in majority white urban universities (MWUUs). The researcher leveraged both the perspectives of *Social Network Theory* (Kram, 1985) and *Black feminist-Womanism* (Lindsey-Dennis, 2015) to structure the research process, and to interpret each participant's experiences as MBWALS in MWUUs. Findings from this study suggests that graduate millennial Black women aspiring or acting leaders (MBWALs) experienced peer relationships in a variety of ways, and were key in providing an alternate means of sustainability--*showing endurance and the act of enduring against something*--and persistence during their time in pursuit of their graduate degree. Through

this research, three main types of peer relationships surfaced and were identified as the following: (a) the *sistah gurl* peer relationship, (b) the *proxy mentor peer* relationship, and (c) the *rival* peer relationship. Other themes emerged from the study in regards to MBWALs' use of peer relationships as identify affirmation and ways to buffer negative race related behaviors such as micro-aggressions-- (Sue, Capodilupo, et. al., 2007, p. 273). These themes led to conclusions that peer relationships played a substantial role in the academic lives of MBWALs.

Keywords: Black feminist-Womanism, persistence, sustainability, peer relationships, millennial

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DEDICATION

This story is dedicated to my father Uche and my mother Lorraine, whose stories have always inspired, intrigued, and perplexed me over the past 20 something years. Thank you for awakening my curiosity, nurturing my boldness, and teaching me to seek out the stories of others and to cherish my own.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Dedication.....	v
List of Figures.....	vii
List of Tables.....	ix

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Overview of Context.....	1
Problem Statement.....	2
Statement of Purpose & Research Questions.....	4
Significance of Study.....	5
Theoretical Perspective.....	6
Research Methods.....	7
Assumptions.....	8
Definition of Terms.....	9
Chapter Summary.....	11

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Context.....	12
Section I: Black Women in Higher Education.....	13
Educational Encounters.....	14
Research Voids.....	16
Section II: Black Women's Leadership in the United States.....	17
The "Anomaly Factor"	17
Social Justice and Community Leadership.....	18
Leadership Persistence and Affirmation.....	19
The State of MBWASLs.....	20
Section III: The Pulse of Persistence in MWUUs.....	22
A Hidden Culture of Coping.....	23
The Strong Black Woman Curse.....	24
Section IV: Current Lenses on Persistence and the Black College Women.....	30
Chartering Change.....	33
Section V: Millennials on the Move.....	34
Relationships.....	36
Leadership.....	36
Section VI: Black Female Collegiates and Relationships.....	37
Relationships and Identity Development.....	38
Towards Defining Peers.....	38
Contradictions and Missing Knowledge.....	39
Section: VII: Chapter Summary.....	40
Conceptual Framework.....	42

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction.....	43
Case Study Design and Overview	43
Rationale.....	44
Research Sample.....	45
Data Collection Methods.....	47
Data Analysis.....	51
Limitations of Study.....	56
Chapter Summary.....	56

CHAPTER IV: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Introduction.....	58
Theme 1: <i>The Three Types of Peer Relationships</i>	63
Theme 2: <i>Alternate Paths of Persistence & Sustainability</i>	70
Theme 3: <i>Peer Relationships as Identity Affirmation</i>	75
Theme 4: <i>Anticipatory Negative Race-Related Behavior</i>	79
Theme 5: <i>Familiar Terrain</i>	83
Theme 6: <i>Trailblazing</i>	85
Focus Group Findings.....	87
Chapter Summary.....	95

CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION & SYNTHESIS

Introduction.....	96
Analysis.....	96
Presentation of Categories.....	97
Theoretical Interpretations.....	121
Revisiting Assumptions.....	124
Analysis Summary.....	125
Synthesis.....	126

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction.....	132
Conclusions.....	132
Recommendations.....	135
References	142
Footnotes	154
Appendices	155

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Who is responsible for Black women’s success in college?.....	32
Figure 2. Peer relationship conceptual framework.....	42
Figure 3. Peer relationship commonality representation.....	101
Figure 4. Peer relationships as identity affirmation (PRIA).....	106
Figure 5. MBWAL Process model for anticipatory negative race-relations.....	118
Figure 6. MBWAL Peer relationships, impact, and sustainability interaction model..	119

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Definition of terms.....	10
Table 2. Demographic table.....	59
Table 3. Frequency of interaction with all peers.....	64
Table 4. Categorical descriptions of MBWALs' peer relationships.....	70

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This journey has had many dramatic turns, starting from the nation's capitol all the way to the brew city, but despite all of the growing pains--I wouldn't trade it for the world! I have learned so much and have discovered that so much of who I am is a direct reflection of the people who have been in my life during this highly spiritual and emotional coming of age.

Again, I have to acknowledge my mother for writing the book on how to keep one's eyes on the prize—and in turn showing me how grow my very own muscle of fortitude and faith. I would also like to acknowledge those that shaped my Black girlhood growing up in a tiny rural north Louisiana town. Where I was tall, brown, wild, and loud. The town where nobody ever told me that I couldn't.

I would like to especially acknowledge my kindergarten teacher Mrs. Newton for writing on my report card that I was “*articulate*”—and for truly thinking that I knew what that meant at 5 years old. I did. Let me also acknowledge the little boy in my first grade class that called me an “*African Booty Scratcher*” when I told him that my last name (Apugo) was from Nigeria, and that I was African—and so was he.

To the students that I had the profound favor and privilege of learning from in Louisiana, D.C. and Wisconsin—I thank you. Your stories have changed my life to infinity and beyond. I love you. This is for you.

To my very own sistah gurls, those that can get a kidney or some other vital organ from me—I love you and am deeply inspired by you all.

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in my career here. I will be forever grateful for that. Dr. Mina, your deep knowledge and pedagogical approach to higher education will serve me tremendously in my future professoriate endeavors. Thank you. Dr. Martin, you are a gift from God. Your wisdom, integrity, and authentic care has forever changed and influenced me in ways of far greater depth than academe. Much respect.

Finally, in acknowledgement to the women of this study—each time one of you agreed to take part in this study—I was humbled. Each of your stories have affirmed my existence in ways far beyond this research could ever go. Without you, this would be just another one of the ideas that live inside my head. I salute you all for your grace and boldness.

In appreciation,

-DLA

“Trust yourself. Think for yourself. Act for yourself. Speak for yourself. Be yourself. Imitation is suicide”

-Marva Collins

Chapter 1: Introduction

*"I'm a survivor...
I'm not gon give up...
I'm not gon stop...
I'm gon work harder...
I'm a survivor...
I'm gonna make it...
I will survive...
and keep on survivin'"*

-Destiny's Child (2005)

For many Black women, higher education attainment has been a long contested journey of survival. Similar to the popular CBS hit reality game show *Survivor*; Black women have embodied the game show's slogan of: *Out Wit, Out Play, Out Last* in their quest for visibility and voice in academia. In some cases, Black women's intellectual prowess has proven to be both powerful and political. This is especially noticeable as a growing number of African American women may seek higher education as a means to rectify years of what some consider educational oppression within the American educational system; moreover, Black women oftentimes find themselves ill prepared for their educational experiences within Majority White Urban University (MWUUs) settings. This study's interest in MWUUs is derived from the idea that urban universities often pride themselves on being more equipped to support non-traditional, female, minority students—as well as being an entity that “aggravates the disconnection between the ivory tower and the practical world” (Riposa, 2003, p. 56).

It is through this lens that the researcher proposed a qualitative study examining graduate millennial Black women aspiring or acting (the researcher chose to involve the term “acting” because some of the women within this study are currently acting in leadership roles) leaders (MBWALs)—*graduate student born between the year 1982 and 2003 who is preparing and/or poised to lead and influence policy decisions at the local, state, national, and international levels*

to solve the grand challenges of social justice and society, she may choose to impact change through activism, advocacy, research, teaching, scholarship, or mentorship—and their varied persistence efforts. More specifically, this study aimed to understand a facet of persistence and sustainability that relates to peer relationships and how Black women may use peer relationships as central avenues of support. The researcher used the conceptual perspective of *Black Feminist-Womanism* (BFW) and Social Network Theory to understand MBWAL's existence within these settings and the developmental functions of their peer relationships. The study also integrated in-depth interviews with MBWALs, a questionnaire, and a focus group at urban universities across the United States.

Statement of the Problem

Black women account for over half of the Black student college and university enrollment (U.S. Census Bureau, October 2010). Moreover, 80% of the Black women enrolled attend majority White universities (Hill, 2009). There are research articles that cite Black women's experiences within majority White universities as psychologically taxing (Shavers & Moore, 2014; Rovai, Gallien, Wighting, 2005), with issues of race and identity being two of the most documented sources of psychological strain (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015; Henry, Butler, & West, 2011; Winkle-Wagner, 2009b; Hooks, 1989). In an effort for Black women to sustain themselves--*showing endurance and the act of enduring against something*—within their graduate degree programs, and to eventually persist to degree completion, Black women often employ coping mechanisms that can be mentally and physically harmful, such as: (a) identity shifting (code switching), (b) isolation, and (c) hyper-vigilance—*the anticipation of a negative race related encounter or action* (Shavers & Moore, 2014; Winkle-Wagner, 2009b; Clark & Benkert, 2006). This type of psychological anguish can negatively impact BW's ability

to remain enrolled, which is especially critical to consider given that BW are cited as having a graduate degree completion rate of less than 30%--leaving them half as likely to graduate than their White female counterparts (Aston & Oseguera, 2004).

The above listed graduation disparity may be particularly true if there are few university measures put into place to support the mental health of Black women. Specifically, university measures that help Black women to psychologically process the following: (a) perceived negative race-related behaviors targeted toward towards them (micro-aggressions), (b) feelings of isolation, (c) stereotype threat, (d) perceived lack of identity affirmation or spaces of identity affirmation, (e) perceived lack of mentorship, and (f) perceived lack of professional and/or academic opportunities available to them (Hunn, 2014; Love, 2008; Chesler, Lewis, & Crowfoot, 2005; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007).

Few studies on Black women graduate students in majority White universities examine how the relationships that Black women may experience during their time in graduate school may act as source of support in the face of the aforementioned listed potential obstacles. No research studies were found that were focused on *millennial* Black women and their relationship dynamics within majority White *urban* universities. As a whole, the examination of peer relationships- *A mutual relationship of similar hierarchical status--in terms of educational level or age group--where both parties perceive themselves as equals--*(McDougall & Beattie, 1997) among Black women in higher education is scant compared to other topics researched in regards to Black women and their time as graduate students (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Palmer, Maramba, and Holmes (2011) reported peer relationships as “powerful contributions” (p. 338) to the success of minority students in majority White universities. Failure to understand the types and purposes of peer relationships in the lives of minority students (MBWALs) may result in urban

universities undermining their primary mission to support historically and presently marginalized groups (Riposa, 2003). Particularly because these relationships may fulfill certain areas of emotional, psychosocial, academic, and professional support that urban universities may fall short of offering (Palmer, Maramba, & Holmes, 2011). MBWALs that are not experiencing peer relationships during their time as graduate students may have a more difficult academic journey, especially if their overall emotional, psychosocial, academic, and professional needs go unsatisfied (Henry, Butler, & West, 2011). This may create further concerns for MWUUs in terms of recruitment and retention; meaning that MBWALs that have poor experiences during their time as graduate students, may impact the decisions of prospective MBWALs desiring to enroll in a MWUU graduate master's degree program. The purpose of the following sections aimed to justify the need for more in-depth studies interrogating the specific sustainability strategies that BW may use en route to their persistence.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was four-fold; first, the researcher sought to understand and identify the types of peer relationships that 15 graduate (master's degree candidates) MBWALs experienced as a means for persistence and sustainability in MWUUs. Second, the researcher examined the purpose and necessity of forming these relationships for MBWALs. Third, the researcher set out to describe the function of these relationships, and how they are leveraged as a source of support for MBWAL's persistence and future leadership endeavors. Finally, the researcher was interested in adding another perspective to the research narrative of Black women in higher education.

Research Questions

The overarching questions that guided this research study in unearthing the experiences, of MBWALs in MWUU settings are as follows:

- (a) What types of peer relationships and for what purposes do graduate (master's degree candidates) millennial Black women aspiring and acting leaders (MBWALs) experience peer relationships within majority White urban universities (MWUUs)?
- (b) How do MBWALs perceive that peer relationships help them to persist and sustain themselves in MWUUs?

Significance of Study

This study hopes to help stakeholders (students, families, faculty, administrators, and student and academic affairs professionals) to understand the experiences of this traditionally marginalized group. While there is a limited, yet growing bank of literature on the persistence strategies, intimate relationships, and experiences of women in higher education, more information is needed pertaining to the distinctive experiences of Black female millennial graduate students in MWUUs.

This research is also poised to make a contribution to literature and institutional practices as it relates to the academic, psychological, and leadership development of MBWALs. Particularly in helping others to understand how or if MBWALs cultivate the resources around them (i.e. peers and institutional supports) to sustain themselves. This study could also inform potential MBWALs as they approach graduate study in MWUUs, by providing a model of persistence strategies and support tactics that can be employed. Possible conclusions found through this study may also act as a preparatory tool for "college bound" and college prep high schools, traditional high schools, foundational college and career readiness programs, and bridge

programs. In addition to this, recent conversations in human resource development (HRD) literature also point to the need for research centralizing women of color and best practices for leadership development (Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

Finally, the researcher envisioned this project as a possible blueprint for creating an institutional culture and climate that embraces and acknowledges the lived experiences of others, as a means to add value, validity, and affirmation to an institution's mission as an urban university, while helping to support and inform the persistence and leadership preparation for MBWALs.

Theoretical Perspective

Though *Black Feminist Thought* (BFT) and *Womanist Epistemology* are two separately identified frameworks, both perspectives centralize the ideological stance of the MBWALs within this study. To my knowledge, Lindsey-Dennis is the first researcher to fuse both terms (*Black Feminist-Womanism/BFW*) as a research paradigm. Although Lindsey-Dennis (2015) uses this perspective to examine Black girlhood, The researcher found that the marriage of both standpoints is ideal in addressing this study's central question.

Social network theory is used to understand the types of peer relationships that MBWALs may form and/or experience in order to foster persistence, and to examine how MBWALs purpose the functionality of these relationships as a developmental network that may prove essential to their (MBWALs) well-being as students. This is often hallmarked by diversity (in terms of the social and racial demographics), strength of ties, and developmental initiation (the starting point for one's social and professional development within an organization). I aim to use this theory as a basis in understanding how the "social" aspect of developmental networks may also be beneficial in persisting in an environment that is unfamiliar in culture, structure, and

ideology. These hallmarks are closely related to fundamental tenets of BFW, in the sense that they recognize the vitality in BW using diversity, strength, and developmental initiation needed for BW to foster a sense of connectivity. In addition, the “constellation” of developmental relationships that Kram (1985) identifies, for MBWALs, may be particularly beneficial in identifying how these relationships are purposed across different degree programs. Perhaps higher volumes of developmental relationships are formed based upon the program demands and degree completion criteria.

Social network theory posits that an individual’s network of relationships provides opportunities and constraints for behaviors. Kram (1985) insists that these relationships set the stage for a “constellation” of developmental relationships (Higgins, Chandler, Kram, 2007), which then form developmental networks.

Black Feminist-Womanism (BFW) is a culturally steeped perspective that “contextualiz[es] the interactive effects of herstory culture, race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression” (V. G. Thomas, 2004; Lindsey-Dennis, 2015, p.506). It also seeks to position Black women as the chief authority on narrating their own experiences and interactions within society from the doubly marginalized lens of being black and female. This vein of research calls for the critical incorporation and interrogation of BW’s social location (in this case, MWUUs) in the research process. Black Feminist-Womanism theorizes that Black women (BW) use every day experiences as a means for problem solving, which in this case, the problem is possibly learning in an environment that may not support one’s identity as a Black woman, graduate student, leader, and a millennial. The researcher posited that the *possession* of different types of peer relationships is in fact a solution to the previously stated problem, and is indeed an act of *problem solving*.

Research Methods

The qualitative research methods for this study adequately highlighted the lived experiences of MBWALs during their time as students and aspiring leaders. The researcher also sought to “empower” those participating by “minimiz[ing] the power relationships that often exist between researcher and participants [...]” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). The researcher deemed phenomenology as an appropriate and reliable method in informing the “perceptions, experiences, and cultural lens of Black, female students at majority White institutions” (Morris, p. 103, 2007).

In this study, the researcher situated the *experiences* of MBWALs forming peer relationships as the phenomenon taking place within the aforementioned setting (MWUU). Like Morris (2007), the researcher assumed that the documented experiences within this study might reflect the experiences of other MBWASLs in different MWUUs across the United States.

Assumptions

In proposing to conduct this study, I made the following assumptions:

1. MBWALs may form and/or experience peer relationships within MWUUs in order to persist academically and psychosocially (Shavers & Moore, 2014).
2. Having peer relationships is a valuable strategy for MBWALs to master and employ throughout their scholar leadership endeavors (Winkle-Wagner, 2015).
3. The formation of peer relationships is organic in nature and result primarily from MBWALs not having other avenues of support and mentorship in higher education.
4. The experiences and formation of relationships among peers may differ across different graduate programs.

TABLE 1.

Definition of Terms¹

TERM	DEFINITION
African American	The terms <i>African American</i> and <i>Black</i> are used interchangeably and include women of African, Black Latina, or Caribbean descent (Winkle-Wagner, 2015).
Persistence	The term <i>persistence</i> in this study is used to describe African American female's continuance in majority White urban universities in spite of difficulty or opposition while maintaining a healthy psychological and academic outlook. Individuals in the sample will have completed at least one year of graduate studies, and be in good academic standing. My definition of persistence is derived from the U.S. Department of Education's definition that persistence is a student's enrollment pattern with respect to staying on track to a degree. For example, students are counted as "persisting" if they are still attending college or have graduated from college (USDOE, 1995).
Majority White Urban University (MWUUs)	The term <i>predominantly white urban university</i> is defined throughout this work as a majority White university located in a metropolitan area that is concerned in outlook and programming that nurtures its surrounding urban environment. More specific criteria includes: (a) student enrollment of 20% or more on a part-time basis (b) located in a city with a population of 250,000 or more (c) has graduate and professional schools (d) grants the Ph.D. degree (Spicer, 1976, p.4).
Peer Relationships	A mutual relationship of similar hierarchical status-- <i>in terms of educational level or age group</i> --where both parties perceive themselves as equals (McDougall & Beattie, 1997). Peer relationships can also be fostered individually or among a group of individuals that is either "inter- or extra organizational" (McManus & Russell, 2007, p. 275), in this case the organization is a MWUUs. This relationship assists in the growth, learning, and development of a person, in this case the

MBWAL. This definition is not to be confused with that of a mentorship, as mentors are often thought to provide more of a career based function (McManus & Russell, 2007).

Millennial Black woman aspiring or acting leader (MBWAL)	A graduate student born between the year 1982 and 2003 who is preparing and/or poised to lead and influence policy decisions at the local, state, national, and international levels to solve the grand challenges of social justice and society—particularly those challenges that affect the Black community. She may choose to affect change through activism, advocacy, research, teaching, scholarship or mentorship.
Black Feminist-Womanism	Perspective cited by Lindsey-Dennis (2015) that postulates the idea that BFW epistemologies exist to weave together Black girls and women’s “worldview, behaviors, and psychosocial outcomes” (Lindsey-Dennis, 2015 p. 513).
Leadership	I define leadership throughout this work as: “movement, taking the organization or some part of it to a new direction, solving problems, being creative, initiating new programs, building organization structures, improving quality” and “influencing one or more people in positive ways” (Davis, 2003; Alston, 2011, p. 8)
Eurocentric	Defined as the implementation or display of European or Anglo-American values and experiences.
Micro-aggression	brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group (Sue, Capodilupo, et. al., 2007, p. 273)
Race-Related	Having to do with a person’s race, culture, or ethnicity.
Sustainability	Showing endurance and the act of enduring against something.

Note. list generated for the purpose of explaining all elements of the study.

Chapter Summary

The information presented in this chapter set the proposed grounds for research. The research question(s), problem, purpose, and significance of study are key in helping the reader to prepare for what is to be understood and interrogated throughout this project. The theoretical framework appointed (BFW) appropriately situates MBWALs as individuals who are authorities of their own lived experiences and socialization as it relates to their setting. In the following chapter, the researcher offered a review of the related research literature to substantiate the problem outlined in the aforementioned sections. The literature is organized in a manner that allows the reader to understand the pertinent scholastic conversations surrounding this study. The review is divided into several parts, which are representative of the major thematic concentrations throughout my search. Next, the methodology section will establish phenomenological inquiry as the basis for research. This chapter will also explain the rationale, data collection, analysis, and limitations/delimitations involved. Chapter 4 will offer a narrative of the findings from the data collected, while the closing chapters provide an in-depth analysis and synthesis of the findings highlighting any emergent themes and patterns. The study concludes with assertions and recommendations based upon the findings. Supporting documents and research artifacts are also attached.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Surely of all creatures that have life and will, we women are the most wretched.

Still more, a foreign woman, coming among new laws, new customs, needs the skill of magic, to find out what her home could not teach her...But the same arguments do not apply to you and me. You have this city, your father's home, the enjoyment of your life, and your friend's company. I am alone, I have no city; now my husband insults me. I was taken as plunder from a land at the earth's edge. I have no mother, brother, nor any of my own blood to turn into this extremity.

-Euripides, 1964

In effectively moving forward with this study, it was necessary to complete a critical review of the current literature (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2013). With this understanding, the researcher began cultivating research articles for this literature review in the spring semester of 2015. The following topics were used as a guiding point for search terms: (a) leadership, (b) persistence, (c) peer relationships, and (d) millennial; these terms were often combined with the phrase “Black women” or “woman.” An integrative approach (meaning an integration of several different literature collection techniques) (Booth & Papaioannou, 2012) to reviewing the literature seemed best to capture the scope of each topic from a variety of academic disciplines, and to enhance my research question and problem statement.

The following sources were used to extract information: (a) scholarly journals, (b) dissertations, (c) internet resources, (d) books, (e) conference proceedings, and (f) university-wide library databases. The researcher accessed approximately 50% of the resources through *Ebscohost*, *ProQuest*, and *Eric*. The researcher estimated 30% of the resources were via interlibrary loan, and 20 % were found in the extensive stacks section of the campus library. In scrutinizing the literature for retention or discard, the researcher uploaded potential sources onto *Nvivo* (a qualitative research data management software program), and ran several queries using some key terms and phrases that aligned with the elements of my research question. If an article

showed adequate coverage for the phrases or key terms that the researcher queried, the researcher began to classify them and read them critically with an intent for further use. This literature review was ongoing throughout the different phases of the study—and expanded to accommodate the study’s various focuses.

The following sections discuss Black women as master’s degree students and aspiring leaders in higher education, along with what the literature recites about them as millennials and their relationship experiences within MWUUs. The final section of this review includes a working conceptual framework that was derived from the research questions posed in the previous chapter. As the study progressed, each element of the conceptual framework was massaged in order to incorporate any new and relevant findings. Here, the conceptual framework acted as a “tool” to inform the methodology and interpretation of the findings.

Black Women in Higher Education

As alluded to in the previous chapter, the conversations around Black women and higher education evoke a variety of thoughts and feelings—some rooted in experiences, and others formed from the wide casting net of large scale quantitative research studies. These narrowed studies have crafted the argument that Black women’s experiences in higher education is an inevitable and endless road of uncertainty, academic mishap, and psychological strain—deeply rooted in interpersonal interactions with oppression, stereotypes, micro-aggressions, and racialized and gendered self-presentation expectations (Winkle-Wagner, 2015; Domingue, 2015). To enhance the perspective on Black women’s history in higher education, I examined what had been documented as black women’s historical lineage during their time as college students in U.S. history, through past journal articles and other academic sources. Though the experiences of BW in higher education have not been thoroughly documented in the research

literature, the little that is available is presented here (Williams, Brewley, Reed, White, Davis-Haley, 2005).

This section of the literature review *does not* provide an itemized chronological historical timeline of BW's existence, roles, or statistical representation in higher education, yet it offers a critical and in-depth discussion of what has been given attention within the scholastic storyline of BW's pursuit of higher education. In fact, I am using the term "historical" to refer to past articles that have offered insights of BW's journeys towards leadership and degree acquisition. The purpose of this section also aims to justify the need for more in-depth studies interrogating the specific persistence strategies that BW may use en route to graduation and leadership.

Educational Encounters

Since Constance M. Carroll's 1982 work "*Three's a Crowd: The Dilemma of the Black Woman in Higher Education*", not much has shifted in terms of the research findings and perils highlighted for Black women in pursuit of a degree. Back then, Carroll (1982) spoke of BW in higher education as being "isolated, underutilized, and often demoralized" (p. 115). Despite this, BW were still adamantly focused on obtaining degrees—though they were fated to exclusion in many aspects of the workforce and post degree leadership. Carroll maintained that BW undergraduates had few images after which to pattern themselves, and were therefore less likely to be in a position to gain support in overcoming the oftentimes discriminatory nature of most colleges and universities settings.

Scholarship dating back to the early seventies suggests that some of the same issues of liberation and the need for critical black mass that students faced at the height of racial tensions in America, are still relevant in the new millennium (Willie & Levy, 1972). In the latter portion of Carroll's (1982) chapter, she calls for the recognition of BW's experiences in higher

education, as they could add “richness and depth” (p. 125) to these environments. However, it has not been uncommon for BW to rally for these notions within their institutions, but still be met with requests to remain “patient” given the amount of monetary resources already being exhausted on “opportunities for minority candidates” (Carroll, 1982, p. 125). Again, the reflections of BW’s history in the collegiate context boasts a past of triumph, struggle, oppression, and stifled aspirations to leadership—yet somehow BW have continued to pursue the perceived freedom (*ability to be financially free from impoverished living and the freedom to be heard in spaces that are rarely occupied by Black voices, ideas, and perspectives*) that comes along with a college degree. Within Carroll’s (1982) chapter, there is little mentioned about BW’s relationships and how they might foster persistence and support—other than the observation that BW “often form peer groups” (p. 119) to supplement the missing leadership and mentorship figures within their collegiate settings. Information explaining the types and detailed functions of these groups is yet to be provided across multiple disciplines that support graduate MBWALs.

Roadblocks. Moses (1989) writes that despite BW’s century-long participation in higher education, they are still under-theorized and seldom researched within this setting. Even so, Collins (2001) holds that black communities continued to push for the education of BW. She rationalizes this observation through the necessity of the Black community to remain intact through the education of the Black woman. Thus, if BW remain educated, being that they are viewed as the carriers of the culture (*carriers of what it means to be an American of Africa within the United States—inclusive of all social and political aspect of Black life and culture that are reflections of Black people’s history in this country*), they will in turn enhance the quality of life for not only other aspiring black women, but for society as a whole (Coleman-Burns, 1989).

Along with the consequences of being under-researched, the variety of perspectives on how BW navigate the terrain of college is also a concern.

Although the previous statements may ring true with many, Allen (1996) maintains that the major road blocks for BW is “lack of supportive peer culture, role models, and mentorship” (Collins, 2001, p. 39). In referencing a multitude of research articles, book chapters, and personal narratives—two out of the five aforementioned “major road blocks” dominate the article selection on BW’s journey through universities and colleges: (a) Lack of role models, and (b) mentorship is heavily prioritized and written about as chief levers in what is missing in ensuring an overall positive experience for BW during their degree seeking endeavors (Palmer, Maramba, & Holmes, 2011). In most settings, particularly in majority White settings, BW have not historically had access to role models and mentors. On the other hand, research suggests that BW may fair better without these specific resources, especially if they are in women’s colleges, as these spaces offer a variety of psychological and academic supports that may take the place of mentoring and role models. This may be particularly true for historically black women’s colleges (Collins, 2001; Wolf-Wendel, 1998).

Research Voids

Though the aforementioned research may be true, the number of BW enrolled in majority White collegiate and university settings remains substantial. Yet, these institutions are not perceived through scholarship as the most nurturing environments. Some scholars have even described the campus climate for most BW within majority White institutions as “sometimes chilly and unwelcoming” (Tillman, 2012). Thus, the research history of BW in higher education is highly saturated in studies exposing and narrating the experiences and issues that BW face as it pertains to university climate, campus life, and identity. The sources cited here illuminate the

struggles faced by BW within these settings, but provide little coverage on the possible relationships that BW may foster in order to substitute for what the literature is reporting as an absence of mentorship and role models.

As for the millennial population of BW, there is little research specifically tackling their experiences within higher education. Over the course of a six-month search, the researcher was able to uncover one article that exclusively addressed Millennial BW or MBWALs in a college or university setting, which the researcher will cite later. Most articles or books that were centered on millennials grouped both Black males and females together, and discussed both groups in terms of their statistical representation in colleges and universities (Bonner, Marbley, & Howard-Hamilton, 2011), as opposed to their in-depth lived accounts during their time as students.

Black Women's Leadership in the United States

For this section, the researcher presents dialogues within the literature that pertain to the various elements of BW's past and present leadership ventures. This section *does not* apply any well documented theoretical leadership lenses to Black women's leadership and the history thereof; thus, in doing so, the information offered here may serve as a means to developing theoretical frameworks for what we know about BW's history of leadership in the United States, based on the current research and literary findings.

The "Anomaly Factor"

Black women are often viewed as anomalies "in the minds of teachers, researchers, and aspirant leaders" (Alston and McClellan, 2011, p. 1) largely due to the notion that Black women's accomplishments and modes of activism have not historically been viewed as leadership. Both Alston and McClellan cite that the terms "Black Woman" and "Leadership" can

oftentimes be viewed as an “oxymoronic concept” (p. 1). In fact, according to Delany and Rogers (2004) Black women’s leadership studies have just recently started to gain traction for scholarly analysis, which is largely due to noted Black women academics and scholars exposing the “exclusion of Black women in the construction of leadership knowledge and practice” (McClellan, 2012). Through this exclusion, MBWALs may have very little exposure to the historical underpinnings and overall significance of past and present BW leaders within their post-secondary leadership courses, as theoretical preference is overwhelmingly viewed through a White male lens (Thomas, 2012). In addition to this, historical Black male leaders are often theorized and given research priority before Black women, which is problematic given the essential roles BW are noted as playing in the lives of many of the prominent historical Black male leaders in the U.S. (Barnett, 1993).

Social Justice and Community Leadership

The emergence of the *African American Civil Rights Movement* in the mid-1950’s throughout the late 60’s, thrust a large number of Black men into the spotlight of leadership, pioneering a vein of leadership recognition and “pioneering research” that strictly focused on Black men (Barnett, 1993, p. 163), posturing little room for theorizing Black women’s leadership perspectives. Other researchers of Black women’s leadership situation within the U.S. cited Black women’s historical leadership presence as often times a reaction to insidious structural and institutional racism (Delany & Rogers, 2004). These authors also posit that BW assumed leadership positions as a means of community servitude. However, Barnett (1993) argues that when Black women finally did come into scholastic and research recognition as leaders—the way in which BW were being studied was overtly biased and negative. For instance, she highlights the “three major biases as: (a) a negative problem-oriented image that stereotypically

connects Black women with various “pathologies” within the family, such as female-headedness, illegitimacy, teen pregnancy, poverty, and welfarism (Barnett, Robinson, & Bailey, 1984; Collins, 1989; Higginbotham 1982; Scott, 1982; Barnett, 1993), (b) a middle-class orientation that excludes, ignores, or makes inconsequential the experiences of poor and working-class women, a large percentage of whom are Black (Bookman & Morgen, 1988; Higginbotham, 1982; Barnett, 1993), and (c) an apolitical-non leadership image of Black and poor women as political pacifists or as followers and organizers, rarely as movement leaders (Barnett, 1989, 1990b; Barnett 1993).

Ironically, BW’s depth of leadership studies--and research in general--has made few bounds in contradiction to Barnett’s (1993) work. In fact, Lindsey-Dennis (2015) cites concerns for research exploiting the same biases over two decades later, but with Black girls as opposed to Black women. Even through these biases and slim documentation of BW’s leadership efforts, BW have continued to forge a path of leadership that is significant to their day-to-day lives and the enhancement of its quality (Ferguson & King, 2001).

Leadership Persistence and Affirmation

Although the lives of BW leaders have not been thoroughly documented, there is some research emphasizing the tremendous amount of persistence and social consciousness embodied by those documented. A variety of leadership studies relating to BW and their positions in Academia, cast BW as facing an onslaught of institutional and personal issues as a hindrance to adequate and effective leadership tenures (Tillman, 2001). Some of these issues include, but are not limited to: (a) isolation, (b) lack of mentorship, (c) invisibility when it comes to leadership opportunities and positions, and (d) uncivil behavior. Other BW’s leadership scholars point out that since BW occupy a duality of roles that are “incongruent with expectations regarding

leadership [...] they will be dually penalized when expressing agency” (Livingston, Rosette, & Washington, 2012, p. 355). This notion was further substantiated in a phenomenological study conducted by Arminio, Carter, Jones, Kruger, Lucas, Washington, Young, and Scott (2000) where researchers found that some collegiate Black student leaders viewed their own leadership within campus organizations as “being part of the enemy” or “oppressive” (p. 500-501).

This finding seemingly put Black student leaders and those aspiring to lead in a somewhat complex situation, as they felt that they were fighting with both their allegiance to other blacks and their identities as leaders within a majority White institution. To combat this possible struggle among BW, Johnson and Thomas (2012) advocate for BW “seek[ing] to affirm their own voices through the help of potential allies” (p. 166). For this study, I seek to conceptualize these “potential allies” as the possible peer relationships that BW may form in order to discover themselves, their ideals, and leadership perspectives.

The State of MBWALs

Black women’s absence of status and experiences from the “leadership cannon²” leaves millennial Black women aspiring to leadership roles, and other historically underrepresented groups (i.e. women, gays, African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans) left with little to no scholarly resources regarding the practical implementation of leadership theories, concepts, and research (Alston, 2012, p. 127). Publications discussing the overall impact of Black women’s missing traditional leadership practices from the literature also emphasizes a gap in information regarding the lives of past prominent Black women leaders such as “Fannie Lou Hamer, Coretta Scott King, Mary McLeod Bethune, Harriet Tubman, Barbara Jordan, Shirley Chisholm, Audre Lorde, Septima Clark, Wilma Mankiller, Sojourner Truth, Flora Ida Ortiz, and

² The body of literature that examines the studying and teaching of traditional leadership theories and concepts from a Eurocentric white male perspective.

Barbara Jordan” (p. 129). In addition, Alston (2012) states that the critical components of current leadership studies fail to analyze how “transformational leadership, critical servant leadership, ethical leadership, and social justice leadership” (p. 128) is exemplified in the lives of the aforementioned black women leaders.

Many BW aspire to leadership positions both inside and outside of the university setting. The current percentage of BW leaders within these settings are extremely low, and likewise lead to a growing number of black women finding these positions challenging to locate, acquire, and even more difficult to sustain. Opp and Gosetti (2002) view African American women in leadership posts at colleges and universities as a “rare commodity, particularly at majority White universities” (pg. 592). Through this observation, scholars have discovered some institutional factors that may account for the lack of leadership positions held by black women. King (1999) cites higher education institutions’ lack of advancement opportunities for Black women, such as: (a) programming that prepares BW for leadership posts-and makes them aware of opportunities, (b) spaces that affirm and acknowledge how they may approach leadership given their identities (either imposed or organic) within the United States, and (c) frequent networking opportunities for further engagement with potential employers and mentors. These are listed as the primary roadblocks for BW in realizing their potential leadership capabilities.

This reality can create difficulty for MBWALs, as it does not affirm their own lives, experiences, and aspirations as leaders. For MBWALs the affirmation and acknowledgement of one’s lived experiences is highly important and is often sought through peer social interactions and the presence of *foremothers*³. Foremothers, however, are not easily located—particularly in

³ Foremothers reveal the circuitous process of African ritual that connects Black women through story. Davis (2008) describes foremothers as being both behind and before Black women navigating the minefields of the academy as a continued presence in the telling of Black women’s stories of historic and contemporary significance.

settings (MWUUs) that do not substantiate such a concept. Thus, the majority of MWUUs neglect validating concepts that represent the myriad of Black women's experiences, inadvertently offering academic content that deemphasizes Black women's persistence in accordance with the types of relationships that MBWALs may foster in MWUUs in order to cope with such circumstances.

The preceding sections of this review do not precisely imply or cite the close personal relationships that many Black women may have had throughout their leadership endeavors within the United States. In addition to this, my literature cultivation did not unearth research articles or other forms of scholarly work that informed the peer relationship dynamic that BW, more specifically MBWALs, may have fostered while in leadership roles or as aspiring leaders. There is some research that elaborates on Black women's relationships to other women as leaders (Barnett, 1993), yet it does not give attention to how these relationships may or may not have influenced them as BW.

The Pulse of Persistence in MWUUs

A wealth of literature and research focused on Black women's persistence, either academically or psychosocially, report that black women often resort to "suboptimal coping" strategies. To persist, Black women are often fated to assimilate (to make similar, to be absorbed) themselves with the surrounding dominant culture. Hooks (1989) rationalizes this phenomenon as "Black students being encouraged to believe that assimilation is the way to succeed" (p. 67), which further suppresses an organization's need to recognize and obtain self-narrated Black female experiences within MWUUs, as well as experiences prior to their time in MWUUs. Collins (2000) reemphasizes the need for Black women to assert themselves as

authorities of their own experiences, thereby creating a culture of necessity within settings that are historically disconnected to the experiences of their Black female student population.

This research project, as currently conceived, will begin to fill a void of theory, practice, and information regarding how MBWALs approach and organically derive peer relationships that aid in persistence and leadership development, through interrogating the experiences and interactions among MBWALs as they aim for degree completion. Ubiquitous research surrounding African American⁴ students and their academic achievement within *majority White urban universities* (MWUUs) has prompted much discussion around the trending topic of under-performance (Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas & Thompson, 2004, p. 420), yet studies specifically around millennial African American female's persistence in MWUUs have substantial gaps in knowledge. Specific demographical statistics for this group (*millennial black women*) are cited in the latter sections of this review.

A Hidden Culture of Coping

The academic persistence of African American female students within MWUUs is contingent upon an institution's ability and willingness to create an environment that will support the overall well-being of the student (Lovitts, 2001). For African American women, the unsupportive and hostile racial climates within MWUUs negatively contribute to the level of engagement and investment of African American female students (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p. 393). According to the scholarship of Patricia Collins (2000), the BFT theme--*ethic of caring*--helps examine the suppression of uniqueness, expressiveness, emotion, and empathy within MWUUs, along with its inhibition to a greater understanding of the unique experiences of a particular individual (p.263), in this case, the Black female student. Numerous research articles

⁴ The terms *African American* and *Black* are used interchangeably.

cite the *suppression* that Collins (2000) often writes about, which often takes place in the form of forced assimilation, identity negotiation, invisibility, untrustworthiness, and psychological anguish (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015; Henry, Butler & West, 2011; Hooks, 1989).

MWUUs' perceived lack of understanding and recognition of Collins' (2000) notion here, continues to stifle the platforms (campus spaces that encourage critical dialogue across cultures) African American women require when expressing their emotional and psychosocial needs for a valuable student experience (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p. 392). When the psychosocial and academic needs of African American female students are institutionally denied due to intellectual, cultural, and racial stereotypes, it may become difficult for MWUUs to accurately perceive and interpret the needs of its African American female students. The following presents an analysis of literature-rich scenarios which African American degree-seeking students within MWUUs face, particularly regarding their persistence.

The Strong Black Woman Curse

One racial and cultural stereotype that persists within MWUUs and mainstream media, regarding Black women and their overall emotional well-being as a degree seeking student, is one that portrays Black women as inherently "strong, self-reliant, and self-contained" (Romero, 2000). As a result of this stereotype, MWUUs are oftentimes oblivious to the obstacles and mental anguish that African American women endure as students. Additionally, the attitudes and perceptions created by the "strong black woman" stereotype threat within MWUUs can "devastate the mental and emotional health" of Black women causing a cycle of "silent struggle" --*defined as the unwillingness to speak out for fear of being judged*--(Moore & Madison-Colmore, 2005), ultimately aiding university officials to advance unaddressed and undocumented

instances of academic and psychosocial struggle (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p.392). The strong black woman stereotype stifles Black women's capacity to utilize the BFT theme *ethic of caring* effectively, in that it perpetuates Black women as foreign to the concept of emotion.

African American female students' need for dialogue in situations of institutionalized oppression is supported by Cotts' (1987) findings via Black feminist epistemology that "the *use of dialogue...establish[es] bonds [to] empower [...] group[s]*" (1987). Without a reliable platform--*campus spaces for intentional social and political discussions that empower Black female students to facilitate intercultural conversations among one another*--the recognition of struggle within this population is suppressed, causing the climate of MWUUs to continue as hostile and tense (Ancis et al., 2000; Harper & Jurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; 1994; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

The "luxury" of strength. Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) confirms the complications of black women's historical existence as being portrayed as fortresses of strength and unassailable independence, which grounds her reasoning that historical and contemporary iconography of black women is one that does not allow the human luxury of emotion and feeling, yet will continue its insidious reach, if not unchallenged (p. 185). Harris-Perry also cautions the notion of black women as figures often deemed devoid of feeling by others--due to their *perceived* victorious emergence from historically oppressive societal systems, such as slavery and domestic servitude (p. 185).

In MWUUs, black women are sometimes burdened (by themselves and others) with maintaining an impenetrable shield of strength, though given very few structural resources to support one's academic and psychosocial development. Hooks' (1989) reflections of the African American female student climate (as it relates to self-worth and identity) at Yale University in

Talking Back (1989), substantiates the value of sharing lived experiences of Black women, while also highlighting the psychological “cost of persistence” for Black women within MWUUs.

Hooks shares her interaction with a black female student at Yale University:

When I told a black female student the subject of my talk, her response was, ‘Why talk about freedom--why not just talk about sanity? We’re trying to stay sane.’ Hearing students express pain and confusion has heightened my recognition that we are in crisis. It is especially troubling to hear black students confess that they are overwhelmed at times by feelings of alienation and despair, that they feel a loss of any sense of identity and meaning (Hooks, 1989, p. 67).

Although not identified as “urban”, Yale’s Black female population illustrates the delicate intersection of racial-gender oppression and degree-seeking aspirations. The afore-referenced student’s disinterest in hearing a talk about “freedom” provides insight to the strained psychological state of Black women within MWUUs, which is cited as devoid of the luxury and humanity required to entertain the idea of “freedom” in an educational structure that Bell (1989) perceives as a facilitator of suppression, identity, and assimilation (p. 68).

Lived experiences and “academic mask.” Many of the psychosocial and academic hurdles existing within MWUUs lack adequate documentation and research that identifies Black female students’ condition as psychologically and emotionally counterproductive to degree acquisition. Studies in BFT contend that the ultimate liberation from oppressive intellectual, cultural, and racial stereotypes occurs through the notation of Black women’s *lived experiences*, which is the “criterion of meaning that explains how one knows what they know through episodes they have encountered within their lives” (Collins, 2000). Through this, the hardships imposed by the stereotype threats facing African American female students is identified as the chief inhibiting factor in their psychosocial well-being. For fear of judgment from her White peers and professors, one female graduate student recalls maintaining an “academic mask” (Shavers & Moore, 2014) throughout her time as a student, which is a strategy identified and

used by African American female students to help navigate their degree seeking experience successfully, by limiting or “masking” one’s authentic self in order to present to White peers as focused, scholastically adequate, and worthy through consistent participation in campus or department wide activities and social interactions (p. 397).

Zoe, a 29-year old ABD (all but dissertation) social sciences student, shares her *lived experience* with “academic mask” (Shavers & Moore, 2014) by presenting herself to professors and classmates as “ready to learn” and “hungry” for learning (p. 397). Her attempts to disprove the pending stereotype threat of Black female learning apathy and intellectual inadequacy, *masks* her ability to offer her genuine self as an asset to her degree program. Another *lived experience* that highlights African American women students’ obligation to “mask wearing” comes from Carmen, a 30-year old social sciences student (p. 397). Carmen expressed the following:

I feel like I don’t know if people would take me seriously ... I want to make sure they’re taking me seriously and that I have opportunities. I think that I already get written off quickly because I’m a woman, because I’m Black, I have natural hair, I look younger than I am [...] (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p.398).

Shaver and Moore’s (2014) research also documents other African American female students’ experiences within PWIs as using “academic mask” for a means of survival and self-preservation (p. 401).

Psychosocial impact. One Black female student reflects upon the psychosocial strain endured by the young women within her degree cohort. She recalls feeling obligated to present herself as a “static” being--unaffected by the hostile and judgmental environment within her academic department (Shaver & Moore, 2014, p. 402). Black female students find that “denying one’s true self and pretending that it does not exist will negatively impact one’s psychological

and emotional well-being” (Shaver & Moore, 2014, p. 402). Literature pertaining to the psychosocial plight of Black female students, maintains that the tedious and stressful nature of post-secondary education coursework can vastly affect the mood of Black female students (p. 402), in the sense that it often times fails to acknowledge the “polyrhythmic realities” (Sheard, 1996, p. 5) — *the non-dichotomous intersecting and interwoven points of reality; in other words, one’s experiences can be described as simultaneously intersecting realities. Polyrhythms reflect the aesthetic essence of African art, music, dance and language, these rhythms course through Black women’s veins and state of being, inducing a sense of self understanding and self-worth* (pp.4-5) --of which Black women need in order obtain their individual definition of success, as it relates to their future leadership endeavors or beyond. Sheard (1996) also cites the importance of encompassing Africentric feminist perspectives, meaning that the faculty teaching of BW should be grounded in the “history, culture, economics, race, gender, language, sexual orientation, and religion of Black women” (Hill-Collins, 1990; Sheard, 1996, p. 4).

The literature also notes the delicate stages of adult social and psychological development taking place for Black female students during their post-secondary degree years. Similar to other demographics, this epistemic “shift” often leads to “anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, self-hatred, and other psychological problems (Jones & Shorte-Gooden, 2003); however, many Black female students often terminate their degree-seeking pursuits as a result of having dealt with the constant exhaustion and burden of shifting--whether in term of identity or otherwise-- throughout the course of their academic careers, which encompasses their elementary, middle, and post-secondary time as students.

Crooked Rooms, Threatening Spaces

Black women's successful persistence in MWUUs shows significant correlation to how well one is able to cope with her surroundings while enrolled. Harris-Perry (2011) constructs meaning of this "coping scenario" through her observations around the "crooked room concept". Harris-Perry (2011) derives this concept from a post-World War II cognitive psychology study on field dependence. The study illustrated *how* individuals locate the "upright" in a space by trying to align themselves with an already "crooked" room. Researchers found that individuals could be significantly tilted or unaligned, by as much as 35 degrees, yet still reported themselves as being perfectly straight. The physical and psychological space that Black women access regularly within MWUUs, requires them to *shift* or *conform* in order to be recognized by others as a valid and knowing Black woman, within an innately "crooked room" (p. 29).

The academic (classroom) and social crooked rooms of MWUUs often facilitate spaces where racial and gender stereotypes pervade, leaving Black female students, and black students in general, helpless in their fight to maintain a sense of academic or social identity. This observation was illustrated through Claude Steele's (2010) reflections in his novel as an African American graduate student at The Ohio State University, where, at the time, he found the Eurocentric social norms and habits within this PWUU to be overwhelming and unreflective of his own racial identity or background, which ultimately fostered a "fixed" climate of anxiety for him during his studies (p.154). This "fixed" state of anxiety is realized through the "crooked room" coping strategies that Black women within MWUUs have leveraged in their effort to persist academically and socially, while trying to remain "upright" in Eurocentrically dominated rooms.

Forced assimilation. Majority White urban universities are often tasked with the mission of serving all elements of the diverse urban environment. Ideally, the urban university should be void of the elitism found in traditional universities (Spicer, 1976, p. 3); however, Black students may often find the elite underpinning of historically White urban universities to dominate-- despite targeted efforts to combat these systems. To persist, both academically and psychosocially, Black women are often fated to assimilate (to make similar, to be absorbed) themselves with the surrounding dominant culture. Hooks (1989) rationalizes this phenomenon as “Black students being encouraged to believe that assimilation is the way to succeed” (p. 67), which further suppresses an organization’s need to recognize and obtain self-narrated Black female experiences within MWUUs, as well as experiences prior to enrollment. Collins (2000) reemphasizes the need for Black women to assert themselves as authorities of their own experiences, thereby creating a culture of necessity within settings that are historically disconnected to the experiences of their Black female student population.

Current Lenses on Persistence and Black College Women

As scholarship continues to highlight Black Women’s struggle to persist academically and psychosocially in majority White higher education settings as both students and employees, much research is still to be desired in terms of understanding the peer interactions and relationships Black women form in order to support themselves, and more specifically how those relationships are cultivated among *millennial* black women aspiring to leadership.

Despite a small body of literature examining the experiences and persistence strategies employed by Black women while attending majority White urban universities (MWUUs), and trying to obtain a professional degree, a recent study illuminates the level of sole responsibility placed upon Black women within these settings to not only do well, but to develop and employ

often unhealthy coping mechanisms in order to remain afloat. In many cases, the literature positions collegiate Black women as numerical participants in large quantitative studies that often times fail to capture the entire scope and complexities in black women's lives and experiences, leading to further marginalization.

In support of this, Winkle-Wagner (2015) states that the outcome or "college success among Black women, although multi-faceted, remains underexplored" (p. 172) due to trend[ing] research examining students of color as a group and at an aggregate level (Winkle-Wagner, 2009b). In addition, much of what is being studied focuses on academic failure--(Rovai, Gallien, & Wighting, 2005) leaving out the spectrum of experiences yet to be shared by Black women concerning their time in college, particularly as students attending majority White universities. Figure 1 (Winkle-Wagner, 2015) offers a look at what an analysis of 119 research studies (inclusive of qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, and theoretical literature reviews) reported as "responsible for Black women's college success" (p. 189). According to these statistics, Black women, as individuals, are deemed most responsible for their collegiate success by higher education institutions, while 32% of research articles report that relationships also factor into a successful college experience. These discoveries help to underscore the need to not only understand the perceived intricacies of Black women's persistence via inner strength, but also the utility of their relationships.

Figure 1. Who Is Responsible for Black Women’s Success in College?

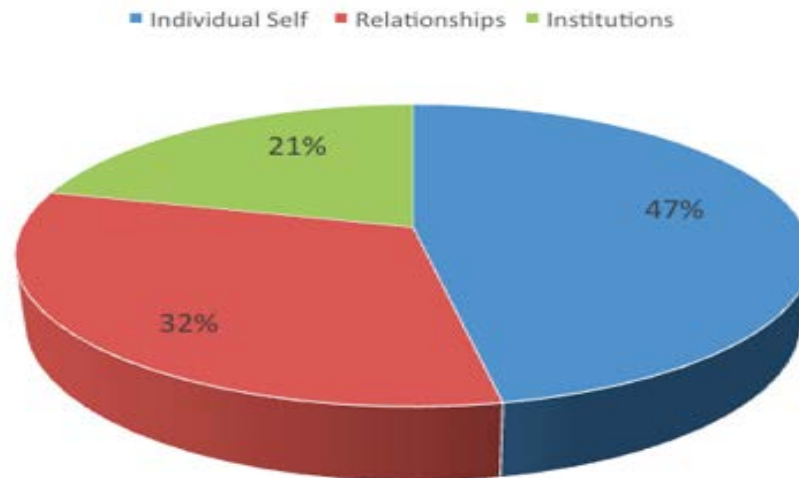


Figure X. Adapted from “Having Their Lives Narrowed Down? The State of Black Women’s Success”, by R.W. Wagner, *Review of Educational Research*, 85, p. 189.

Although understudied as whole, the millennial population of black women in the collegiate setting has been given little focus, particularly in terms of how they form peer relationships. Articles on Millennial habits and attributes within the college setting maintain that millennials tend to leverage peer relationships and social interactions far more than generations past (Fox, 2012). Missing from these studies are the ways in which Black female collegiate millennials fit into these observations, with regard to social and peer interactions as valid and relevant avenues of study.

Furthermore, Black women's individual self and the overcoming of structural and environmental issues (persisting) as students, dominates the storyline of black women in MWUUs. Given the intersectional nature of black women's lives, research that emphasizes other realms of how Black women cultivate ways of knowing and support structures independent of an organization's efforts, could create new dimensions of understanding for how MWUUs-- particularly student affairs, college administration, and faculty service MBWALs.

Chartering Change

Researchers note the importance of MWUUs recognizing the experiences of African American women as urgent and of priority, particularly the research findings suggesting that overall well-being and academic persistence cannot exist harmoniously for Black females in MWUUs (Rosales & Pearson, 2003; Henry, Butler & West, 2011, 143). The literature also argues that MWUUs are often aware of the aforementioned challenges, but fail to implement models that will better serve or accommodate the needs of these women (Grant & Simmons, 2008). Scholars Shavers and Moore (2014) insist that university administration and professionals assume the responsibility of "offering services that meet the unique needs of Black female doctoral students" (p. 404). Both authors (Shavers & Moore, 2014) provide ways in which this can be achieved. The text offers the following as recommendations for MWUUs: diversity training, platforms for leveraging the perspectives of Black feminist thought, womanist epistemology, and social network theory as a means for evaluating institutional policies on race and gender, focus groups, and formal support networks (pp. 404, 405).

As the need for these initiatives increase, scholars charge MWUUs to dedicate the necessary time and resources to "assessing additional factors that influence the experiences and identity" of Black female students (Shavers & Moore, p. 406). Still, there is little research that

points to the intricacies of peer relationships and how their presence could effectively foster efforts in MBWALs persistence. Few studies give attention to these relationships and highlight their value within these settings.

Millennials on the Move

Other than a reference within the previous section of this review, the millennial population's salience to this study has been brief. The following discussion aims to bring awareness to the possible knowledge deficits in not only collegiate millennials as a whole, but also collegiate Black female millennials. There are a handful of studies that address millennial minority groups and the challenges that the millennial generation often face in pursuit of higher education, but much is to be desired as it relates to the specific experiences of MBWALs. The following conversation hopes to capture what scholars are currently engaging in as it relates to the multi-layered identities of millennials.

The Millennial Profile

The growing millennial population—*individuals born between 1982 and 2003* (Howe & Strauss, 2000) --within post-secondary education among black women is quickly expanding—yet there is little research targeted towards the understanding of this population and the unique experiences they bring to academia. With 43.2 % of millennials enrolled in college, and 13% being black, existing literature regarding millennial college students cites vast differences from past generations—including Baby Boomers and Gen Xers (Coomes & DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss 2000; Oblinger, 2003; Woodall, 2004; Wilma J. Henry, 2008).

Research also highlights millennials as the largest racially and ethnically diverse generational group in the nation's history (Bridgman, 2004; DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss 2000; 2008)—with 40% of the adult millennials being persons of color (Madland & Teixeira, 2009) --

yet studies lack exploration of millennial's experiences through a culturally relevant perspective. Henry (2008) maintains that Black and Latino millennials' strong connection to hip-hop culture significantly influences their identity development, intimate relationships, and way of knowing on college campuses. Despite these findings, Black women millennials still strive to obtain not only undergraduate, but graduate degree status.

Characteristics. Millennials have gained the generalized reputation of being: (a) ethically and socially conscious, (b) deeply invested in social stratification and income inequalities, (c) globalized thinkers, and (d) strongly attached to new technologies (Fox, 2009). However, according to Howe and Strauss (2007) millennials can best be characterized as: (a) sheltered, (b) feelings of being “special”, (c) confident, (d) team-oriented, (e) conventional, (d) pressured, and (e) achieving. With such critical and varied personality hallmarks, meeting the diverse needs of this population within a collegiate context can present significant challenges in identity, social programming, academic programming, course content, and advisement—just to name a few. In relation to diversity, it is yet to be understood as to whether or not different races or ethnicities among millennials exhibit different characteristics—similar or dissimilar to those that were cited here. The characteristics that Black women collegiate millennials may possess has little documentation. Furthermore, an acknowledgement and understanding of the different generational attributes that Black women may possess, can be extremely helpful in planning for the success of Black females in college and university settings.

Though widely applied throughout higher education Howe & Strauss's (2000, 2003) “millennial framework” may be misleading to Black students and other ethnic minority groups, especially given Black women's presence in higher education being cited as outnumbering Black male collegiates by 2 to 1 (Cujet, 2006; Strayhorn, 2008a; Strayhorn, 2008c). This finding

suggests the essentiality in developing research agendas in response to BW's presence within these settings. On the other hand, we see an example of research that further marginalizes Black millennial students, as Bonner, Marbley, and Howard-Hamilton (2011) report that Black millennial's attitudes towards "high educational aspirations" (p. 27) is disproportionately low and—which, at best, unfairly groups the mindset of all Black millennial students into this sample. Aside from this, the text provides skimpy examples of these attitudes. These findings are of particular interest in this study, given that they provide a counter perspective to a large body of findings that BW, specifically, tend to have high educational aspirations, which is further illustrated by their large post-secondary enrollment numbers.

Relationships

Given that one of the characteristics of millennials is being *team oriented* (Howe & Strauss, 2007), there seems to be a greater sense of responsibility for millennials to engage in group learning dynamics, which in turn could indicate that millennials may possess an overall affinity for nurturing and establishing peer relationships. If this is so, there are many questions that may emerge as relevant to this study. Particularly in regards to the specific strategies and tactics millennials use in order to find and secure relationships on college campuses. If this point is further interrogated, in relation to MBWALs, one may discover if the characteristic--*team orientation*—is appropriated for persistence efforts among the previously mentioned demographic. Moreover, there may be some gaps in understanding how millennials function in these relationships to develop lasting connections to their peer groups beyond college.

Leadership

Millennials are cited as having the expectation of becoming leaders upon their completion from college, despite most colleges' inadequate leadership preparation models for

leadership (Fox, 2012). Fox (2012) argues the critical need for a leadership framework for millennials that feed their “intense intellectual and emotional energy”—which includes *critical self-reflection, real-world argumentation, concentrated attention to detail, and research and study that is motivated by extrinsic factors* (p. 139). Even though Foxs’ insights here are valid, there are still concerns for leadership models that encompasses the specific needs of millennial Black women aspiring to leadership, which could prioritize the structural, psychological, and spatial dynamics that could impact BW’s leadership aspirations. As mentioned earlier—there is a sizeable body of research that promotes and names Black women leaders throughout American history, yet much of their leadership traditions and philosophies are missing from leadership theories and paradigms.

Black Female Collegiates and Relationships

The central focus of this study is to examine the types of peer relationships that MBWALs may form during their time as graduate students within a PWUU setting. In the search process for locating research articles and relevant informational sources, specifically regarding Black women and peer relationships—very little was found. Moreover, an even smaller pool of research teasing out Black women’s peer interactions on college campuses was uncovered. When research articles did discuss Black women’s relationships, the overwhelming majority documented their relationships in terms of sex, sexuality, and other intimate relationships not specifically relating to the way in which peer relationships are defined here. However, one article (Henry, 2008) specifically honed in on Black female millennial college students, identity development, and their dating dilemmas. This section of the review will extend from Henry’s (2008) previous examination regarding Black female millennials and expose critical gaps in knowledge and research.

Relationships and Identity Development

A number of researchers have explored women's interpersonal relationships as vital to their (women's) development (Chickering, 1969). There are also a number of developmental frameworks that cite interpersonal relationships, in fact many position these types of relationships as the nucleus of identity formation—and essential to a woman's persistence and psychological well being within a variety of educational contexts (Josselson, 1987;1996). Although this study does not offer an indepth analysis on identity development, it is important to note its role in understanding the vital nature of relationships. Looking at the targeted demographic for this study, Black women's multiple identities are rarely featured in understanding their persistence to leadership or graduate studies. Hooks (1994) and other Afrocentric scholars bring some attention to this reality, as they share their own experiences as graduate students in majority White educational contexts—still, there is little to no accounting for their peer relationship, or its impact or lack of impact on their persistence.

Towards Defining Peers

Peers can generally be defined as “belonging to the same societal group especially based on age, gender, or status” (Merriam-Webster.com 2011), or as Astin (1993) puts it, peers are “a collection of individuals with whom the individual identifies and affiliates with and from whom the individual seeks acceptance or approval (p. 400). Given the general nature of both definitions, their application to Black women within college contexts is often used in studies centralizing BW and their peer relationships. Peer relationships are also indicators of “classroom connectness” (Sollitto, Johnson, & Myers, 2013), which could shed light on their importance when dealing with issues of retention, as it relates to Black women. The most specific research article that addresses this study's question in regards to the *types* of peer relationships is

illuminated in Kram and Isabella's (1985) paper as the following: (a) the information peer—*provides information about the organization*, (b) the collegial peer—*provides trust, self-disclosure, discussions, and emotional support*, and (c) the special peer—*provides an intimate and reciprocal relationship*, each occupying a specific role. Although Kram and Isabella's (1985) article offers these relationship types as identifiable within workplace settings, there is no research warranting their functionality in college settings.

Contradictions and Missing Knowledge

Research suggests that “African American, Hispanic, and Asian women students prefer and benefit from collaborative work environments that provide social interaction” (Williams, Layman, Slaten, Berenson, & Seaman, 2007, p. 1). Despite this knowledge, there is little understanding around *why* these demographics prefer and benefit from these types of social relationships. Furthermore, millennials also gravitate towards these types of relationships as a means of reinforcement and environmental connectivity. Perhaps we know so little due to the decrease of peers in adulthood (Reitz, Zimmerman, Hutteman, Specht, & Neyer, 2014). Thus, research tends to prioritize childhood and adolescent peer group relations. Cheatham (Bennett, 1996) stresses the need for research interests among understudied populations, particularly “intragroup interactions and the role of race” (Bennett, 1999). This may be especially vital for students in PWIs, as peer relationships can “facilitate academic success” (Bennett, 1999).

Even though there seems to be sufficient cause for study examining the primary interactions among Black students and peer intragroup interactions, this topic is still not a primary focus of research (Bennett, 1993). This reality is especially critical to MBWALs, given the slim research efforts targeting the various developmental implications associated with functioning peer relationships. Contradictorily, Rubin, Bukowski and Parker (2007) insist that peer

relationship literature has seen a significant amount of publicity, diversity, and articulation in terms of “cultural and cross-cultural meanings” (p. 3). On the other hand, Winkle-Wagner (2015) still maintains that peer relationship literature regarding the aforementioned topics are still severely lacking in terms of Black women college goers.

Chapter Summary

The opening quote for this chapter talks about needing “the skill of magic” in order to triumph all of the challenges of womanhood. Though this observation may be indeed true for women of all races and ethnicities, this seems essentially true for Black women within the United States in pursuit of higher education, as they oftentimes need “the skill of magic” to navigate and cope in majority White settings. Otherwise, isolation and alienation may become a daily reality (Allen & Hanif, 1991; Fleming, 1984; Pounds, 1987; and Willie & McCord, 1972; Bennett, 1999). Throughout this review, the lone researchers that have taken an interest in the development of Black women within post-secondary academia are far and few in between.

With all due gratitude, the revelations from these authors have rang redundant and underutilized in the development of institutional policies and procedures for Black women. Regretfully, the present need for clarity concerning MBWALs has the potential to go unresearched, unprioritized, and as Winkle-Wagner (2015) writes “narrowed down.” A recent report highlighting the “problems rhetoric” of Black millennials gives little attention to the relationship component of Black millennials, and more specifically Black female millennials. Rogowski and Cohen (2015) prioritize issues of lived experiences in terms of: (a) economics, (b) education, (c) health care and gun violence, and (d) incarceration, as well as themes considering both policy political engagement and attitudes, and support for public policies. Although the information presented within the report is timely and invaluable in utility, the multiple voices

undoubtedly behind this quantitative study leaves much to be desired. Much of what is statistically represented throughout the report leaves room for interpretation and the possibility of misunderstanding. Earlier sections of this review caution the widespread use of quantitative studies, as they have the potential to further marginalize the narrative of Black youth in America.

The following section will guide the research endeavors for this project. Each section will present an argument for the proposed research methodology. The conceptual framework (figure 2) will inform the interview protocol and other components of the methodology.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 2. Peer Relationship Conceptual Framework

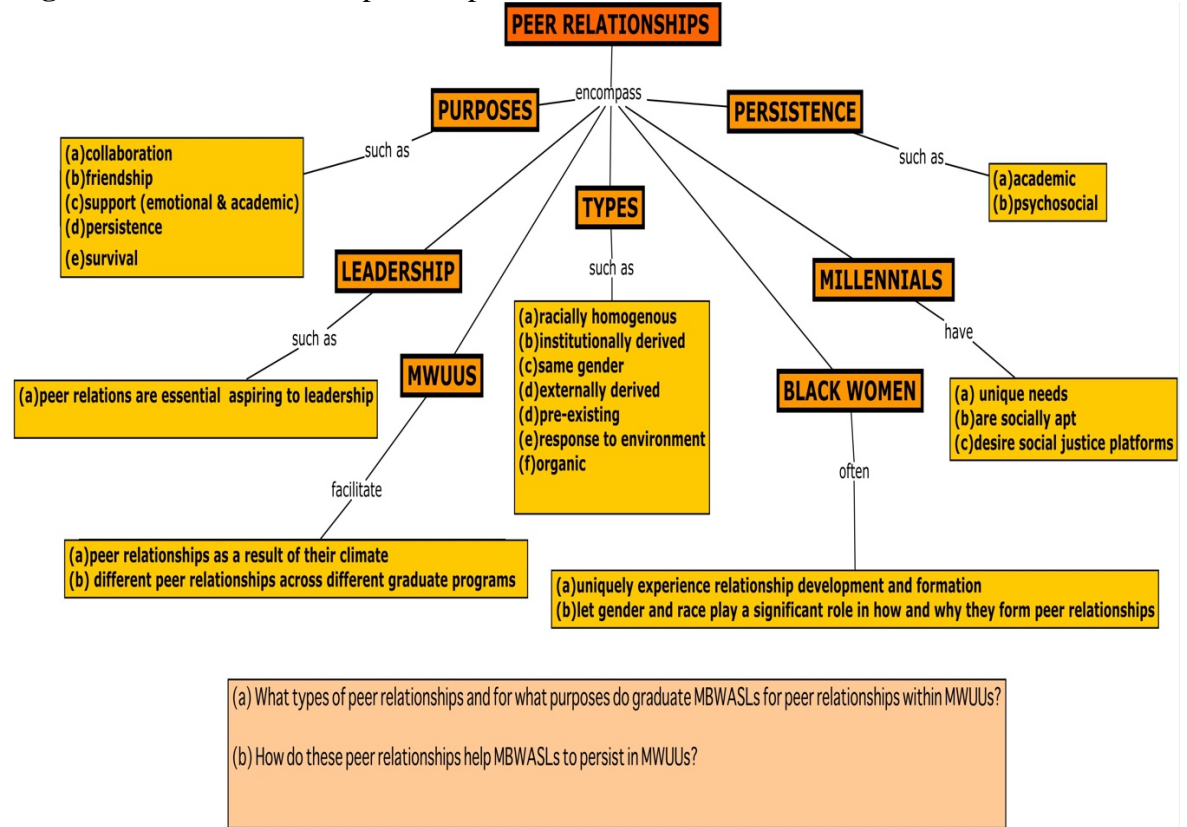


Figure X. Created by D. Apugo (2015) to explain the major concepts that emerged from the literature review.

Chapter 3: Methodology

...you are attempting to find the foot-paths that African American women have found to be a more desirable or successful route to completing their degrees in Predominately White Universities.

Dr. Larry Martin, 2015

The purpose of this research project is to explain the types of peer relationships that MBWALs experience as a means of persistence within MWUUs. This study seeks to inform readers of how MBWALs approach graduate degree pursuit in MWUUs by providing a model or framework that enhances their knowledge of persistence strategies and support tactics that can be employed. To address this phenomenon, the following overarching questions guided this research study in unearthing the experiences, interactions, and persistence of MBWALs in MWUU settings:

- (a) What types of peer relationships and for what purposes do graduate (master's degree candidates) millennial Black women aspiring scholar leaders (MBWALs) experience peer relationships within majority White urban universities (MWUUs)?
- (b) How do MBWASLs perceive that peer relationships help them to persist and sustain themselves in MWUUs?

This chapter offers an in-depth explanation for the methods used to gain insights to the posed research questions. In doing so, the following sections will be presented: (a) rationale for study approach, (b) research sample, (c) design overview (d) data collection techniques, (e) analysis of the data, (f) ethics, (h) trustworthiness, (f) limitations of the study.

Qualitative Method Overview

A qualitative design method is used to best explore the perspectives of MBWALs in MWUUs. It was the researcher's intention that the qualitative research methods proposed for this study adequately highlighted the lived experiences of MBWALs during their time as students

and aspiring leaders. The researcher also sought to “empower” those participating by “minimiz[ing] the power relationships that often exist between researcher and participants [...]” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). As in, by giving the participants a chance to share their experiences with this phenomenon, they may begin to feel empowered by the fact that their experiences are being used to make meaning not only for themselves, but for others of similar backgrounds that are planning to pursue graduate study. More specifically, the researcher deemed qualitative inquiry as an appropriate and reliable methodology to inform the “perceptions, experiences, and cultural lens of Black, female students at majority White institutions” (Morris, p. 103, 2007).

Phenomenological Approach Rationale

Taking a phenomenological approach to this study was essential in understanding “how human beings make sense of experiences and transform experience into consciousness...” (Patton, 2015, p. 115). In this study, the researcher positioned graduate MBWALs as the human beings that shared their experiences with the researcher. The “sharing of experiences” took place through the interview process, and the responses that gathered were identified as individual reflections of consciousness. As the researcher analyzed the interviews, she endeavored to understand how these women made sense of their experiences. In addition to this, the “consciousness” brought forth during phenomenological inquiry also impacted the researcher, as it relied heavily upon the researcher to understand each participant’s experiences in a way that theorized the types of peer relationships that graduate MBWALs form, as well as how peer relationships functioned as a tool for persistence.

This project represented the individual pieces necessary in putting together (answering) the puzzle (questions) of how graduate MBWALs may experience their time in MWUUs. Thus, phenomenological inquiry (via interviews) acted as the adhesive one must utilize in order to

purely understand the participants' psychological and emotional responses to the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). In other words, the route to consciousness is a journey that will be shared by both the researcher and the participants, and is one that is not exclusive to these two parties (researcher, participant), yet it sought to engage other stakeholders—in a effort to bring about organizational (MWUUs) consciousness as well.

Phenomenological interview. As stated earlier, the interview process and the data collected from this process, acted as a discovery tool for the researcher. In other words, the interview was honed in on the “direct description” of an encounter or interaction—or in this case, a type of peer relationship within a MWUU. This, of course, was “without offering causal explanations or interpretive generalizations” (Adams & Van Manen, 2008, p. 618), which can dilute the validity and implications for future study endeavors. This methodological approach is particularly important to graduate MBWALs. Principally because their experiences were documented without the stigma of their responses being interpreted loosely or out of context—given the structure of the case study.

Research Sample

A criterion based purposeful sampling method was used to locate and secure research participants. The researcher identified participants that had the following experiences: (a) currently enrolled in master's degree programs (graduate students) (b) maintained either part-time or full-time student status, (c) took predominately face-to-face courses, (d) was a millennial (born between 1982-2003), (e) self-identified as Black or African-American, (f) considered themselves to be aspiring to leadership or acting in a leadership role in some capacity within an organization or their communities, and (g) planned to impact scholarship (as defined per Table 1.) in some way. Millennial Black Women Acting and/or Aspiring Leaders that have completed

an exclusively online graduate degree program are not warranted for this study, given that there are a different set of research questions and assumptions to navigate, which the researcher plans to explore in future study. The researcher sought to include at least 15 participants for this study.

Last spring, the researcher conducted a pilot study that included a similar demographic sample to this one. In conducting the study, the researcher found that participants were initially reluctant (due to issues with trust), but eventually agreed to be included. For this study, the researcher anticipated running into similar barriers. Upon reflecting, it had become clear that the researcher had assumed a certain degree of advantage because the researcher racially identified with potential participants; however, the researcher found that race and gender did not automatically warrant the participant's trust. The researcher did, however, discover that like Shaver and Moore (2014) she had "fewer margins to mitigate" (p. 397), meaning that because there are some cultural nuances with which the researcher identifies, less time was spent trying to figure out their relevance to this study.

The researcher included MWUUS from across the United States. During the fall 2015 AAACE (American Association for Adult and Continuing Education) conference, the researcher took advantage of networking opportunities and asked faculty members from different urban universities across the United States for their contact information in order to send out recruitment information. The researcher initially became interested in urban universities because of their location and mission statements, both of which were situated to address the culture of its surroundings. In doing so, it was my assumption that these schools would have more of a diverse outlook. In terms of adequate programming and resources, for women of color in pursuit of graduate degrees. Participants were sent an initial "call for participants" e-mail flier with a link to a *Qualtrics* generated demographic survey. After survey completion, respondents were asked to

complete an online schedule management *Doodle Poll* to sign up for their interviews. The researcher selected the participants to be included in the focus group based upon their responses during their interviews.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection for this study was done as ethically appropriate as possible. The approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) is a requirement for data collection. The active recruitment of the participants was conducted via phone, e-mail, *Facebook*, and *LinkedIn*. The young women were targeted using a snowball sampling technique (Creswell, 2012), that is the researcher asked mutual professional acquaintances, faculty members, and university employees responsible for the planning and outreach of this demographic of women, to forward e-mail invitation fliers to those aligned with the criteria. Two participants were personally referred from faculty members, all others were through e-mail (8 participants) and social media (*Facebook* and *LinkedIn*) postings (5 participants). The researcher personally sent out 6 rounds of e-mail recruitment letters to approximately 50 names that the researcher had acquired through word of mouth from peers and faculty members across the United States. The researcher received approximately 20 initial responses, but was only able to solidify 8 interviews through the e-mail recruitment process. The other 7 interviews were solidified via the other recruitment approaches mentioned above.

A qualitative approach was used in the data collection process, as each participant's subjective experiences was documented using BFW (Black Feminist-Womanism) (Lindsey-Dennis, 2015) as a research paradigm and an interpretive tool for the meaning making of each woman's verbalized experiences. In qualitative research, one generally uses a multi-faceted approach in collecting data. Likewise, this study used two main methods of data collection: (a)

standardized open-ended interviews, and (b) a focus group. The interview protocol was created using the research questions as a guide, along with questions shaped towards further exploring each woman's learning experiences. the researcher used BFW as an interpretive lens. This theory was used in the development of the interview protocol. The theoretical premise around gender and race was used to formulate the questions, and asked participants to specifically engage being black and female as a focal point of their experiences.

Data collection was conducted over the month of January 2016. The interviews were semi-structured and ranged from 75-90 minutes. The focus group lasted around 90 minutes. Interviews that were not conducted locally, were conducted via *Facetime* and recorded via the *iPhone* recording app, or *Skype for Business*, if not an *iPhone* user. The final phase of data collection included member checking, where the researcher followed-up with participants regarding their thoughts on how the interview went (the interview protocol process). Participants received a completed copy of their interview and focus group reflections in the form of a concept map.

Data Collection Rationale

The driving question for this qualitative study was to understand the types of peer relationships that graduate MBWALs experienced as a means for persistence and sustainability in MWUUs. In order to gain thorough insights on the experiences of this demographic, the researcher felt that it was imperative to engage in a research design that properly voiced the participant's own experiences within MWUUs. In depth interviews and collective dialogue (via the focus group) reinforced my belief that each of the participants were authorities of their own experiences, and were experts about their own societal, social, and political positions as Black women. The researcher use the aforementioned data collection techniques in order to understand

each participant's experiences. In doing so, MBWALs were prompted to respond to interview and focus group protocol questions (see appendix F) that emerged from the literature review and served as a tool for understanding the formation, function, and utility of MBWALs peer relationships.

Interviews. Each interview was open-ended and semi-structured to allow for more time and an open dialogue of questions. In keeping with the tenants of BFW, the researcher allowed the space for participants to share their multiple identities of culture, race, gender, sexuality, religion, and spirituality (Lindsey-Dennis, 2015) --all of which had the capacity to greatly enrich this study's findings. The reflection process that interviews initiated had value for both the researcher and the participant.

Focus groups. BFW research proposed the idea of "gathering all relevant information...to uncover intricacies of African American [women's] lives" (Lindsey-Dennis, 2015). As highlighted in previous sections, there is little research exploring the multi-layered identities of Black women in the United States, and for this study—little was unearthed in the literature review process that can bring us closer to understanding those identities. In using a focus group for this study, the researcher brought together a 4-member subset of participants leveraging a group dynamic to deepen the understanding around MBWALs opinions, beliefs, perceptions, emotions, and interpersonal interactions around a common topic. The researcher also gathered the collective reactions of the women involved. The researcher selected the focus group participants by asking them during their initial interviews if they would like to be contacted to participate in a focus group to confirm the themes of the study. Those that agreed were contacted via e-mail once the date and time was set for the focus group. They were asked to complete a consent form as well.

The overall goal of the focus group was to further interrogate the interview protocol by engaging in a dialogue that led to their empowerment, in the sense that it allowed participants to be in a safe space with women of similar racial backgrounds and attitudes, which allowed them to speak openly and freely about their experiences as MBWALs in MWUUs. Focus groups are particularly useful when researching historically marginalized groups, as they can provide a collective voice and other lenses regarding issues that MBWALs may be facing, in addition to this, spaces for these women's voices are not often available, making this opportunity all the more significant and fruitful (Patton, 2015). The focus group was the final phase of data collection, as the researcher used the interview transcripts to capture the themes and present them as potential topics of conversation for the focus groups. Participants were presented with the themes from the interview and asked to give their reactions to these themes in the form of conversation.

Recruitment. Focus group participants were recruited following the initial recruitment protocol as interviewees; however, the researcher asked interview participants to consider sharing their experiences through a focus group dynamic once their initial interview was over. Given that this was a phenomenological study, the researcher wanted to keep the sample size as consistent with this approach's suggested guidelines as much as possible, and therefore 4 of the 15 overall participants were selected. In addition to this, Morgan (1998) calls for a smaller number of participants in focus groups when participants have (a) a high level of involvement in the topic, (b) are emotionally caught up in the topic, (c) expertise around the topic, and (d) a complex view of the topic. For this study, all of these factors were relevant. A call for participants in this focus group went out with a link, and from there participants were asked to complete the qualifying questionnaire.

Demographic questionnaire. Prior to the start of this investigation, the researcher conducted 2 pilot studies that have justified the use of demographic questionnaires. Through these questionnaires, the researcher was able to determine which participants would be qualified to participate. This early effort to reach out to participants provided an initial line of communication and set the stage for building trust that was essential for the latter stages of this project. The information from this demographic (see appendices G) was used during the analysis portion of this research--in order to compare and contrast across all participants.

Peer reviewer. The peer review process was an integral factor in ensuring that each participant's reflection was accurately depicted. According to Merriam (2002), the peer review process was vital for reinforcing plausibility, and involved a knowledgeable "colleague to scan raw data" (p. 26). For this study, the researcher employed the expertise of a colleague that has conducted extensive research studies on African Americans in various contexts in regards to identity, race, gender, visibility, and space.

Member checking. The final phase of data collection included member checking, where the researcher followed up with participants regarding their thoughts on how the interview went and their level of understanding. Participants received a completed copy of their interview in the form of a concept map highlighting the themes and connections that were recorded by the researcher.

Data Analysis

Merriam (1998) insists that researchers simultaneously collect and analyze data to limit the risk of misinterpretation and overwhelming data sets. The data analysis approach used for this study encompassed what Johnson and Christensen (2012) called a "reduction and interpretation" of the "amount of information collected" (p. 93). To foster this interpretation, the researcher listened to

the audio files and transcriptions of each participant's reflections with as much fidelity as possible. The researcher used concept mapping to isolate the major "themes" or concepts that each participant shared throughout her interview. The researcher used the online software *CMap Tools* to create an electronic graphic of each participant's responses, which allowed me to look for themes or concepts that represent the diversities in experiences of Black women--as it either relates to or contradicts the theoretical tenants of BFW. Coding the emergent concepts were in alignment with the themes that stood out as most critical to understanding the participant's experiences as it relates to their race, gender, relationships, and persistence.

The data were analyzed through an online qualitative software program called *QSR NVivo*. This software was used to identify the themes from the recorded interviews and notes, by using parent and child codes to capture the participants' individual stories and the patterns that were evident among the participant's stories. A coding dictionary was created and referenced to ensure consistency. This took place in numerous iterative rounds of looking at the raw data with regard to the research question and what they participants' responses were. This also involved the peer reviewer's insight and the use of diagramming through *CMap* tools software to identify linkages and/or themes in some of the interview concepts to ensure that all possible reasons and explanations were given proper discussion and consideration.

Ethical Considerations

The utmost respect and protection of the participants were a top priority for the duration of this study. The researcher's responsibility to maintain each respondent's dignity and safety was paramount. Given the sensitivity of this research's topic, it was essential that the researcher go the extra mile in providing a quality reflective experience for all. To further support this, each participant was given a thorough explanation of the study's purpose, as well as how the

information will be treated thereafter. A variety of safeguards have been put into place as an added measure of security.

Security. Each respondent's rights and interests were prioritized, and made critical regarding the reporting and dissemination of the data. All participant's identifying information was protected through the use of pseudonyms, along with the identifying information of the universities involved. Strict measures were taken to secure the storage of research-related records and other raw data. The researcher used *Dropbox* (a secure online data file storage and sharing tool that is password protected) to store and manage data. In addition to *Dropbox*, the researcher used the university's online file storage database, *OneDrive*, as a backup storage tool. This *OneDrive* is also password protected both by personal password and university login. Only the researcher had access to the secured information obtained from the interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups that were uploaded to the electronic drives.

Trustworthiness

The methodology for this project involved several procedures, which according to Creswell (2012) helps to ensure a trustworthy and ethical research process. To establish credibility, the researcher took additional measures to ensure that responses were reported accurately. Employing the use of triangulation was assistive, as it provided additional credibility measures. A demographic survey, semi-structured interviews, a concept-map of each interview, member checking, and peer reviewing was part of the triangulation process. As Denzin (1978) states "each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality, [thus] multiple methods of observation must be employed" (Patton, 2015, p. 316) in order to test for consistency. The researcher did this by looking at the different forms of data in an effort to "illuminate" any inconsistencies in the findings across each form of data (Patton, 2015, p. 316). The researcher

also developed an audit trail (Creswell, 2012) inclusive of: (a) interview protocol, (b) demographic information, (c) recorded interviews, (d) transcriptions (raw data), (e) data reduction and analysis notes, (f) data reconstruction and synthesis products (i.e. thematic interpretation chart for researcher problem, conclusions, and recommendations), (g) process notes, (h) analytic memos, (i) preliminary development information (C-Maps), and (j) e-mail correspondence.

Subjectivity

A researcher's subjectivity can have a significant impact on how data are interpreted, analyzed, and reported (Peshkin, 1988). The researcher's current position as a Black female graduate student impacted the assumptions that helped to craft the research questions. Last spring, the researcher conducted a pilot study that included a similar sample to this one. In conducting the study, the researcher found that participants were initially reluctant (due to issues with trust), but eventually agreed to be included. For this study, the researcher anticipated running into similar barriers, which the researcher quickly addressed. Upon reflecting, it had become clear to me that the researcher had assumed a certain degree of advantage because she racially identified with them; however, the researcher found that race and gender did not automatically warrant the participant's trust. The researcher did, however, discover that like Shaver and Moore (2014) she may have "fewer margins to mitigate" (p. 397), that is the researcher may spend less time asking probing questions to bring understanding around the participant's experiences, in terms of her race and gender—particularly because the researcher may likely identify with her experiences in the same regard, whether positive or negative.

Positionality

The positionality statement is to help inform the reader of how the researcher's lived experiences as a millennial Black woman *and* her lived experience with the phenomenon under study, has shaped this chapter's presentation of the findings, and later my interpretation and analysis of the findings. The researcher is a Black woman pursuing an Urban Education doctoral degree at a majority White urban university, and currently have two significant peer relationships. She was born and raised in a small rural town in Louisiana. Her mother identifies as a Black American and my father identifies as Nigerian (Igbo). My professional background includes K-12 teaching and other educational advocacy and policy initiatives related to equity. The researcher has experienced racial stereotype threat, anticipated negative race-related experiences, and have encountered significant racial micro-aggressions in both my educational and professional careers. Biases for this research study included the researcher's belief that the participants would have participated in several different types of peer relationships as a means for emotional, academic, and psychological support during their graduate tenure in a majority White university. The researcher also believed that participants, as she had, would use these relationships as buffers and coping mechanisms.

Bracketing

Patton (2015) maintains that bracketing is the process of "bracket [ing] out the world and presuppositions to identify the data in pure form, uncontaminated by extraneous intrusions" (p. 575). For this study I bracketed the participants experience of this phenomenon by not interpreting meaning from existing studies (Husserl, 1913; Patton, 2015), which according to Husserl (1913; Patton, 2015) means the researcher:

(a) Locate within the personal experience, or self-story, key phrases and statements that speak directly to the phenomenon in questions, (b) interpret the meaning of these phrases, as an informed reader, (c) obtain the subject's interpretation of these phrases, if possible, (d) inspect these meanings for what they reveal about the essential, recurring feature of the phenomenon being studied, and (e) offer a tentative statement, or definition, of the phenomenon in terms of the essential recurring features identified in step 4. (Denzin, 1989, pp. 55-56; Patton, 2015, p. 576).

Limitations of Study

The underpinnings of qualitative research give way to significant limitations. In this section, the researcher offered some ways to address these limitations. A great deal of interpretation and decision-making is left up to the researcher and in doing so there can be unintended bias. This study, though it encompassed a very specific niche, should be used cautiously when being applied to studies that seek to answer the same research questions. One must keep in mind that this study encompassed multiple research sites, which were all considered MWUUs. Knowing this, the outcomes and findings of this study may not be beneficial in its application to *all* universities. Furthermore, the experiences of all MBWALs were not included in this sample--therefore the thoughts, perceptions, and understandings of the participants in this study cannot be exclusively applied to the experiences of all MBWALs. In addition to this, students within an online graduate degree program were not included in the sample.

Chapter Summary

As noted in the metaphoric quote at the beginning of this section, the methodological approach that the researcher is taking for this study is, indeed, to discover the "footpaths" that African American women take in order to persist in graduate degree programs at majority White urban

universities. This chapter sought to provide a detailed description of the research methods proposed for this project. The researcher relied upon a qualitative case study design to capture the phenomenon of the types of peer relationships MBWALs form as a means for persistence and leadership insights. The data collected were critiqued using themes from the literature, and was carefully scrutinized for credibility and dependability, as listed in the previous sub sections of this chapter. This study's intent was to make a valuable contribution to higher education, leadership, HRD, organizational learning, and the lives of MBWALs. The following chapters of this study documented the findings and analysis from the participants.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

“...give us the opportunity to be heard”

-Dysis (2016)

The purpose of this study was to explore the types of peer relationships that millennial Black women aspiring leaders (MBWALs) have as a means for fostering persistence within graduate degree programs at majority White urban universities (MWUUs). The researcher believed that a better understanding of this phenomenon would give insight into the understudied academic lives of millennial Black women, and would also allow universities—and others invested in the success of these women—to understand the intricacies of what it means to be a millennial Black woman in pursuit of a graduate degree. Furthermore, the researcher sought to understand *how* these intricacies impact MBWAL’s perceptions of their relationships.

In the following discussions, issues of discriminatory racial encounters and reflections of perceived micro-aggressive encounters from the participants surfaced frequently; there were no questions in the protocol specifically about racism, nor were there questions about whether or not they had experienced racism. The experiences that the participants shared in the following sections are derived from their own telling and perspectives of their experiences in majority White urban universities (MWUUs). The study’s interview protocol was informed by the research questions; therefore, participants were asked questions about their peer relationship experiences, which in turn led to them talk about how they leveraged their peer relationships.

Moving forward, chapter four’s goal is to provide an in-depth description of the empirical results of this study. The findings from this study were constructed through an analysis of the following data collection methods: (a) demographic survey, (b) individual interviews, and (c) a focus group interview. The use of a computer software program (*QSR NVivo*) was key in the

analysis and storage of the raw data accumulated from the interviews and focus group. The researcher first formed the raw data into codes, and then constructed the data into broader themes through the use of concept maps. Essentially, the researcher used open coding and axial coding to systematically analyze the data collected from the interviews. In addition to this, the researcher recoded the data to obtain a numerical representation (percentages).

Identified participants were asked to complete a brief online demographic survey that prompted them to list their degree program, graduate status (as it pertains to amount of credit hours completed or years completed), current academic GPA, and hometown. This information was requested as a means of determining their demographic backgrounds. Data collected from the *Qualtrics* online survey module is listed in Table 2 below:

TABLE 2.
Demographic Table

NAME	HOMESTATE/COUNTRY	AGE	PROGRAM	STATUS	NOTES
ALLIYAH	Georgia	23	Health Sciences	Enrolled	Track athlete
CELESTE	New York	30	Humanities	Enrolled	Former restaurant owner; Ivy League graduate
DYSIS	Virginia	23	Informational Sciences	Enrolled	“Southern belle”; dates internationally
KORI	Illinois	32	Social/Behavioral	Enrolled	Active military; proud mother of two; 1 st generation
LIZA	Central Africa	25	Social/Behavioral	Enrolled	Speaks 4 different languages

SUNNY	Wisconsin	23	Business	Enrolled	Proud role model; enjoys social media
TARA	Wisconsin	25	Health Sciences	Enrolled	Active social life; passionate leader; 1 st generation
ZORA	West Indies	26	Education	Enrolled	Future university president
MONA	Connecticut	30	Social/Behavioral	Enrolled	Has a twin; 2 nd master's degree
URSALA	Maryland	25	Criminal Justice	Enrolled	Journal editor; future attorney
KIM	North Carolina	25	Education	Enrolled	“Black Ambassador”; proud mother; studied abroad
ABBY	Wisconsin	32	Business	Enrolled	Tech entrepreneur
ROSE	East Africa	24	Education	Enrolled	Bi-lingual
DENISE	Jamaica	32	Humanities	Enrolled	International artist
LAILA	Wisconsin	32	Education	Enrolled	Lover of research; mother

Note. list generated for the purpose of understanding participant demographical information.

The demographic information shared by the participants shaped their responses to their interview questions.

Each participant expressed significant concern for how they would be identified within this study. MBWALs were particularly concerned with the protocol involved with how their identities would be protected. The majority of the participants wanted to ensure that they would not in *any* way be detected by their institutional affiliates. One participant stated: “I’m almost

done with coursework...and I don't want *any* problems." In addition to this, the researcher lost several potential participants, as they agreed to do an interview—but *did not* want to be audio recorded. Unfortunately, conducting interviews without audio recording them was not a part of this study's methodological approach, and likewise was not outlined in the IRB protocol.

This study poses two overarching questions to millennial, Black women graduate students, who consider themselves to be leaders in some capacity:

1. What types of peer relationships and for what purposes do graduate millennial Black women leaders (MBWALs) experience peer relationships within majority White universities (MWUs)?
2. How do MBWALs perceive that peer relationships help them to persist and sustain themselves in MWUs?

In weaving these questions into the research protocol--15 participants' shared deeply personal and reflective experiences with me. In doing so, each participants' experiences were used to provide a deeper understating around the types of relationships that millennial graduate women experience as a means for persistence and sustainability—either academically or psychosocially. In aligning the interview protocol questions with the two overarching research questions, six major findings emerged from this study:

1. An overwhelming majority of (14 of 15 [93%]) MBWALs identified having at least one of the three major types of peer relationships (sistah gurl peer, proxy mentor peer, rival peer) identified within this study.
2. A significant majority (13 of 15 [86%]) of MBWALs used their peer relationships as a sustainability measure against the following obstacles (a) perceived racial micro-

aggressions by White professors, colleagues, and peers (b) lack of perceived institutional academic and emotional support.

3. The significant majority (13 of 15 [86%]) of participants used their peer relationships as a means of affirming their identity both inside and outside of the university, as these relationships helped to support each participant's multiple identities within a majority White graduate setting.

4. The significant majority (13 of 15 [86%]) of participants indicated that they anticipated some form of negative race-related behaviors (i.e. racism, prejudice, or discrimination). Participants anticipated these behaviors either through their own personal experiences, or through the forewarnings of peers or family members cautioning them as to how they may be perceived by Whites, particularly in academic and professional environments.

5. All (15 of 15 [100%]) participants had past institutionalized educational experiences (secondary, undergraduate, team sports) within majority White settings.

6. The significant majority (13 of 15 [86%]) of participants shared a deep personal need and responsibility to set an example for other young Black women—particularly if they did not have and *still* do not have role models for themselves during their academic journey, and also given that there is not enough media coverage highlighting positive images of Black women.

In the following sections, the researcher presents the above-mentioned 6 findings as themes. For the purposes of this study and to properly follow my analysis in chapter 5, it is important to note that the terms “theme” and “category” will be used interchangeably, per Creswell's (2013) text.

Theme 1: *The Three Types of Peer Relationships*

All MBWALs identified having at least one of the three major types of peer relationships brought forth within this study. For the purposes of this study, the difference between a “peer” and a “peer relationship” is that a peer relationship involves the frequent and prolonged interactions between two people—deeming it a “relationship”. When the term “peer” is referenced throughout this study, singularly, it refers to *one* peer. The primary finding within this study related to the types of peer relationships that MBWALs partake in during their time as graduate students within majority White universities. Based on the participant’s descriptions, there were three major types of peer relationships prevalent among MBWALs. The three types were identified as: (a) the “Sistah-Gurl” peer relationship, (b) the “Rival Peer” relationship, and (c) the “Proxy Mentor Peer relationship” (see Table 4). The “Sistah-Gurl” peer relationship was profiled by MBWALs as: (a) usually same sex, (b) taking place among those around the same age, (c) sharing similar educational and social interests, (d) forming due to a deep bond through similar identities as Black women or being Black, (e) can be formed or had before or during graduate study, (d) occurs among non-family members. MBWALs expressed that they interacted with these peer relationships quite frequently during graduate studies. Table 3 lists MBWALs frequency of interaction with their peer relationships.

TABLE 3.
Frequency of Interaction with All Peers

NAME	DAILY	WEEKLY	MONTHLY
ALLIYAH	X		
CELESTE			X
DYSIS		X	
KORI			
LIZA	X		
SUNNY	X		X
TARA	X		
ZORA	X		
MONA	X		
URSALA	X		
KIM	X		
ABBY	X		
ROSE		X	
DENISE	X		
LAILA			X

Note. list generated for the purpose of understanding participants' daily interactions with peers.

The purpose of the “Sistah-Gurl” peer relationship was overwhelmingly stated among participants as providing: (a) an emotional safe haven, (b) a "cheer leader,” (c) an outlet for hanging out or spending quality time together, (d) a buffer for emotional breakdowns, and (e) a buffer for negative and/or discriminatory behaviors related to race (in graduate school and/or professional settings). Two participants (Mona and Liza) held peer relationships that were

drastically different than the other participants. Mona's peer relationship with a Black male embodied the characteristics of a "sistah gurl" peer, and Liza's peer relationship with a White female reflected the profile of a "sistah gurl" peer.

In African- American or Black culture, the term "sistah", as spelled here is used to show an Africentric connectivity. To most Black women a "sistah" is someone that represents a deep bond between women of African descent that is outside of birth, hence the Black culture phrase: "*Sistahs from another Mistah*", meaning that we are sisters in chosen bond, but from different fathers. The term "sistah" is also one used to acknowledge a sense of genuine care and kindness between Black women—usually between those who are within the same peer group. It would be uncommon for MBWALs to address an African American elder or someone older than she as a "sistah" (outside of church settings), perhaps collectively this would be acceptable, but not in terms of a direct dialogue between the MBWAL and the elder. It would be especially rare for a MBWAL to address an elder as a "sistah gurl", in some African American sub-cultures, particularly the southern United States; this would be considered as highly disrespectful by African American elders. However, elders often regard younger African-American girls and women as "sistah/s".

MBWALs' lives are deeply impacted by Black culture—particularly hip-hop culture⁵ (Henry, 2008), which is why the function of this word (hip-hop), within the context of this study is critical to note. The lexicology of Black culture is often something that Black students chose not to use in MW settings, for fear of being stereotyped or perceived as unintelligent by other races—mainly Whites. Likewise, the spelling of "gurl" throughout this work is a departure from

⁵ Refers to the liberation movement that evolved into a civil (human) rights movement sparked by ostracized, marginalized, and oppressed inner-city youth. Grounded in the traditions of U.S. born Blacks, Latinos, and other members of the African Diaspora (see *Hip Hop Culture* (2006) by Emmett G. Price).

the English language spelling of: “girl”, and was chosen as a cultural response to the participants—which identified Black culture as being a significant part of their daily lives.

Zora, a 26-year-old education major from the West Indies, who effortlessly shifted into a deep Caribbean accent as she excitedly talked about how impactful her “Sistah-Gurl” relationships have been throughout her academic journey:

I feel like they [universities] need to understand just how serious the sister girl bond is. You understand what that means, but you have those friends that are, like they say blood is thicker than water, but you have those friends that become blood because they're that thick, and I feel like a black woman's life without the sister girl bond will be nothing...these are the folks that know what color drawers you have on today because you tell them everything, and they really do...you can tell them things that you can't even tell your own family because you feel like, you know families do judge, but your sister girls, they'll listen to you...I don't think I've ever met a black woman that will say, oh, I don't have a sister girl, at least one best, best friend, your “bestie”. I have never met anyone that can say it really that I don't have a sister girl. Huge, huge relationship.

Alliyah’s (26, health sciences, Georgia) “Sistah-Gurl” bond was solidified during her struggles with coursework. Through this, she expressed how valuable her relationship with a fellow classmate evolved into more of a sisterhood:

...we're very close and we speak a lot, but it seems our conversations are mostly about progressing in life, so we speak about school or hey, you know, so proud of you. It's encouraging, and we're both black females, and I like the fact that when we do speak it's all about positivity and she's always like, so glad you're feeling well and even if it's probably 6-months way back in the day, she was like oh yeah, you did so well, you're inspiring me to do this, and I give complements back because I acknowledge the hard work and the success that comes from it. So with that relationship, I think we're close with that and I think we'll always have a network connection and not just network, but a connection of friendship and family and all of that type of stuff.

The interview process brought forth another type of peer relationship—which was the “Rival Peer” relationship. MBWALs profiled this relationship as: (a) one with whom they usually shared course, (b) can be male or female, (c) had consistent academic interactions, and (c) were formed via classroom or course related interactions. Thus, these individuals were essentially *classmates*. However, their functions were quite different than those of classmates--

given that these “Rival Peer” interactions provided a source of unspoken competition, encouragement, and motivation for MBWALs. They allowed for a healthy exchange of challenging conversations within coursework by pushing the MBWAL’s thinking on certain course related and social topics—while inspiring one another to “get on his/her level”. My conversation with Sunny (23, *Business, Wisconsin*) revolved around her significant interactions with a “Rival Peer”, of which she reflected upon as being a constant source of motivation and support, as it related to coursework and staying on top of her academics:

...she's the only person I really talk to about careers and she's really motivational. She says things like: "look you've got to be here, you've got to do your homework, you've got to get the grades"...she's still in school and we just share the struggles with each other. She has probably been the most impactful because she was more encouraging. Seeing how driven she is and how passionate she is about what she does, always wanting to find something. It was always like what's next with her...

Sunny also shared the impact that social media has on her relationship with her “Rival Peer” in terms of motivation, and being positively impacted to do well—despite being at a distance and/or not necessarily being in a classroom setting:

...if I see [the rival peer] studying on Snap Chat, I'm like oh shoot, I'm going to study because it's a grades thing. Okay, she got good grades, she was studying, let me show my good grades. It's a lot like what I said before. I don't want to slack because I don't want to send the wrong message, and I feel like some of my peers, like on Facebook, they're kind of watching me, so I'm going to make sure I'm up here.

While talking to Sunny, the researcher noticed that the reciprocal nature of the “Rival Peer” relationship was especially important, given that MBWALs felt a deep sense of responsibility to promote a positive image to others in regards to how seriously they took their academic lives.

The third type of peer relationship that surfaced during the interview process was probably the most common in terms of the relationships that graduate students are known to foster throughout their graduate career, *and* in terms of frequency of notation within the literature. The majority of interviewees spoke in-depth about their relationship with an individual

that acted as a mentor to them. Despite findings within the literature defining a mentor relationship as one that involves someone who is generally older and has a wealth of professional and leadership knowledge on hand for MBWALs to absorb (Kram, 1985)--interview findings for this study shed new light on what functions a *peer* mentor relationship has for MBWALs. Interviewees described a mentorship style relationship with a peer that was formed in lieu of having more of a formal mentorship relationship as graduate students. In addition to this, graduate MBWALs may not have opportunities to access and foster peer relationships, largely because in some disciplines, they are the only Black women, or as Dysis (23, *Informational Sciences, Virginia*) put it “*I think it is unfortunate that when I go to a workshop on campus or some event, I **am** the diversity*”.

Thus, the researcher coined these relationships as “Proxy Mentor Peer” (PMP) relationships based on their role in helping the MBWAL to move to the next phase of a professional and/or leadership career. The PMP is profiled as usually same sex, around the same age, and generally shares coursework and/or social interests, and has similar career aspirations—of which the PMP may have a larger scope of expertise. For instance, if a MBWAL is in a particular professional field, but has not yet assumed an executive leadership post—she (MBWAL) may look to her PMP for guidance. This may be particularly helpful if the PMP may already have experiences within this particular role, or she (PMP) may currently be in this role, which puts the PMP in a prime position to function as a course work and program resource, career advancement and opportunity advisor, and a resource for developing professional relationships. After sitting down with Liza (25, *Social Behavioral, Central Africa*) over coffee to inquire about her educational experiences and any impactful peer relationships that she would be willing to share—her posture and face changed as she spoke admirably about a peer named

Emma (pseudonym) that, although was only a year older, was critical in her growth and development as a current and future leader in the social and behavioral professional field:

The way she [PMP] talks to people and the world that she lives in is a man's world...so the way she carries herself is really fascinating to me because I just get to learn a lot from her. The way she talks to people, the way she is able to address issues and make people understand things in a different way than when she frames arguments... nobody has been really able to challenge me in a different way that I am used to and so working with her is kind of refreshing because I get to learn and I get to learn in a really good comfortable environment because she is somebody that I trust, she is somebody cool and very smart. So working with her has been really good for me because I am learning different ways of talking to people. She is so excellent that I really do appreciate being able to work with her and being able to learn from her and the way she sees things.

Other participant's interactions with the PMP were reflected upon as they found themselves at depressingly low points in their academic careers. For Celeste (30, *Women and Gender Studies, New York*), the psychological struggle of not feeling “good enough” were met with support and compassion by someone that she described in her interview that functioned in her life as a mentor—that she happened to perceive as also her peer:

...she [PMP] is one of those people that is like, when I was like oh maybe medical school, maybe I'm just going to go back to corporate, I don't know if I'm going to cut this graduate thing, I don't like writing papers about stuff I'm not interested in and it's just tiring...it's in those low moments that I've been able to come to people like this, and they are like no you can do this, stop being lazy and also believe that you can do this.

Other participants reported similar bonds that pushed them to believe in themselves and move forward with the understanding that they were worthy of the aspirations that they set out to achieve.

TABLE 4.**Categorical Descriptions of MBWALs' Peer Relationships**

Categories	Sistah-Gurl PR	Rival PR	Proxy-Mentor PR
Profile	<i>usually same sex around the same age similar educational interests similar social interests formed from a deep bond similar identities as black women can be formed before or during graduate study non-family member</i>	<i>sharing coursework having consistent academic interactions (between classmates) usually via classroom or course related interactions</i>	<i>can be male or female around the same age or slightly older shares coursework, academic and/or social interests similar career aspirations substitute or alternative to a formal mentor relationship</i>
Purpose	<i>emotional safe haven "cheer leaders" hang out/spend quality time outside of coursework buffer for emotional breakdowns buffer for negative and/or discriminatory behaviors related to race (inside or outside of graduate school)</i>	<i>healthy competition in courses challenges and pushes thinking fosters a competitive spirit inspires one to "get on his/her level"</i>	<i>coursework and program navigations career advice and academic opportunities helps to develop professional relationships consults with peer around leadership goals</i>

Note. table generated for the purpose of describing MBWALs' types of peer relationships.

Theme 2: Peer Relationships as Alternate Paths to Persistence and Sustainability

One of the key questions guiding this study was to seek an understanding for how MBWALs perceived that their peer relationships helped them to persist in graduate school. For the purposes of this study, the term persistence is defined as both: (a) an African American female's continuance in majority White urban university in spite of difficulty or opposition while maintaining a healthy psychological and academic outlook, and (b) the U.S. Department of Education's definition that persistence is a student's enrollment pattern with respect to staying on

track to a degree. For example, students are counted as "persisting" if they are still attending college or have graduated from college (USDOE, 1995). The data collection phase of this study illustrated the impact of MBWAL's peer relationships on their persistence and ability to sustain (endure) themselves during this academic phase of their lives. Interviewees spoke candidly about their academic journeys and the peer relationships that stand out in their minds as especially positively impactful, meaning that this relationship was critical to not only their pursuit of a graduate degree, but also their desire to remain enrolled.

Millennial Black women aspiring and/or acting leaders also indicated that the peer relationships they held during their time as graduate students acted as a means for psychological and emotional sustainability against the following obstacles: (a) perceived racial micro-aggressions— *“brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group* (Sue, Capodilupo, et. al., 2007, p. 273) --by White professors, colleagues, and peers, and (b) lack of perceived institutional academic and emotional support. Laila (32, *Wisconsin, Education*) likened her experiences with racial micro-aggressions in MWUs as *“definite trauma”*.

The types of peer relationships identified in the previous findings sections were all leveraged towards MBWAL's sustainability in terms of ensuring that any negatively perceived racially motivated encounter was not internalized to the point where a participant no longer desired to remain enrolled. In other words, if a participant *did* experience some form of negative racialized behavior—she was more likely to cope with these experiences or exchanges through talking with one of her identified types of peers. Although I did not include any questions in the interview protocol specifically about negative race-related interactions or micro-aggressions,

participants' talking about their persistence and sustainability seemed to be compelled to share their experiences with what they perceived as micro-aggressive or discriminatory behavior from White faculty and students. Denise (32, *Jamaica, Humanities*) told a story of encounters that deeply impacted her time as a student within her university and as an internationally and domestically acclaimed professional artist. She recalled the feeling that overcame her during her first few days as a graduate student and how she looked to her peers as a source of support and understanding:

I had never been anywhere where my skin preceded everything before anything else, and I was very conscious of my race there, more so than I had ever been in my life. So my roommates kind of were the ones that interacted with the most ... and I needed to understand what was happening to me, because I really didn't know what was going on.

Denise went on to recount some of her experiences with racial micro-aggressions through her interactions with her White male and female classmates outright asking her on multiple occasions: “*why are you here?*” Denise painstakingly shared a classroom interaction with a professor where she perceived her professor’s attitude towards a recent community act of violence against a large number of Black men and teenagers to be negligent and “passing the buck”, in the sense that the professor refused to acknowledge the other Black students in the course that were visibly upset and emotionally bothered by what had happened. In addition to this, the White students in the class—deflected the situation at hand, and began comparing it to the 9/11 attacks. Denise felt that the professor did not take the opportunity to use her platform to facilitate a dialogue—she instead, put the dialogue in the hands of a student who was at the time “*balling her eyes out.*” Here is Denise’s recollection of this exchange:

Over the summer African-Americans were murdered, it was a massacre I should actually call it, happened while I was in school. We went to class the very day that it unfolded, no one talked about it, we just kind of went on with class as normal, there was one other African-American student in the class and she's crying the entire time. Actually it was the same day that the incident happened, and during the break, the teacher had talked to

the African-American student and said what's going on, why are you crying? She said that a large number of African-Americans were just murdered and we're going on as if nothing happened. So then the teacher said you're right, it is my fault, I think I need to address this with the class. She goes to talk to the class, and she was like hi class, I think [Shameka] has something to say. The African-American student who was balling her eyes out and trying to explain to the class what is going on, so she passed the buck. So she talked to the class and said what happened. The class then takes the conversation and made it about 9-11. They were like (Denise speaking in a sarcastic tone):oh yeah, that's right, because I was teaching and 9-11 happened I did this, and when 9-11 happened, we did that, and we talked about it and we spent the whole day doing this and that. So then I raised my hand, and I was like you guys just completely deflected. You took a tragedy that was an American tragedy, and you said well no, that's a Black problem, we're going to deflect to something that we can actually relate to which is when White people died and we're going to talk about 9-11. Again, the type of response I got was not yes, you're right, we did that, it was oh my god, I'm some crazy woman who is making them think twice about how to handle these type of situations, and that was the first week that I was in graduate school.

Denise was left to sort through and make meaning of these experiences with her peers, as she was new to the city, and did not know where else to turn.

Kori (32, Illinois, Social Work) shared her experiences as a graduate student intern, and emphasized her encounters with racial micro-aggressions as she discussed how those that she reported to had very little expectations for her, which made her feel as though they (white supervisors) perceived her as having very little potential to make a positive impact:

...there were a lot of micro aggressions. They just have existed for me always... somebody told me one time, I never expect much from you but you always go above and beyond and you always do more than I ever expected, and I'm like why wouldn't you expect anything from me in this position in the first place? So there has always been a lot of micro aggressions that read between the lines and really know what people think of you-type of knowingness.

Although having frequently experienced these types of negative verbal exchanges, Kori has depended upon her peer relationships to ground her existence in settings where these types of behaviors arise, and to help provide emotional buffers and support for any encounters that may

happen in the future. Kori reflects on her peer relationship's role in her sustainability against her aforementioned experience:

I've gotten a lot of mentorship, [and] a lot of encouragement...so that helps me to persist in this program and that gives me encouragement to say I'm headed in the right direction and hopefully at the end of it I'm able to accomplish these things that I've identified as important.

Abby (32, *Business, Wisconsin*) --like Kori--experienced micro-aggressive behavior from white colleagues and peers during her time as a student, and as an intern in majority white settings.

Abby also recalled how a “sistah gurl” peer had experienced the same type of negative behavior.

She shared the following:

I remember one day she came to me, we were having lunch, and she needed to vent a little bit to me about this current internship that she was doing at this predominantly white company and how she felt a little bit dismissed and that her ideas or her efforts to try to take more initiatives with her work as an intern was really dismissed compared to the other interns who were white taking on the same kinds of initiatives to put things forward and suggest plans and things like that, she felt like her ideas were always being dismissed. In that moment, I shared with her my previous experiences as a graduate student, having those same experiences and then also working at a company where I was an accountant and having those same kind of experiences. I was responsible for inventory and procurement and things like that and how sometimes I would make suggestions to the board and it wouldn't always be taken seriously at first unless someone else brought it to their attention. So that was always frustrating, so I shared that with her, and how I kind of got through that. Eventually I quit. I was not suggesting that she did that, but just sharing that experience with her.

When the researcher asked other participants if they felt that these exchanges were taking place because of their race, the researcher was met with a resounding “yes.” MBWALs felt that white colleagues or classmates were experiencing their tenure as graduate students, interns, and employees much more differently than them—in terms of how their (white counterparts’) ideas and actions were being received by supervisors and faculty. MBWALs felt that, as Abby mentioned, if someone *white* mentioned ideas or suggestions, these things would be acted upon or taken seriously, as opposed to her mentioning a suggestion or idea and having it dismissed or

not taken seriously. Although participants perceived this to be discriminatory—many of them were able to purpose their peer relationships just as Abby had—for a reciprocal source of support and sustainability. Some participants (Zora, 26, *West Indies, Education*; Ursala, 25, *Maryland, Criminal Justice*; Kim, 25, *North Carolina, Education*) also expressed the value of them knowing that their “Sistah Gurl” peers would listen to them without judgment or blame when they shared stories of perceived racial discrimination and/or micro aggressions—“*You can tell them things that you can't even tell your own family because you feel like, you know families do judge, but your sister gurls, they'll listen to you*” (Zora).

Oftentimes these conversations were met with “Sistah Gurls” sharing similar stories of their own experiences with racial discrimination and/or micro aggression with them, thus participants found these attributes to be highly important and something that a non-Black woman would not understand, and as Kim (25, *North Carolina, Education*) put it: “*they just wouldn't understand...they just don't get it*”. Much of these women’s experiences boils down to recognizing the importance of being in a peer relationship with someone who *understands* them and their perception of the academic and social world that they live in. Ursala (25, *Criminal Justice, Maryland*) gave her perspective on how important racial identification or fostering relationships with people that “look like you” can be in helping to foster the type of understanding that other participants spoke about:

I think in particular when you have people who look like you and you're going through the same thing, who is going to understand that struggle better than people who look like you? So it's like we could have more candid conversations, and so we could encourage each other and things like that.

Theme 3: Peer Relationships as Identity Affirmation

The previous findings indicated that MBWALs peer relationships were a key component to their psychosocial well-being. In addition to this finding, the personal experiences documented

throughout the interview process also indicated that participants used their peer relationships as a means of affirming their identity both inside and outside of the university--as these relationships helped to support each participant's multiple identities within MW graduate settings. During my interview with Ursala (25, *Criminal Justice, Maryland*) the researcher could *feel* how integral her peer relationships were in terms of affirming her: *"for me right now, my friendships are more concerned with how do you fill me, how do you help me grow in other areas, because I still need positive affirmation"*.

The majority of participants stated the being a Black woman had its challenges, and the reoccurring challenge mentioned among the participants was the fact that MBWALs knew that their way of being, in terms of mannerisms, style (hair, clothes, manner of speaking), intellect, and educational background within their graduate setting was constantly being dissected and observed by others—others meaning those individuals not inclusive of Black women. MBWALs' consciousness of this behavior towards their existence within graduate MW settings triggered feelings of them not belonging or being "good enough." In recognizing this, MBWASLs often used their peer relationships to affirm and reinforce their presence within these spaces:

...sometimes you feel like you're dumb, you feel like you don't belong there and you're going through these classes and you're hearing people give these intelligent answers and you're just like lord, I need hooked on phonics, I'm not smart, and so I think those relationships existed because you needed positive affirmation. You needed people to say, you're not stupid, you can't concern yourself with things like that. (Ursala, 25, Maryland, Criminal Justice)

The overwhelming majority of participants testified that their lived experiences as a Black woman in majority white higher education had been one of constant consciousness and awareness of themselves and others' perceptions of them. All participants wanted to be able to share their gifts and talents with the world without having to worry about colleagues, classmates,

or professors viewing their enrollment as a stipulation of the institution's diversity fulfillment, of which MBWALs *needed* their peer relationships as a source of affirmation against this mentality. During my interviews with Sunny and Ursala, the researcher discovered the constant "cloud" that they had spoken about in terms of how they feel they are being perceived in the aforementioned spaces:

I think being in a white university, you question if you're supposed to be there because being at Maryland, and this is the first time I had this interaction, but people would talk about affirmative action, and it's like I didn't want to be looked at as somebody who was there because of some diversity initiative. No, I actually am smart, and so I just felt like I had to work 10 times harder than I think probably white peers did, because when I went to Maryland, they were always at the bars and all of the black students I knew were always in the library, studying, and stuff.

Dysis (23, Virginia, Informational Sciences) found herself as the only Black woman within her university's information sciences program, which made it difficult for her when trying to foster relationships with peers, particularly peers that mirrored her identity as a MBWAL. To solve this problem, Dysis sought out both off and on campus events that would provide an opportunity for her to make connections: *"I try to do black graduate school alliance, I went to a couple of events from African Student Organization, ASO, and Black Student Organization, BSO."* However, Dysis later stated that after attending some of the events facilitated by these organizations, she found herself disengaging due to its predominately undergraduate demographic and programming focus, stating: *"That age group wasn't for me."* Dysis and a few other participants talked about their desire to be engaged in campus programming efforts that encompassed their aspirations as leaders and were affirmative to their identities as MBWALs.

Millennial Black Women Aspiring and/or Acting Leader's multiple identities are nurtured through their relationships and intimate interactions with peers. Again, these relationships (according to the findings) are typified by their purpose and are--for the most part--

organically formed out of a deficit or need that is not present in one's present space. Kim's (25, *North Carolina, Education*) interview illuminated the finding that not only do the MBWALs within this study need affirmation from others that "look like them", but they also need affirmation of their experiences, of which vastly contributes to their identities. Kim reflects upon her struggles with feeling "not good enough" and "impostership" as she told me about her early struggles as a mom and a graduate student:

"It's like...am I supposed to be here? ...am I smart enough? Somehow I got past that. I met [Jessica] a Black single mother...that was huge, because she has been like a mentor for me...I know that she understands what my struggles are and what I am going through. It's like when I heard her in class—I just felt like...finally.

Kim went on to share more about how her identity as a mother began to have a new layer of importance and perspective after her interactions with Amy, as this facet of her identity was now interpreted by her as something that has deeply enhanced her abilities as a student and aspiring leader.

Some participants felt that their peer relationships also affirmed their identities as leaders and/or aspiring leaders. MBWALs that were in current leadership roles, such as Liza (25, *Central Africa, Social Behavioral*), spoke admirably about her peer relationship with a Proxy-Mentor Peer (PMP) that consisted of numerous interactions where Liza's PMP supported her perspectives and insights as a leader, although Liza shared her insecurity with some of the situations she encountered as a result of her leadership—she was grateful that her PMP was there for her during times of uncertainty as a leader:

She [PMP] has given me the motivation to learn more about what we're doing in manufacturing. She has forced me to wake up at 5 in the morning and do my reading and meet with her at noon and say hey, look what I learned. It's a great motivation. I think it is always good to have somebody to challenge you and it's refreshing to have somebody. I've been working on projects since I started this program with very awesome, very smart people, but haven't been really challenging, and she's challenging me in such a good

way. That's why I keep gushing about her because I'm really excited about all of the things I'm forcing myself to do to not impress her but just feel like I can do this too.

When I asked Liza about how she felt being a Black woman influenced her as a leader, she expressed concern that she had been “holding back” and letting her white PMP take the reins in meetings and/or presentations. Liza frequently felt uncertain about how others would perceive her, and anticipated some form of discrimination or racial tension:

So I feel like it's going to come, and actually it's funny because I feel like that's what's been holding me back unconsciously and I didn't even think about it until now, but every time we've had a meeting with these men, I've just kind of taken the back seat and let [Kayla] explain it because I tell her, you do a really good job, you know how to talk to these people, so I'm just going to let you do that. But in fact, I can talk too. I know the material. But I feel like for some odd reason, maybe that's what it is.

Theme 4: Anticipatory Negative Race-Related Behaviors

Liza's statements in the above section, leads us to the fourth finding during the data collection process, which I identified as the “anticipation of negative race-related behaviors.”

The awareness of these behaviors, according to Brosschot et al. (2005), has the potential to create a “prolonged physiological arousal in response to the anticipated stressor” (Utsey et al., 2012, p. 537)—and in the case of MBWALs, the anticipated stressors are racism, discrimination, and/or racial micro-aggressive behaviors. I define the term “race-related” as “a transaction between an individual and their environment that is rooted in racism” (Outlaw, 1993, p. ...). I will discuss the concept of this finding, along with anticipatory racism in greater detail in the following chapter--along with its implications.

The majority of MBWASLs indicated that they had been forewarned, cautioned, or reminded by either same-race friends, peers, and/or family members as to how they would be perceived by other races—particularly in academic and professional environments. Through this, they anticipated some form of racism, prejudice, or discrimination. All but 2 participants (13 of

15 [86%]) stated that they had been keenly anticipating negative racial behaviors from whites long before they started their graduate program. Thus, the individuals and/or different types of peers mentioned in previous sections had acted as a buffer to them being impacted by racialized micro-aggressions or discrimination to the point of them dropping out of their graduate programs.

One of the underlying themes from this finding was the belief that MWUUs had very low expectations for MBWALs, and in turn, MBWALs had very low expectations for MWUUs. Due to past instances where MBWALs felt that they were not being heard or their ideas were not being considered, much of what MBWALs shared during their interviews were highly adaptive survival mechanisms that allowed them to remain in the settings, while excelling academically and maintaining an emotionally healthy state of mind. The idea of anticipatory racism or discrimination, came forth initially during Mona's (30, *Connecticut, Social Behavioral*) interview as she spoke about conversations that she had with her father regarding her interactions with whites in both social and academic settings. Mona recalled her dad's statement: "... so while you're smiling around with them, they're calling you a nigger behind your back" as one that resonated with her throughout her academic and professional career. She followed sharing her dad's statement here with:

...my dad prepped me for that a long time ago and although I think it is always nice to have people that are there for you and peers to kind of help you along, he prepared me to be isolated, to be talked about, to be pushed out and I think he tried to instill confidence. It was hard, but I kind of developed the attitude of I don't need a bunch of friends, I can do this without friends.

In addition to this, there were significant moments in Mona's academic career when she felt that her dad's advice had especially rang true. Mona shared a few of her interactions with

professors during her graduate studies, where she was impacted by the type of mistrust and discrimination that her dad's previous statement had alluded to:

...probably the toughest time was when I did my mock proposal for my thesis and was told by my teacher and one of my committee members that I had done the best mock proposal she had ever seen in the history of her teaching there, and then 2 weeks later when I submitted my paper, she told my committee head that I wasn't ready and pushed her student through who was the white woman who I feel like wasn't even half as ready as I was. So that was a really challenging period because I felt like when I did talk with her, basically my committee chair was like just go talk to her, go see what the issue is, I don't agree with her, I don't think it's fair, so that was kind of pumping me up, but when I talked to her, she tore apart my paper. She was so judgmental, she even chuckled and laughed at certain things that I talked about, and I feel like it was all structural. It wasn't like the content or what we were working towards wasn't there, it was more like she didn't like the structure of how we decided to do things...she just didn't like that. It was really frustrating because I felt super defeated and then I felt like just dumb and then that was going to push my graduation date back, because by this point we were going into the semester of our last classes, and if you were ready to propose before Christmas, that was going to mean you would graduate in May on time, and since she denied it, I wasn't, so that was really frustrating.

After Mona's interview, I went back through other interviews and began to look for participants providing accounts where they had anticipated race-related negative behaviors—in doing so I found Abby's (32, Wisconsin, Business) excerpt:

I think I get second guessed a lot...and I don't know if it's because I look younger than I am or I'm female or I'm black or if it is all of those things together. That's the other thing that makes me really nervous, and I'll use this business I'm trying to start as an example...my mentor wanted me to write a paragraph about myself. I don't feel that it's going to be enough to convince a room of investors. When they see me, they're going to see this little short black girl and like ah we don't trust her with our money, and I'm afraid of that.

Abby went on after this statement to talk about her credentials and qualifications as a student, professional, and soon to be business owner—yet, despite Abby's acknowledgement of her accomplishments, she still anticipated being judged negatively by White potential investors. The idea that these investors would *not* trust her enough to invest in her seems to provide further insight into some earlier dialogue from participants (*Celeste, Ursula, Kim*) stating their constant

feelings of not being “good enough.” Although Abby does not directly state that she felt as though she “wasn’t good enough” her thoughts shared here seem to resonate as such.

Kori (32, *Illinois, Social Behavioral*) recalls her earliest educational memories as being filled with uncertainty and political unrest rooted in race relations and the fight for equity. Kori went into detail about her educational experiences in majority white settings prior to her graduate experiences, and thus, explained how this heightened her anticipation of race-related discriminatory behavior and exclusion:

I kind of saw that white flight, that whole segregation, that whole lack of desire to integrate the school systems and the downfall of it once those things happened, so I entered school at a very unique time where [it was like] a civil rights era, there was that effort to integrate schools but those were public schools and then along came the choice program, the [1010] program, they gave white people who were still in the city an opportunity not attend school and then later opportunities to leave the city and just kind of let it further degrade our public school system, so I was kind of on the tail end of what could have been something amazing.

According to Kori, the way she envisioned her educational opportunities as a young Black girl growing up in the mid-west United States was profoundly shaped by her primary and secondary schooling experiences. The way in which Kori approaches her graduate education now is one of, as she puts it, “knowingness”. For Kori, this means “knowing” or anticipating that you can often be received and perceived in a negative way by Whites in regards to your education:

I've always been doubted, I've always been kind of like there to fill a space but I've never been looked at like a capable individual and I've always had to prove myself. I was counted out. I was just another number. I was another person paying tuition. I know that quite often they [white faculty and classmates] don't expect you to complete a program. I understand that quite often they [white faculty and classmates] don't expect you to have any knowledge or experience and that they very much feel like they are going to be the teachers and they are going to give you knowledge, and that's not only your professors and your faculty, but also your classmates who are like they're going to teach you in addition to the learning. And [I'm] always like oh, and what authority or credentials do you have to be my personal tutor and to show me the ropes? Why aren't I your equal? Why aren't I experienced in this goal the same way that you are given that we on paper are the same?

Sunny (23, *Wisconsin, Business*) tells a similar story of anticipation and “knowingness”, so much so that she changed universities entirely. Like all participants, Sunny did not share any personal experiences with any egregious acts of racial discrimination or violence (egregious meaning being spat on, called a racial slur, and other acts that would be deemed by a court of law as a hate crime), yet her anticipation of these events happening was her primary reason for switching universities:

I had super attitude because it was a ridiculously low amount of minorities in [former university] so I just felt angry at everybody because I was paranoid. I didn't want to talk to anybody, I didn't want to join any clubs so I stayed in my room and I didn't want to come out, I didn't even want to look out of my room because I thought they were going to do some crazy race stuff. Like people who go to like [former university], there was this big thing 2 years ago, they were doing racial slurs and vandalism because the more north you get the worse it gets. So that discouraged me...so when I came to [current university] and I was more comfortable.

The participants in this study all had educational experiences in majority White settings before their graduate degree pursuit. A few (3 of 15 [20%]) participants spoke extensively about their experiences in majority White environments *outside* of education as well, such as sports (*Mona*), board memberships (*Ursala*), and other advocacy organization work (*Dysis*). Other participants found it hard to document times where they *were not* the minority in terms of their educational histories, which leads to finding number five.

Theme 5: Familiar Terrain

As stated previously, all of the participants have had past-institutionalized educational experiences in all or at least one majority White primary, secondary, and/or undergraduate settings. Participants felt that their history within these settings have put them in a better position to succeed, as far as knowing what to expect and how to navigate unfamiliar terrain. Tara (25, *Wisconsin, Health Sciences*) attributes her graduate navigational tactics to having attended a

majority White high school, and thinks about how her time there influenced her next steps, especially given her background:

I went to a predominantly white high school where going to college was the norm, and I didn't grow up in that neighborhood. I grew up in inner-city, low-income, while going to a suburban predominantly white high school. I think that influenced my trajectory in pursuing my college degree in the first place.

Celeste (30, New York, Humanities), on the other hand, said that her significant majority White primary, secondary, and post-secondary background was strongly enforced by her parents--given that the majority of schools that were most affluent were located in majority White suburban neighborhoods--*we were always the only black family, and our parents always moved us into slightly more expensive neighborhoods than they could afford because those were where the best schools were--*. Overall, this exposure was great educationally, but it manifested negatively as Celeste struggled to gain her identity as a Black woman at the university level:

I also had a best friend named [Jamal], and I would also say I was conservative in the fact that I didn't really understand how race or gender differentiated my experience of the world or the way in which the world engaged me, so this was just like a tan, really we were all equal the world saw us as all equal, it was really how hard you worked and people that didn't have as much clearly just didn't work as hard as my parents did. That was the perspective going into [majority white university], and then I met a gentleman at [majority White university] named [Jamal] who is still a close friend to this day and he was like, ba-bop, he slapped me and was like, bitch, you're a black woman, what's wrong with you? And then he was like, this is Judith Butler, this is Adrienne Rich and so then he just became a part of my informal educational experience and then I kind of was like, oh my god, and of course that happens to someone and the pendulum swings the entire other way. So I went to this point where I was incredibly extremist, you're constantly a little bit angry about, you don't even at that point fully understand your experience, but you're beginning to see the precipice of the idea that it's so much bigger than you, this is not just your individual experience, there are so many interlocking institutions that exist to support the privilege of others and the oppression that you feel. That's just not an individual, it's much bigger than yourself. So I was trapped in my anger there, it was just like what is this, and it was at that point, [I realized] I really didn't have any black friends. Again, I went to predominantly white high school districts. Meeting black people consisted of my mother taking me to inner city parks in Rochester and being like go play with these little black girls, and they were kind of like why do you only have white Barbie Dolls, and I'm like because this is what's in the neighborhoods where my mother shops, this is all they have is white Barbie Dolls. So I couldn't really play with these little

girls in the inner city because they were like why do you only have white Barbie Dolls, so they kind of rejected me in this way. My brother was accepted because he is really great at sports and as long as you can run and kick a ball or throw a ball, and he was good at all of those things, you can get down. So I felt rejected in that way.

Although the findings for the previous sections are profound and appear to be, as Celeste (30, *New York, Humanities*), offered: “a burden”, MBWALs were adamant about their allegiance to themselves, their peers, families, and communities. This resolution ties into the final overall finding for the study, entitled: “trailblazing”. In addition to the above findings, the focus group section of this chapter goes more in-depth about participant’s “familiar terrain” experiences.

Theme 6: Trailblazing

The over-whelming majority of participants (14 of 15 [93%]) of participants shared a deep personal need and responsibility to set an example and/or pave the way for other young black women—particularly since many of them did not have and still do not have it (role models) during their academic journey. Almost half of the participants (6 of 15 [40%]) admitted to feeling the impact of having few Black female role models to pattern themselves after—either in their career (leadership) or educational endeavors. Tara (25, *Wisconsin, Health Sciences*) stated proudly:

because of where I’m from and who I am, I feel like I hold so much value for individuals like myself, meaning Black, coming from [Wisconsin], low-income, coming from a single family home everything about me. I feel I can inspire and motivate anyone like me. I hope that I can do that...and lend something about myself to what I do.

Kori’s sentiment in regards to taking a leadership role was brief and illustrative of her commitment to the community and younger generations: “I have a moral obligation to contribute to my society and to my surroundings in a positive way, and I think that is my biggest drive.” Within the context of her experience as a student in a MWUU, Mona expressed her

desire to be a role model in the capacity of a faculty member, particularly understanding how impactful it would have been to have witnessed a Black female professor as a student:

In the undergrad classes I stepped in for my professors for the classes I was a TA for, I wanted to be that picture for the young black undergrad students. If she is the only black woman in this program and she's teaching this class and she's doing well. We could go to grad school and do that too. She carries herself well. She's excelling in the program. I wanted to be I guess the idea that they could do it too.

Sunny also believes in the power of her place in higher education being something that others can look up to, and in this case her younger sisters:

...in general my role is just making sure you're doing what you're supposed to do to set an image and for making people look up to you, like I got siblings looking up to me, so I want to make sure I sent out the best message for them because I have a 6-year-old sister and a 14-year-old brother. So I want to make sure, because he asks me, "are you still in college? I thought we went to your college graduation?" I'm like, no, I'm still in college.

Participants spoke lively about themselves as leaders and the personal investment that they had in presenting themselves as such. MBWALs thought it was highly important for younger women to understand the relevance of Black women as leaders within society, especially given the sometimes false narrative often imposed upon Black women leaders by the media and others as being “angry”, “bitchy”, and “unapproachable” (Mona). MBWALs within this study offered some of their very own leadership characteristics as a counter-narrative. “*I think I am a critical thinker...and I've been rewarded for it more than once*” (Alliyah), “*I am articulate, being articulate conveys to other people intelligence and that they assume certain things about your level of intelligence*”(Celeste), “*I am a go-getter, I am kind-hearted, and down to earth*”(Dysis), “*I have an innate quality to and moral obligation to just make things better*” (Kori), “*I'm positive and upbeat, I'm organized* (Sunny), “*I think I am passionate—I'm passionate. I am unselfish. I have something in me. I've been told I have the “it” factor. I am a great motivator. I should be a preacher* (laughs)” (Tara).

MBWALs were prideful in accepting their positions as role models and leaders for other Black women, but did not hesitate to talk about the tremendous pressure they faced in doing so, and the feeling to be “on” at all times. Dialogues from the focus group session highlight this finding and other previous findings all the more poignantly.

Focus Group Findings

In order to gauge participant’s reactions to the themes found during the interview process and to triangulate the data, the researcher assembled a focus group using a subset of 4 participants from the initial 15 participants. The focus group was audio recorded and lasted around 90 minutes, and participants were promised that their insights and identities would be strictly concealed. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and asked to introduce themselves by that name. Consent forms were mailed electronically to participants who were “skyping in” and handed out to the participants who were physically there. Upon completion of each interview, the researcher asked participants if they would like to take part in a focus group study, some agreed, but as time drew near for the actual focus group to take place, other commitments surfaced and conflicted with the original number of “6” initial participants, thus, leaving 4 participants (*Zora, Tara, Mona, Dysis*) as part of the official focus group. Mona was “skyped in”, while other participants traveled either by public transportation or car to attend. The focus group was located at a local university’s conference room. Participants were asked to sign a consent form upon arrival and to put on name tags for their pseudonyms. Participants were provided refreshments and a few moments to place their things in a comfortable area of the room.

Once settled, the researcher explained that she would facilitate this evening’s conversation, and in doing so, the researcher would section the focus group into two separate

parts. The first part involved participants giving a brief overview of their back ground and experiences as a graduate student, the second part asked participants to share any obstacles that they had encountered during their studies, and the final question asked participants to share what was key in helping them to “weather” or overcome these obstacles. The second half of the focus group requested that participants review the six overall themes of the study and provide their reaction.

The focus group findings very closely mirrored the findings from the interviews, with the exception of participants sharing more about their previous experiences within majority white settings. The layout of this section will present “crucial quotes” from participants in response to my probing. The bold face text in some portions will indicate my questions and participant pseudonyms, and the italics will represent the participants’ voices. This following narrative will not be a verbatim transcription of the entire focus group, yet a summary of the most descriptive and illustrative participant reflections, the dialogues listed here are; however, a verbatim of what each participant actually said at a particular portion of the focus group:

Tell me a little about your personal and academic background and your educational experiences in graduate school thus far.

I am originally from the island of Grenada, but I was raised in Brooklyn and Georgia. My program is Higher Education Administration...which is beautifully predominately female. In my cohort there is actually about 2-3 of us that are actually minorities. I feel like the classroom environment speaks to the reality of the work environment, because I feel like you don't see a lot of Black people in student affairs, compared to other races...it just says something (Zora)

I am from Virginia. I went to catholic private school for 11 years and got introduced to public high school, which was a whole new world to me. I am getting my master's degree in Informational Sciences. There is one other Black female that is actually a grandmother. And then there are 2 other African males. The rest are Chinese and Caucasion. I have never felt a deeper sense of racism more than I have while being here. And I have traveled SO much in my childhood from coast to coast (Dysis)

I am pursuing a master's in Health Sciences. I am the only Black person in my program—that I know of. There is another girl that I think is from some country in Africa (Tara)

I am from Connecticut and grew up in the Atlanta area. My graduate program is in rural Louisiana. I am the only Black female (Mona)

From here, the conversations built upon themselves and naturally took shape to answer questions that the researcher had not initially posed. When asked: **To what do you contribute your persistence and/or sustainability in this program to?** All four participants listed their peer relationships and/or friends as being their primary source of support. Given that participants in the focus group, like the others, occupied university spaces where they were the “only Black girl” they stated that their peer relationships existed within these spaces as a result of them putting in efforts to maintain these relationships. The women in this focus group understood that this would mean they would have to be open to establishing relationships with those that were racially and culturally different: *“I have a safety net...a circle of 8 that I see consistently. So if something is stressing me out. We make plans to see each other...the majority of the people in this circle are Asian” (Dysis)*. Tara went in depth about the way in which she purposes her friendships as a MBWALs, and the fact that her being from the same area that her university is located in—helps her to stay connected to others:

I have so many different groups of friends. I have to have one for every part of me. I have my group of friends that are in grad school, and they are at that higher education level where they can understand when I am stressed about stuff like we are talking about here... or I have a group that are into fitness...so it's like all my groups of friends have different interests.

Tara also went on to discuss how motivational her peer relationships are, which showed consistencies with the category assignment of the “proxy-mentor peer”:

...their goals motivate me. Just seeing them strive and to do well in whatever aspect of their life that they are focused on. It motivates me to know. Like okay, they are doing

it...so I can definitely do it. Like when I get discouraged there is no reason why I should give up.

Mona's statement was the exact opposite of Tara's, as she shared how her only peer relationship consisted of one other African American male classmate:

I did not have anyone that is going through the same thing. Some of my friends are supportive of me doing it...umm, it is just one classmate that was really supportive and reached out to me. Other than him it's really just me, so hopefully I can just be a person that will lead others behind me that want to go through it. But he was that one person that was helpful.

My final question for this half of the focus group was in terms of **what obstacles did they anticipate for themselves moving forward in their graduate program**. One participant indicated that she hoped to be done in May, and that she could talk about the obstacles she had overcome up until this point. Zora talked about her anticipation for needing more support, as she is so far away from her family—which has been her main source of financial and emotional support. She (Zora) recalled an incident last semester where she left to go home and returned to a completely flooded apartment. Zora spoke passionately about how her newly formed “sistah gurl” came through for her: *My house was in a mess...the pipes burst...there was not heat...and then here came [sistah gurl] to say [*snaps fingers quickly*] okay get it together, calm down, man up. It just pays to have someone a little more level headed than you are*”. In response to the researcher's question, Tara shared how her biggest obstacle has just been staying focused—and she suggests that her recent lack of focus has been due to her having so many other opportunities presented to her, causing some internal questioning along the lines of: *“do I really want to be in this program?...am I really gonna use this degree?”*. She believes that this is also a symptom of her being a native of the place where her university is located. For Dysis, her main obstacle has been *“just fitting in”*. She expounds:

“I’ve tried for a solid year to make just one [emphasis] Black friend, just one [emphasis] African American friend [all laugh]. And I don’t mean African [from Africa]—but African [emphasis] American...just one sistah-gurl [all laughing]. So until then...I’m chillin’ with the Asians [laughs].

The final half of the focus group was dedicated to discussing the participant’s reactions to the findings. In doing so, the researcher briefly went over each of the six findings carefully highlighting the percentage of participants that were found for each category. After reading each of the interview findings, Dysis quickly jumped in, sharing that she found it “shocking” that all participants had prior experiences with MWUUs. She went on to explain that her reason for attending MWUUs were not because she found them to be better, but because it was more of an act of convenience. *“It’s not like I chose a MWUUs because I saw being there as better, it just happened to be where I went”*. Zora’s perspective on the matter was:

“I feel like, chances are, if you are a Black woman, unless you are really specific, you are [emphasis] going to end up at a MWU...it’s almost impossible not to end up at one...and being at an MWU [prior to] didn’t affect me in any way...because of where I grew up...but I don’t think I experienced true racism in a MWU until now. And it’s crazy because the Black people here say: ‘why do you sound like that?’ ...so it’s like who do you turn to?”

Each participant spent time talking about how they made their decision to attend a MWUUs, two participants stated that their decision was based on convenience and the other two made their decisions based on financial aid and scholarship opportunities. Dysis recalled a conversation with a family member, where she was asked why she did not apply to a local Historically Black College or University (HBCU), her response to him was: *“why would I want to attend an all-Black university, when the world in not all Black?”* Focus group participants also spoke about their realities of having to justify their Blackness to other Black peers. Dysis expressed hearing from Black classmates and friends that she *“sounded white”* throughout her

post-secondary education experiences. Tara added her reflections of attending an all-white suburban school and being from, as she puts it, *“the hood”*.

Tara discussed the dual identity that she felt forced to grapple with throughout her secondary and post-secondary schooling: *“I was exposed to so many of these themes that you’re talking about at a young age, and didn’t even realize it...I remember my 4th grade teacher telling my dad how the way I talked needed to improve”*. Tara went on to say that her “accent” was developed largely in part by her community surroundings, which she stated as being “hood”.

I just had a really hard time adjusting as a 9 year old...I was with all these white girls, and they’re wearing “Juicy Couture” and “NorthFace” [all laughing]...and they like live in mansions and stuff...and here comes my little...this little Black girl. I had to deal with that and try to fit in.

The back and forth adjustment of racial identity and negotiation for the MBWALs in this focus group seemed to become a necessary part of their existence, very early on in their academic lives, or as Tara captures it: *“it’s like, I was talking too ghetto for them [suburban White teachers and students] ...and talking too White for them [Black friends and family]”*. MBWALs’ Black friends *questioning* their Blackness, and their perception of White peers *assessing* their level of Blackness was something they navigated throughout their academic careers. Participants went on to discuss more about their educational backgrounds up to this point, reinforcing the theme “familiar terrain”. Focus group members felt that their prior experiences in majority white settings had a major impact on their approach to their current surroundings and the feelings that they had developed about both Whites and Black. Dysis discussed sometimes shying away from Black people in social settings, and when asked why she stated: *“I don’t know [laughs]...I just don’t know...it’s like as soon as you open your mouth...I already know what type of training you’ve had...”* The group went on to discuss their value system, and how they categorize their peers using this system. The group collectively identified

their value system as: “70’s and 80’s babies’ values”. They credit this system of values for keeping them on the right track and for not being influenced by the sometimes narcissistic and disingenuous behaviors of their generation. Participants also went into detail about how they tediously select their friendships or peer relationships-- *“It’s not like I am trying to be judgmental...it’s just I am very picky with my friends”*.

This conversation led into participants discussing their intimate relationships, and how they felt about their dating lives, or lack thereof. Focus group participants discussed some key elements that they wanted in their intimate partners, which closely tied into earlier interviews that discussed the lack of Black men that are available to date. Participants began to share how this was something that they thought about frequently and was a significant point of stress and concern, stating:

You know, we [Black women] are just up against so much...and when we do find a Black man that’s got it together, we got to compete with little Miss Kardashian looking girl over there...then you have the Black men that don’t date Black women, because they think we have too much attitude. It’s like we are always CONSTANTLY trying to prove ourselves...and why should I have to prove to you? Why do I have to fight the stereotypes that you have placed upon me?

Tara joined in by stating: *“You have to really just understand Black men on an individual basis...and a lot of times women just want this cookie cutter man...so I look at it on an individual basis...I don’t look at what society tells me, because I know what I need in a man at this point in my life...”* Dysis added:

At this point in my life I choose to only date men with a bachelor’s degree or above...because for me, it seems like with a degree, you just have a better perspective of the world, and also, I choose to only date international men [all laugh]...as opposed to Black men...don’t judge me [all laugh]. They [international men] just come here and they are driven...they have goals. So the boo that I have now, he is on my level—and I’m happy! [giggles].

The discussions here confirm the above listed perceptions of how MBWALs leverage their peer relationships, and it also gives greater insight into the reason *why* MBWALs have multiple types of peer relationship during their time as graduate students. The 4 participant's discussion of what they understood to be helpful in their graduate journey thus far was also consistent with the interview findings. Participants spoke at length about their past experiences in MWUUs, which according to them, had a significant impact on how they approached their graduate studies. MBWALs felt that they had better insights into how to navigate MW educational settings, due to their exposure so early on, which is consistent with the theme "familiar terrain".

Identity also surfaced as something that played a significant role in their psychological and emotional struggles. All participants spoke passionately about having to "shift"⁶ identities and "code switch"⁷ given their settings. MBWALs alluded to the fact that the practice of identity "shifting" and "code switching" had been something that they had practiced doing long before graduate school, and was a coping mechanism—against feelings of unacceptance in regards to how they spoke, looked, dressed, or the communities in which they were from. Overall, participants appeared to depend upon themselves to grapple with their emotional and psychosocial struggles in their academic contexts.

⁶ A conscious or subconscious change in self (identity) as a response to one's environment

⁷ To change one's tone of voice or manner of speaking based on the encountered audience.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented six findings from the interviews and a reinforcement of several of those findings from the focus group. Raw findings were presented initially, and then were formed into themes, of which encompassed verbatim quotes from the interviews. Thick descriptions of the participants' interviews were presented as evidence of their perceptions and experiences. These were weaved throughout each thematic category as a tool to bring the reader into the world of the participants. The cornerstone of the findings were the fact that 93% of participants were engaging in some type of peer relationship that was identified here. Beyond this, 93% of participants were found to be using these relationships as a means of persistence and sustainability against obstacles such as negative race-related behaviors and a perceived lack of institutional academic and emotional support.

Findings also suggested that 86% of participants use their peer relationships as a means of affirming their multiple identities both inside and outside of the university setting, while 86% also stated that they came to expect some form of racism or prejudice from Whites within their academic and/or professional settings. Participant's familiarity with majority white settings were especially critical in their perceptions of their experiences as Black women, in the sense that they understood how to navigate their surroundings. Finally, 100% of participants envisioned themselves as role models and leaders for others. The findings from the focus group helped to substantiate the findings from the interviews, in that all focus group participants spoke about their past educational experiences with negative race related interactions, the purpose of their peer relationships, and the negotiations of their identities as Black women.

Chapter 5: Analysis, Interpretation & Synthesis

This chapter is dedicated to answering the “so what” question of my research. Meaning that there is a purpose for this study, and therefore a plausible interpretation and analysis. The following sections offer an analysis for readers to apply to their own perspectives. Using this writing approach, the researcher provided multiple literature perspectives--which the reader can easily absorb.

Analysis

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the types of peer relationships that a group of 15 MBWALs have in MWUUs, and the purposes they serve. The researcher also sought to determine how these women perceive that their peer relationships helped them to persist in MWUUs. This study aspired to provide rich insights into how MBWALs leveraged their peer relationships as sustainability measures against academic, psychological, and emotional hurdles sometimes present in MWUUs. In addition to this, the researcher desired to capture the lived experiences as millennial Black women aspiring to lead.

This study employed a phenomenological approach to collect qualitative data by conducting in-depth interviews in order to preserve the essence of each participant’s lived experiences with the phenomenon under study. A focus group discussion was facilitated to understand how participants responded to the study’s overall findings. Surveys were used to collect demographic data from participants, and to provide a point of contact for the focus groups. The study engaged 15 currently enrolled graduate millennial Black women who are leaders or aspiring to lead in some way. The raw data were coded and analyzed using an online data analysis software (NVivo). This process was done initially using the interview questions as a coding format. These codes formed categories (themes) and subcategories (sub-themes). The

researcher used the study's two guiding research questions as a probe, which were: (a) What types of peer relationships and for what purposes do graduate millennial Black women aspiring leaders (MBWALs) have peer relationships within majority White universities, and (b) how do MBWALs perceive that peer relationship help them to persist in MWUUs.

The categories discussed within chapter 5 were derived from the research questions, and the following categories were used as an emergent coding scheme for the secondary round of coding. The researcher followed these emergent codes to logically shape the findings in chapter four. For this chapter's analysis, the researcher presented an interpretation of these findings, along with an analytical discussion highlighting the patterns made apparent through this study's research methodology. Supporting theories, articles, and conceptual tools (see Figure 2) are used to logically represent the researcher's thinking along with others researching and/or interrogating some of the same concepts presented in this chapter. Although the preceding chapter sought to position MBWAL's stories as narratives of the experiences, their stories are also positioned in this chapter as tools of interpretation and linking dialogues of explanation and exploration in order to construct a holistic and dynamic synthesis. Literature on persistence, micro-aggressions, majority White universities, and leadership are pulled into this chapter's discussion in order to provide an in-depth understanding as to how MBWALs used peer relationships as tools towards persistence and sustainability within their graduate educational environments.

Presentation of Categories

The findings from the interviews and focus groups were used to develop this section's categorical analysis. Iterative analysis of demographical information, interview, and focus groups provided a roadmap in developing two analytic categories (themes) from six major findings within this study. Category 1 is titled: "Leveraging Peer Relationships as Alternative

Paths to Persistence and Sustainability”, which emerged from findings 1, 2, 3, and the focus group. Category 2, “Past Experiences impacting Present Actions” surfaced from findings 4, 5, 6, and the focus group. The premise of category 1 encompassed the following sub categories (sub-themes): (a) the types of peer relationships that MBWALs participated in as graduate students, (b) their usefulness for persistence and sustainability, and (c) functionality as identity affirmation within MWUUs. The second category is a formation of the sub categories (sub themes): (a) anticipatory race related behaviors, (b) familiar terrain, and (c) trailblazing.

Category 1: *Leveraging Peer Relationships as Alternative Paths to Persistence and Sustainability*

In keeping with the study’s overall purpose to examine, understand, and interrogate MBWALs existence and use of peer relationships as a means for persistence and sustainability, the researcher found that the women within this study held three major types of peer relationships, which were vital to their sustainability. As a response to their environment (MWUUs) MBWALs relied heavily upon these relationships for emotional, academic, and psychosocial support against the many obstacles MBWALs identified throughout the data collection process. These obstacles were consistent with literature discussing the often turbulent and emotionally taxing experiences of Black women within MWUs (Moore and Madison-Colmore, 2005; Shavers and Moore, 2014; Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Hooks, 1989).

As leaders and aspiring leaders, participants came to acknowledge these relationships as significantly important, particularly because they depended very little upon the fact that they would have relationships with Black women that they would categorize as mentors, or at least how the literature defines a mentor (someone that, according to Kram and Isabella (1985), provides the following: (a) sponsorship, (b) coaching, (c) protection, (d) challenging work

assignments, (e) role modeling, (f) counseling, among other things). To add an additional layer of perspective, Winkle-Wagner's (2015) recent research regarding the collegiate experiences of Black women, chart relationships as being a significant catalyst in the success of Black women within the collegiate context—leaving the findings from this study in regards to the purpose of MBWALs relationships to be of significant value. In addition to this, the peer relationships identified within this study provided MBWALs with alternate forms of coping, as opposed to the sometimes unhealthy coping strategies that research literature cites collegiate Black women as employing.

Three Types of Peer Relationships

Peer relationships for MBWALs are highly nuanced friendships. When participants were asked to provide their definition of peer relationships, a range of responses surfaced such as: *“a friend who is on the same career path”*, *“like-minded”*, *“someone in my age group”*, *“someone who you’ve got the same [similarities] with”*, and were overwhelmingly consist with the literature's definition of what a peer relationship embodies, which stated them as being a mutual relationship of similar hierarchical status (in terms of educational level and age group) where both parties perceive themselves as equals (McDougall & Beattie, 1997). Millennial Black women aspiring and/or acting leaders used peers to substitute the absence of formal mentors, hence the presentation of the “Proxy Mentor Peer (PMP)”. Mona and Sunny provided an articulate description of the purpose of this relationship in their graduate studies, while other participants went on to examine the value and impact of such peers within both their graduate and professional lives. Meanwhile, the “Sistah-Gurl” peer occupied the largest social space for the women of this study, and was spoken about as an essential aspect of their well-being and affirmation within majority White contexts. Millennial Black women aspiring and/or acting

leaders recognized that there was a component of their peer relationships that fostered a sense of much welcomed rivalry. These relationships were primarily formed within the classroom context, and were nurtured through coursework and other educational interactions amongst peers. This relationship, according to participants were “motivational” from an academic perspective. As chapter 2 highlights, the literature on peer relationships—in general—hones in on peer relationships from more of a career aspect rather than how these relationships manifest themselves in a university context.

One participant, Kori, spoke about *not* feeling that she had “true” peer relationships with anyone within her program or outside of her program, in fact, she called her experiences with peers as “superficial” and “surface level”. Interestingly enough, according to her interview and coding analysis, Kori had experienced more frequent accounts of race-related micro-aggressions than most participants. However, due to Kori’s age—her frequent encounters may be a consequence of her having lived longer, thus increasing her probability of these occurrences.

Furthermore, literature specific to how peer relationships are experienced and purposed among MBW is virtually non-existent; however, when examining Kram and Isabella’s (1985) work on peer relationships in workplace settings, there is some parallel between the typology of MBWALs and Kram and Isabella’s findings. For example, Isabella and Kram’s (1985) definition of a special peer (*provides an intimate and reciprocal relationship of emotional support, personal feedback, confirmation, and friendship*) and collegial peer (*provides trust, self-disclosure, discussions, career strategizing, job-related feedback, and friendship*) closely encompasses some of the functionalities of MBWALs “Sistah Gurl Peer” and the “Proxy-Mentor Peer”. Figure 3, illustrates the relationship between Kram and Isabella’s (1985) findings and

those emergent from the study, while applying this study's demographical lens (MBWALs) to the types of peer relationships found.

Figure 3. Peer Relationship Commonality Representation

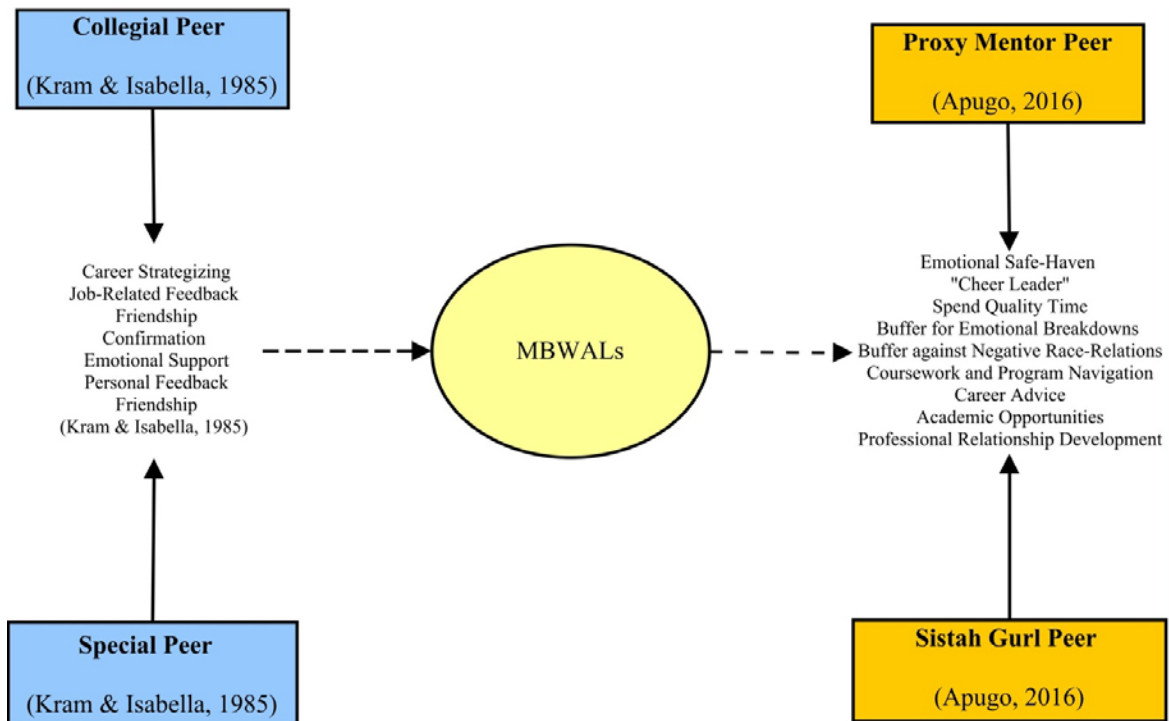


Figure X. Created by D. Apugo (2016) to show relationship between Kram and Isabella's (1985) workplace peer relationships and those existing among MBWALs.

For some participants, *one* of their peer relationships could embody the purposes and profiles of all three relationships, making that particular peer's role in MBWAL's lives extremely significant. In addition to this finding, research literature discussing peer relationships within the workplace posits peer relationships as tools that enhance one's commitment, increase morality, and reduce turnover (Sias & Cahill, 1998). This statement embodies the nature and functionality of each participant's peer relationships. More specifically, having these peer relationships as part of their lives provided a deep sense of reciprocal accountability, which was

shared by Sunny, as she talked about an unspoken and healthy rivalry with a peer, in terms of her academic achievement and future goals. *“Seeing how driven she is...and how passionate she is about what she does,”* explains how heavily Sunny relied upon these relationships to remain enrolled and to push forward to completion. The peer relationships identified within this study also provide a sense of morale for MBWALs, in that they are often the first line of contact when a negative situation arises within the MBWAL’s life, whether it be internal or external to the university. Sias and Cahill’s (1998) article also cites peer relationships in professional settings as being a point of tension and stress for those that engage in them; however, the overwhelming majority of MBWALs regard their peer relationships—despite the type—as engagements of solace, and are often consulted to ease tensions from academics and other negative internal and external interactions. As Zora puts it: *“they know everything about you...they’ll listen to you...you can absolutely be yourself around them...I don’t think I’ve ever met a Black woman that didn’t have a “sistah gurl” bond...huge, huge relationship”*.

Peers as intricate support networks. Williams, Layman, Slaten, Berenson, and Seaman (2007) have determined that minority women (i.e. Hispanic, Asian, Black) flourish in collaborative work environments that allow for socialization and connectivity. Winkle-Wagner’s (2010) article on the power of peer relationships in Black women’s college experiences successfully documents the variety of ways that Black women leverage their peer interactions for support. This notion holds true according to MBWALs’ expressing their intense desires to form and maintain relationships with their peers; however, according to the participants’ accounts of their relationships as graduate students within MWUUs, there were few, if any, opportunities to connect with other Black women—let alone those at the graduate level. Thus, participants found themselves creating and nourishing separate support relationships among other students, not

necessarily with those that were explicitly within their programs. During the focus group session, and in several interviews participants spoke about the networks of friend groups that they appropriated for their sustainability at any given time. These groups were recognized through their level of frequency and interaction. The overwhelming majority of MBWALs expressed frequent interactions with these support networks, depending on their social, academic, and emotional needs.

Leadership support. Fox (2012) cites millennials as being charged with becoming leaders upon their completion from college, despite most colleges' inadequate leadership preparation. Inadequate leadership preparation may be particularly true for MBWALs, especially given the scant documentation and acknowledgement of Black women's leadership traditions and perspectives within the United States. Aside from this, the *millennial* Black women within this study consistently highlight their desire to "be what they did not see". When asked about those around them that reinforced their leadership aspirations and capabilities—the overwhelming majority of participants cited their peers as either being "unspoken" role models for them—and even further, they thought of them as informal mentors, hence the use of the term "proxy mentor" being assigned as one of the types of peers identified as a relationship type among MBWALs. Peers were also instrumental in helping MBWALs to affirm their existence as Black women leaders, in the sense that MBWALs spoke frequently with their peers (either type) when faced with situations that cause them to question or underestimate themselves in either a professional or academic leadership setting.

Intimate relationships. Although no questions were posed to participants or included in the protocol in regards to their *intimate* relationships, several participants (Zora, Ursala, Abby, and Alliyah [26%]) discussed their concerns regarding MBWALs present and future dating

options, particularly in terms of the likelihood of MBWALs finding “quality” Black men to date and later partner with. Alliyah talked about the incarceration rate of Black males deeply impacting the dating pool for Black women, while Ursala and Zora both expressed their fears of indefinite “single-dom”. Zora stating: *“I don’t want to be Superwoman and I come home and [the] house is completely empty...I don’t want to be 38, no kids, no husband—and my eggs are powder”*. Ursala’s observation was more along the lines of herself and other MBWALs simply *not* having access to Black men within their graduate degree programs: *“you just don’t see that many African American men here [higher education]*. Millennial Black women aspiring and/or acting leader’s sentiments here are deeply consistent with research articles and dissertations that illuminate these realities for not only *millennial* Black women, but for Black women in general.

Although few articles take on *millennial* Black women’s intimate relationships, one article by Wilma J. Henry (2008) talks about the campus dating scenes for millennial Black women as being “out of balance”. Henry’s (2008) article also discusses the lack of optimism that MBW have when it comes to partnering with their Black male counterparts, and the grim possibility that many millennial Black women will remain single, rather than to partner with someone outside of their race or partner with a Black man that is not their educational equivalent (Henry, 2008), though none of the participants spoke out against the latter.

Identity affirmation: *“you hear me, but you don’t feel me.”* This study’s findings also suggest that MBWALs’ identities are deeply woven into their peer relationships, in the sense that MBWALs leveraged their peer relationships as mechanisms to aid in affirming their identities in spaces that did not and do not necessarily do so. For the purposes of this study, the researcher defined an affirmation as the recognition of self—and other acknowledgement of one’s sense of worthiness (Neville, Viard, & Turner, 2015) (see Neville et al., 2015 for more on racial

recognition and identity affirmation). Abby eloquently spoke about the power of being able to consult with a peer that was around the same age, same race, in the same graduate program, and facing some of the same race-related obstacles as she— *“we had the same sort of trials and the same aspirations”*. Kim also shared her reflections of how important it was for her to make a connection with someone in her program that was also a single mother— *“it was good for me to make that connection because she automatically knows what I am going through”*. Another participant’s sentiment was similar to hers, stating: *“creating that support with another Black woman is easier, it’s easier to come to another Black woman and say, hey I’m feeling this way and going through this because you know she’ll understand”*.

Consistent with Jones’s (1997) understanding that college women possess multiple identity categories, each facet of MBWALs’ identities (i.e. millennial, leader, Black woman, graduate student) under examination within this study were supported by at least one of the peer relationship types presented here. Moreover, peer relationships appeared to help reinforce the emergent characteristics of these identities for MBWASLs (see Figure 4.).

Figure 4. Peer Relationships as Identity Affirmation (PRIA)

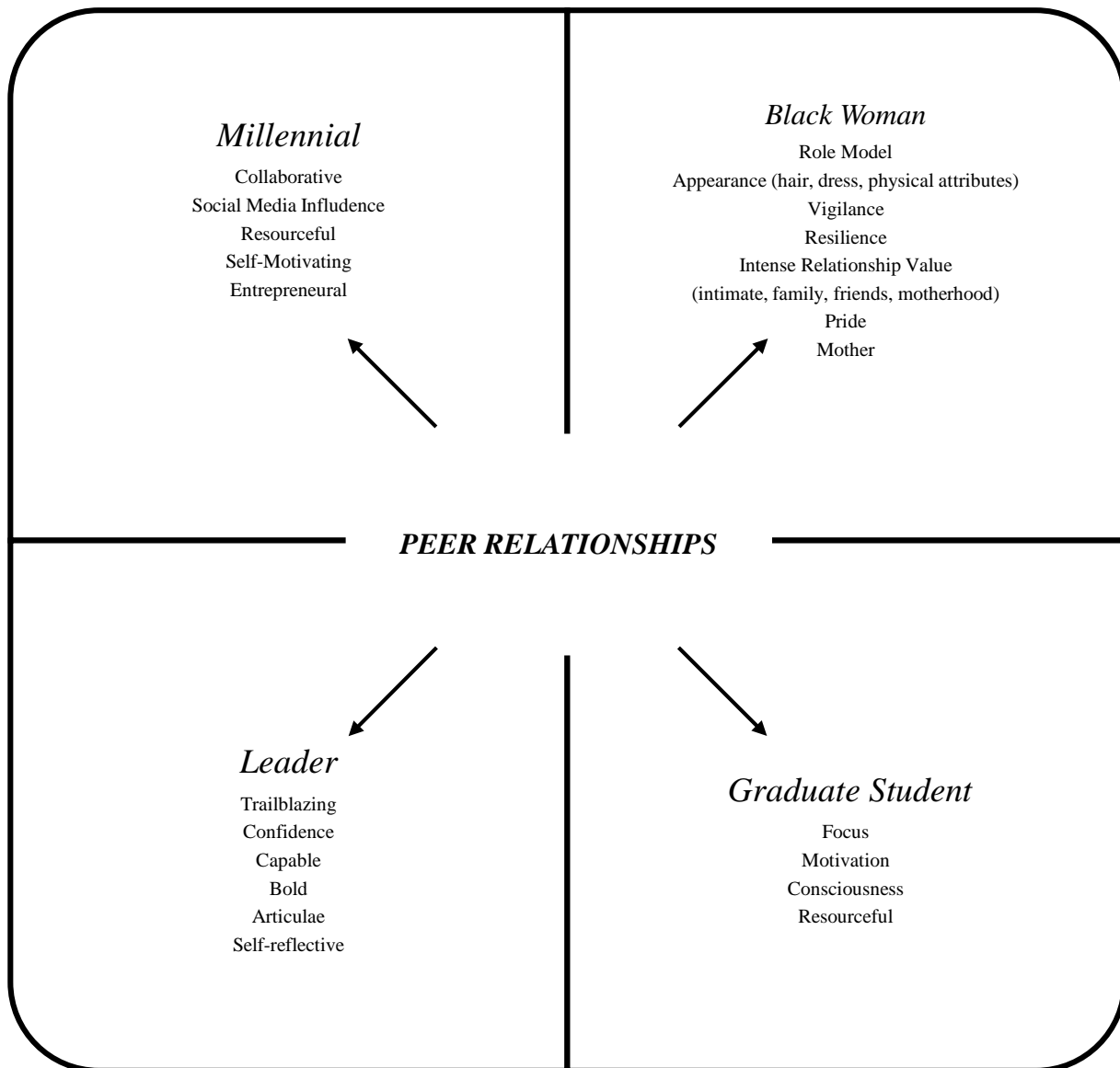


Figure X. Created by D. Apugo (2016) to show peer relationship presence in each of MBWALs' identities.

The research lineage around Black women and identity has emerged as a means for interpreting the complex and multilayered aspects of Black women's existence within majority white spaces, particularly in settings of higher education (Hooks, 1989; Hill-Collins, 1999; Winkle-Wagner,

2009a; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Johnson-Bailey, 2001). The peer relationships notated within this study, appeared to be highly representative and reflective of each participant—in terms of the identity characteristics that they highlighted within themselves, which could potentially inform the importance of MBWALs identifying these relationships within MW educational settings that do *not* structurally affirm, support, or acknowledge, the aforementioned identities of MBWALs. Stryker’s (1987) study reinforces this perspective, as it presents findings that students whose social relationships were a reflection of their identities exhibited far less identity “shifting”.

Also noteworthy is the frequency of interaction among the peer relationships identified within this study, and how this frequency reinforced MBWAL’s identities. Some participants (*Sunny, Zora, Mona, Liza, Rose*) reported talking to one of the three identified types of peers daily (reference Table 4). The idea of PRIA (Peer Relationships as Identity Affirmations) as it pertains to millennial Black women, has also surfaced in popular culture in a recent blog post (March 2016) through the website *For Harriet*, which features topics surrounding Black girls and Black womanhood. *For Harriet* Los Angeles based writer, Syon Davis, expressed how integral her Black girlhood and womanhood relationships were and still are to her identity as a Black woman. She goes on to talk about the importance of Black women having “a space to be angry...without being labeled and written off as an angry Black woman” and “a space where you don’t feel like you are speaking for the entire African-American population” (Davis, 2016)—which is similar to participant Kim’s interview statement about being “Black ambassador”.

She also goes on to explain how given the fact that her educational environment growing up was comprised of majority White and Chinese students—she yearned for her neighborhood “sistah gurl” relationships on the weekends for a source of identity affirmation and as she puts it,

the opportunity to “keep your scarf on”. Davis’ insights here speak to the timeliness of others recognizing the importance of Black women’s peer relationship bonds, particularly in spaces where they are the minority. This study confirms Davis ideas, given the documented testimonies of participants revealing how peer relationships factor into their identity affirmation. Beyond this, researchers (Chickering, 1969; Josselson, 1987; 1996) situate women’s interpersonal relationships as vital to their development and persistence in post-secondary contexts; however, Chickering (1969) and Josselson’s (1987; 1996) work do not interrogate the development of women’s identities in terms of race, therefore posing a gap in understanding around how interpersonal relationships, such as peer relationships play into identity development and persistence for MBWALs.

Persistence and Sustainability

As mentioned previously, the overwhelming majority (14 of 15 [93%]) of participants attributed some aspects of their persistence⁸ and sustainability⁹ to their interactions with peer relationships. The ways in which participants engaged in their peer relationships appeared to be a direct response to how they were experiencing their environments, meaning those environments both internal and external to the university. In addition to this finding, focus group participant, Tara, alluded to this when she stated: “*everybody has a role...*”, in terms of peer relationship’s purposefulness regarding any emotional, psychological, professional, or academic obstacle that they were facing. Another participant likened her peer relationships to the function of an atom, in stating that:

...you have your nucleus, which to me is like your really, really close people. That's the most important part of your atom. That's who you need, you require. Then you have

⁸ See Table 1. for definition

⁹ See Table 1. for definition

your first level ring which is the extras that make it happen but don't necessarily have to be there all of the time. So I consider that my acquaintances, you might meet them in class, you hang out, you say hi in class, you do projects or whatever, but then when you go home, it's like no interaction whatsoever...I call them the valance electrons cause that's the folks that are extra, and you know, you could kind of replace them when somebody else takes a better spot, so then you have those that are just there and I feel they are inconsequential to your existence but you know, you be nice and you keep them. So to me, those are always my three levels and I feel like it's interchangeable based on where my relationship with you is at the moment.

With respect to this participant's intricate assessment of her peer relationships, few research articles prioritize Black women's peer relationships as avenues towards persistence and attrition in college; however, researchers concerned with Black women's collegiate experiences tend to investigate Black women's range of identity shifts and persistence efforts in either undergraduate or doctoral programs (Winkle-Wagner, 2012; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Hill, 2009; Morris, 2007; Shavers & Moore, 2014) as a response to their collegiate environments. However, this study's findings orient MBWALs peer relationships as important aspects of their multiple identities as graduate students and a highly adaptive persistence and sustainability strategy. Highly adaptive in the sense that, according to this study, peer relationships can function optimally in a variety of settings and for an array of purposes. Peer relationship experiences from the majority of participant interviews highlight peer relationships that are sustainable within themselves, given the fact that the majority of MBWASLs reported having long distance peer relationships and peer relationships that were fostered long before their entry into graduate school.

The afore cited scholars (Winkle-Wagner, 2012; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Hill, 2009; Morris, 2007; Shavers & Moore, 2014) document the collegiate experiences of Black women as an isolating, treacherous, and psychologically taxing one—likewise, the stories captured among the women in this study confirm these experiences. However, the majority of

MBWALs indicated that they held very little expectations of MWUs in terms of support (i.e. emotional, academic, social), while only one participant (Denise) outright stated that she “*just expected more of them* [White professors and classmates]”. This lack of expectation for their institutions was seemingly crafted as a result of their prior experiences in MW settings.

Micro-aggressive behavior. MBWALs recalled situations in which they felt that they had experienced negative race-related verbal and non-verbal exchanges from white faculty and colleagues while enrolled in graduate school. Participant’s experiences with these behaviors are highly consistent with research citing Black women’s interactions and interpretations of workplace and university settings that appeared to be racially hostile (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015; Lewis & Neville, 2015). MBWALs revealed that they found themselves constantly engaging in, what Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto (2015) call “hypothesis testing”¹⁰ after experiencing a negative exchange from a white colleague that was perceived by them to be a response to their race.

The process of “hypothesis testing” involves the individual who has experienced the micro-aggression to essentially relive the incident in one’s mind, while constantly questioning their perception of what happened and using the “process of elimination” to consider all possible explanations of the encounter (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015, p. 172). Laila (32, *Wisconsin, Education*) recalled conducting a series of these tests after having her work excluded from several class assignments by a White professor—“*I just kept trying to explain it away...could this be happening to me?...was it [the assignment] not good enough? Why am I not*

¹⁰ See page 169 of Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015 for a detailed chart on the process, coping, and detailed meaning of racial micro-aggressions.

being included when everyone else's work was included when a White male posted something very similar, but his was included".

Laila later had a conversation with the professor that ended in the professor tearfully apologizing, but never confirming or denying if Laila's exclusion in her course assignments had been because of a possible bias towards Black women in academic settings. Laila concluded that she felt that the professor was intimidated by her response, and the fact that she may not have experienced Black women "*expressing themselves intellectually*". Discriminatory race-related behaviors, as recalled by the majority of participants, involved them going unnoticed, underestimated, silenced, and having their idea dismissed or passed off. Nearly all participants expressed that they wanted faculty members, classmates, and professional colleagues to "*embrace [them] as a female of color...and find value in that*" (Kori)—yet, contrarily, research literature is rich with accounts of Black women and their obstacle filled post secondary journey in terms of attrition and academic dysfunction, which narrows down the experiences of Black women in higher education as universal, oftentimes failing to capture the experiences of Black women from different generations and economic backgrounds.

The role of peer relationships. As mentioned in the previous sections, participants used their peer relationships in a variety of ways, one of which is to act as a buffer and emotional confidant for micro-aggressive and discriminatory behavior. MBWAL's peer relationships seemed to be their first line of coping when it came to processing a perceived race-related negative interaction. The overwhelming majority of participants that cited having a "sistah gurl" peer relationship, also shared that when they felt they had encountered some form of micro-aggression or discrimination, the "sistah gurl" peer was the first person they reached out to for emotional support—which included helping them to process and validate the encounters. Holder,

Jackson, and Ponterotto's (2015) article cite this coping mechanism as the use of a "support network" (p. 170).

Perceived lack of institutional support. Rachelle Winkle-Wagner's (2015) finding that the vast majority of research literature pertaining to the state of Black women's college success indicated that Black women were largely responsible for their success in college. Although most studies do not explicitly define success or delegate it to one particular area of Black women's collegiate experiences, this interpretation rings true for the participants within this study. Questions were not posed to participants asking them as to whom they thought was responsible for their success, but based on several (*Tara, Zora, Dysis, Sunny*) MBWASL's responses stating that they actively sought out peer relationships (in their respective programs and on campus as a whole), because they knew how vital they were to their psychological, social, and emotional well being. Again, participants did not express any expectation for the university in regards to providing psychological, social or emotional support, which may be a consequence of MBWAL's not wanting to ask for help—even *if* it is available through the university. There is no greater depiction of this point, than Zora's lived experience with needing to remain strong despite being depressed:

Nobody knew I was depressed, I was so good at putting on a face. I was still showing up at class everyday. I think this is the reality for a lot of Black women. You get really secretive, because you know it's always judgement, the stereotypes. We[Black women] go through a lot in terms of mental instability...it's overlooked because we are expected to be strong and hold it together.

In chapter 2, the researcher referenced the "strong Black woman" concept, in the sense of having to grapple with some sort of emotional breakdown or general stress to the point of not being able to overcome it, which often happens in high stress work and/or academic environments; however, MBWALs in this study often tackle these mental anguishes without the

help of outside forces, often reinforcing the idea that Black women are invincible—which validates Moore and Madison’s (2005) idea of the “silent struggle”. On the outside some MBWALs may appear to be doing well, but on the inside she may be struggling. In addition to this point, some MBWALs of this study expressed their reluctance to share their emotional struggles with those that may not identify with them (i.e. White peers and/or colleagues) simply because they likely did not trust them with the intimate details of their lives—given past experiences, and the fact that they did not want to be judged, reinforces the earlier participant quote: “*you hear me, but you don’t feel me*”, which means “despite what I am saying to you about my current state of mind, you may never deeply understand my experience as a Black woman that lives this experience each day”.

As mentioned earlier few research articles cite the institutional obligation majority white universities have to the emotional and academic well-being of its Black women students, and little is often done in terms of targeted leadership development programming for MBWALs (Coker, 2003; Wolf-Wendel, 2000) . Even though a large number of MWUs have historically Black sororities on its campuses that could help with relationship formation and Black women’s leadership support initiatives, these can often be exclusionary in terms of academic achievement (i.e. admission is contingent upon GPA and other factors) and cost (i.e. membership fees and dues), possibly leaving out low-income or first-generation students that may not have access to additional funds for active membership in these sororities.

Category 2: *Past Experiences Impacting Present Actions*

After discussing the types of peer relationships that MBWALs possess as graduate students, and the myriad of functions that each of these relationships serve, some attention can be placed on the findings from the study that indicated MBWAL’s past experiences and exposures

to majority White settings had a significant impact on how MBWALs approached their education. Although the findings from category 2 were not anticipated or assumed initially by the researcher--they emerged through the coding process from interviews and focus groups.

Anticipatory Negative Race-Related Behaviors

When talking about their graduate student experiences, the majority of participants (86%) indicated that they anticipated some form of negative race-related behaviors or interactions (i.e. racism, prejudice, or discrimination). This anticipation came from either past personal negative race-related interactions or as a result of others (same race friends/peers, and/or family members) forewarning them or cautioning them as to how they would be perceived by other races, particularly in professional and/or academic settings. In addition to this finding, 93% of participants had past experiences in majority white professional or educational settings, which likely increased the probability of participants witnessing or personally experiencing a perceived negative race-related encounter—making MBWALs anticipation all the more significant.

The stress of blackness. The literature recognizes this study's interview derived terminology of "anticipatory negative race-relations" as "racism-related vigilance" (Clark, Benkert, & et. al, 2006), and is defined as the idea that "Blacks must be constantly aware of the repertoire of possible responses to chronic burdensome discrimination" (Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Hicken, Lee, Ailshire, Burgard, & Williams, 2013, p. 102). Participant quotes within research studies about "anticipatory negative race-related behavior" parallel the participant's responses within this study, specifically pertaining to how they approach daily life as a MBWAL in both their professional and personal lives: *"[One problem with] being Black in America is that you have to spend so much time thinking about stuff that most white people just don't even have to think about. I worry when I get pulled over by a cop...I worry about that because I am not free to*

ignore it” (Feagin, 1991, p. 114) another quote from Feagin and Sikes (1994, p. 295) captures the tone of this MBWALs accounts as well: *“I feel as though most of the time I find myself being in a guarded position or somewhat on the defense. I somewhat stay prepared to be discriminated against because I never know when it’s going to happen to me”*. Although documented over twenty years ago, these reflections on racism from Whites in any given setting still ring true for MBWALs. Kim (26, *North Carolina, Education*) spoke candidly about her interactions on campus as a graduate student working and being educated in a majority white space—*“my guard is always up...I’m just afraid of what [they] might say or do next”*. This quote lead into a conversation about how she (Kim) felt each day as a student and an employee. Kim expressed being, what it felt like to be “the racial ambassador” within her settings.

The mental tug-of-war of anticipating a negative racialized occurrence has vast mental health repercussions, such as heart issues, psychological stress, and other physical manifestations (Hicken & Lee et.al, 2013; Mona et al., 1972). Although overt and egregious acts of racism and discrimination (i.e. “whites only” signage, being spat on, being called a racial slur, or anything that would be legally deemed a hate crime) from decades past arguably seldom exist in modern day America, research literature confirms that the type of racism MBWALs are likely to experience are subtle and ambiguous—consistent with the definition of a micro-aggression. Anticipatory stress, according to Brosschot, Gerin, and Thayer (2006) and Brosschot, Pieper, and Thayer (2005) has received very little attention in the literature, and even less attention has been paid to how “race- related stressors affect the anticipatory responses”(Utsey, Belvet, Hubbard, Fischer, Opare-Henaku, & Gladney, 2012, p. 537). One insight aptly captures the tone of MBWALs interviews as it relates to their experiences with their racial vigilance, in the sense that only one participant (Laila), recalled being followed around campus and called the “N” word.

Other than this experience, MBWALs did not *share* instances of *direct* and *egregious* racism or racist acts (defined as listed above), during this interview—which does not mean they did not experience it. Participants may not have chosen to share these encounters (if experienced) with the researcher. At any rate, the affects of anticipating the events are summed up in the literature as:

Even if an individual never personally experiences a race-related event, learning about the experiences of others (vicarious, chronic-contextual, collective, and/or transgenerational) creates an awareness or expectation that he or she may encounter racism at any time (Harrell, 2000, p.)

Stereotype threat. Several participants (5 of 15 [30%]) expressed their concerns about being perceived in a certain way by white classmates, faculty, and/or colleagues. These participants feared that any witnessed behavior outside of the cultural norms of their spaces would be open to the judgement of whites, particularly if their behavior confirmed a well known stereotype. Mona’s anxiety with being perceived by Whites in a certain light came through in her statement concerning a leadership role she had recently taken:

I'm the only black person, so leadership in that role started off kind of being anxiety provoking, I didn't know how [they] might receive me or how other members of the staff would receive me. I didn't know how much experience they've ever had with a black person in a leadership role, so for me it was really important that I conveyed myself in the best way possible, because I felt like this may be the only time that some of them ever see a black person, a black woman in a leadership role and I need them to have a good representation so they understand what we can be in these roles, what we are in these roles, and that we're going to lead you down the right path. So it was nerve-racking.

Claude Steele (2010), like Mona tries to validate himself as he talks about over-compensating as a young Black student to prove his skills as an academic in a majority white university. He defines “stereotype threat” throughout this work as the anticipation of confirming a long held negative belief or position about one’s racial identity. Researchers Walton, Spencer, and Erman (2011) insist that the “potential of stereotyped students depends critically on the nature of the

psychological environment present in a school” (Logel, Walton, Spencer, Peach, & Mark, 2012 p. 46).

Degree-seeking African American women frequently find the circumstances surrounding their academic goals to be less than accommodating, often getting lost in a world of Eurocentric social norms and habits that do not reflect their own backgrounds or racial identity, leaving little room to feel accepted or “good enough” to be granted access into the dominant white culture within MWUUs. In *Whistling Vivaldi* (2011) Steele talks about the stress of wanting to obtain something that “was precisely the characteristic [his] group (African Americans) was stereotyped as lacking” (p. 153), and how that stereotype insidiously penetrated his mindset as a young black male in majority white academia. Lack of recognition for this phenomenon challenges even the vastly talented, yet stereotyped, students, in that it psychologically undermines their ability to perform as well as they are capable (Logel. et al., 2012, pg. 46). Figure 5 (below) provides a theory for how MBWALs appear to process anticipatory negative race-related behaviors.

The model’s emphasis is to also illustrate how stress, anxiety, and fear are ever-present, despite whether or not a micro aggression happens (Harrell, 2000; Hicken, et.al). The anxiety, fear, and stress are also present when worrying about if one’s actions will confirm a widely know stereotype, or as expressed by participants: “the strong Black woman”, “the single bitter Black woman that has it all except a family and/or a man”, “the bitchy Boss”, and “lowered expectations”. Figure 6. explains the roles of peer relationships and sustainability.

Figure 5. MBWAL Process Model for Anticipatory Negative Race-Related Behavior

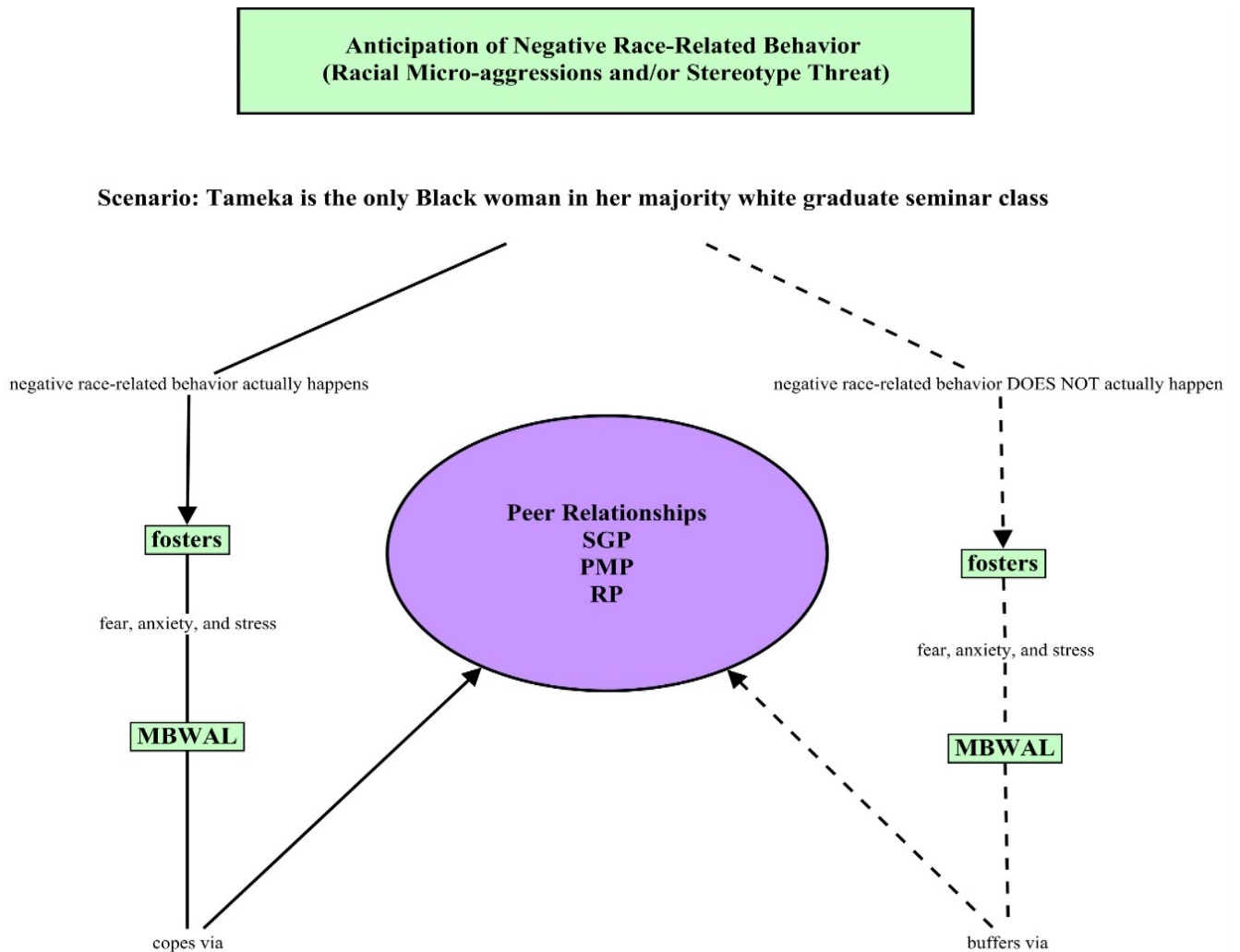


Figure X. Created by D. Apugo (2016) to illustrate MBWAL process of negative race related behavior.

Figure 6. MBWAL Peer Relationship, Impact, and Sustainability Interaction Model

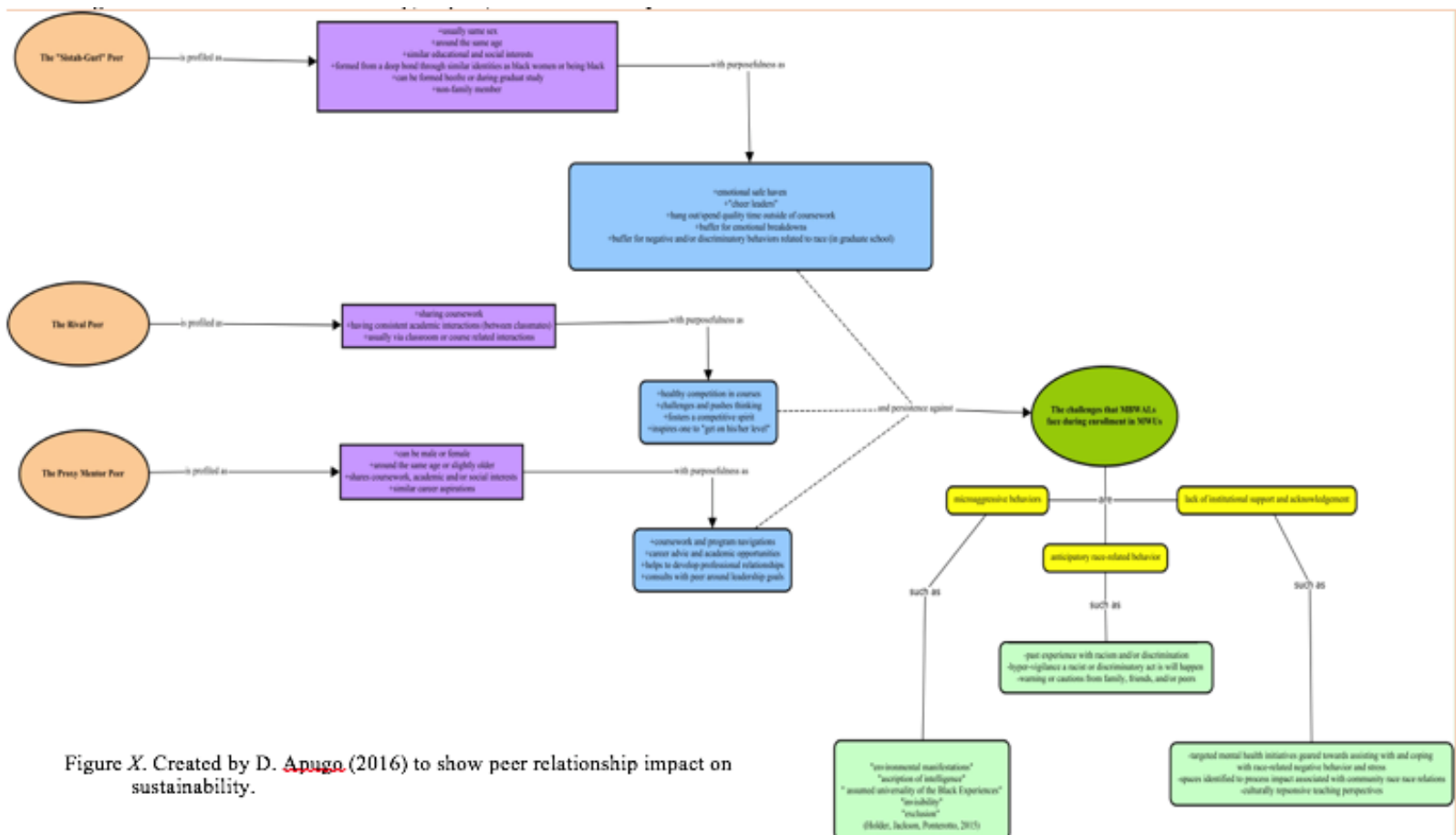


Figure X. Created by D. Apugo (2016) to show peer relationship impact on sustainability.

Familiar Terrain

All 15 participants expressed having past institutionalized educational experiences (primary, secondary, and/or undergraduate) within majority white settings. The majority of participants attended majority white secondary schools, while the overwhelming majority of participants attended majority white universities for their undergraduate degree programs. Findings from the focus group and interviews suggest that MBWALs previous interactions with MWUs provided them with some indication of what to expect (in terms of perceived negative race-related behavior) and how to sustain oneself within these settings. Despite MBWALs negative race-related encounters, academically, they appear to be fairing well. MBWALs previous experiences in MW settings may be instrumental in their ability to excel academically, despite the range of perceived race-related encounters indicated by participants.

Trailblazing

The overwhelming majority (93%) of participants reported having a deep personal need and responsibility to set an example for other young Black women—particularly since they did not have and still do not have it during their academic journeys. Participants also alluded to the fact that there is not enough media coverage highlighting positive images of Black women. These findings may add pressure to MBWALs, in terms of causing them to remain in roles, particularly leadership roles, where they may be constantly subjected to emotional and psychological stressors (micro-aggressive and/or discriminatory behavior) (Domingue, 2015; Allen, 1996). In addition to this, the perceived lack of millennial Black women in MW professional and academic settings may also present a significant amount of pressure for millennial Black women to always “be on” and prepare to be, as the one participant puts it “the Black representative”. However, the overwhelming majority of participants seemed to approach

the notion of being a role model with great optimism and fortitude. Only one of the participants described the idea of being a role model as a “burden”.

Theoretical Interpretations

As a final approach to the 1st and 2nd analytical categories, I revisit two theoretical frameworks for interpretation: (a) Black Feminist-Womanism (Lindsey-Dennis, 2015), and (b) Social Network Theory (1985) to assert their role in respect to the findings.

BFW and MBWALs

BFW addresses the way in which participants approach each of their identities as graduate MBWALs. According to the tenants of BFW, the idea of Black women occupying spaces that were not erected with their specific needs and identities in mind, is activism. Womanist perspectives support the notion of activism as a route to social change and an effort to end all forms of oppression, and in the process supporting MBWALs empowerment and self-definition (Collins, 2000; Philips, 2006). Furthermore, BFW promotes the idea that Black women’s “decisions and actions [are] outputs related to their worldviews and experiences” (Lindsey-Dennis, 2015). In this study, MBWALs reinforce this process, in the regard that they [MBWALs] developed and nurtured peer relationships as modes of sustainability. From a researcher’s perspective, BFW requests that data collection, interpretation, and analysis be embraced throughout one’s own experiences—without bracketing as a means for validity (Lindsey-Dennis, 2015).

The findings from this research are meant to be received as ones that add layers of distinction and nuances to the experiences of millennial Black women in MWUs, which further advances the position of MBWALs as authorities of their own experiences through tapping into

how, and why, they craft meaning from their interactions with their environments. In this study's case, this is the exploration of the types of peer relationships had by MBWALs, and their distinctive purposes. Furthermore, BFW seeks to analyze how BW use everyday experiences as a means for problem solving. MBWALs daily interactions and experiences with their peers resonate as an important part of their daily lives as graduate students, and significantly intersects with other areas of their identities. For the women in this study, the "problem solving" came into play as a response to negative race-related behaviors, and a lack of perceived institutional support and identity affirmation. MBWAL's used their innate abilities to utilize their relationships in a way to support their academic endeavors as both leaders and graduate students.

Leadership. The idea of leadership and Black women is often recongnized as an "anomaly" (Alston and McClellan, 2011, p. 1) largely due to the notion that Black women's accomplishments and modes of activism are often seldomly viewed as leadership by popular leadership theorists and textbooks. The terms "Black Woman" and "Leadership" is, to many, an "oxymoronic concept" (p. 1). Through the lens of BFW, MBWALs are using their advanced educational status to promote personal accountabiliy by using their lived experiences to craft meaning and perpspective to their personal leadership approaches, given that Black women are often excluded from "the construction of leadership knowledge and practice" (McClellan, 2012). As cited earlier, often little institutional approaches are taken for the advancement of leadership opportunities for Black women—therefore leaving them solely responsible for their leadership growth and development. Research studies articulate some hindrances to BW's effective leadership as: (a) isolation, (b) lack of mentorship, (c) invisibility when it comes to leadership opportunities and positons, and (d) uncivil behavior (Tillman, 2001), despite these occurances—the overwhelming majority of the women within this study embraced their leadership roles and

what it meant for their communities and other Black women—grounding their actions in BFW's communitarian beliefs.

Social Network Theory

As reinforced by participant interviews and focus group discussions, MBWAL's use of peer relationships were consistent with *Social Network Theory's* position that an individual's network of relationships provides opportunities and constraints for behaviors, and are often hallmarked by diversity and strength of ties. For MBWALs and the types of peer relationships they possess—the diversity of each relationship is captured in its function and purpose. As for the strength of ties aspect, the measurement of this among MBWAL's relationship is observed through the length of these relationships and the frequency of interaction, which for the majority of MBWALs, was daily. Social network theory also substantiates the theory that MBWAL's level of engagement with their relationship networks has much to do with their technologically advanced social environments, as well as a generational need to collaborate.

Millennials. Research cites this as the major difference in how millennials engage in their relationships, than how “Baby Boomer” and “Gen Xers” engage (Coomes & Debar, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Oblinger, 2003; Woodall, 2004; Wilma J. Henry, 2008) in the sense that past generations have relied more heavily upon mentorship and family relationships far more than millennials. Consistent with Fox (2009), MBWALs within this study parallel some of the characteristics he presents which are: (a) ethical and social consciousness and (b) globalized thinking. Several participants spoke candidly about living, working, and traveling abroad, and how these experiences had impacted their leadership and global perspectives. Those participants talked about how the issues that they had observed globally were consistent with some of the

issues prevalent here in the United States. From an ethical and socially conscious standpoint, the majority of participants indicated that their decision to pursue graduate studies was to address social issues related to racial equity and to occupy spaces that were uncommon for Black women--in other words--they wanted to challenge themselves. Through this analysis, some assumptions were confirmed, while others lacked sound confirmation.

Revisiting Assumptions

In chapter 1, four assumptions were made based on the researcher's background and professional experiences. This section discusses the overall findings against the study's initial assumptions. The first assumption was that MBWALs formed peer relationships in order to persist academically and psychosocially. This assumption was partially true, in the sense that peer relationships were *used* as a method of persistence, but the findings *did not* speak clearly to *how* and *why* the relationships were formed, as these were not questions posed to participants. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that peer relationships *can* form these relationships while enrolled as graduate students, given the fact that some participants spoke about seeking out "Black connections" on campus and putting themselves in positions to make friends outside of their racial and cultural identities.

As for assumption number two, the study did indicate that having peer relationships were a valuable strategy, and one that embodied support in areas of the academic, social, and professional lives of MBWALs. This assumption was especially validated through participants expressing that they used their relationships in ways that were most beneficial to their needs at any given time. The third assumption held that the formation of peer relationships is organic in nature and result primarily from MBWALs not having other avenues of support and mentorship

in higher education. This assumption proved to be partly true, in the sense that most of the peer relationships discovered in this study held the role as mentor, as a response to MBWALs having limited access to formal mentorship relationships. However, in addressing the other part of the assumption, findings did not outright confirm that the formation of peer relationships were “organic” in nature, particularly since some participants expressed how they sought out these relationships, knowing the particular purpose that the peer would fill. The final assumption was that the experiences and formation of relationships among peers may differ across different graduate programs. Findings do not confirm or disconfirm that this assumption is true, as different graduate programs saw a prevalence of different types of peer relationships, the “sistah gurl” peer relationship was one that was constant across all disciplines. In regards to the formation of these relationships across programs, there were no noted descriptions in regards to how these relationships were formed. Participants did offer where they met the peers with whom they were involved in peer relationships, yet they did not specifically state how the relationship was formed.

Analysis Summary

The following sections tie in the overall findings as a means for posing outcomes and/or consequences for the identified findings. Interpretations are made based upon the findings as well. The above discussions highlight the complex and multifaceted experiences MBWALs have as a result of their graduate studies. The above analysis discusses why MBWALs have peer relationships, and how these relationships are powerful reinforcements of their identities. Based on the findings, we cannot conclude that the nature of these relationships will change after their time as graduate students; however, given most participants’s stated bond with their peer relationships—it is highly likely that the type and purpose of these relationships will shift in nature to meet the needs of their professional lives, personal lives, or lives as doctoral students.

The most complex task throughout this research project was to provide a clear and consistent argument for the types of peer relationships that MBWALs possessed, and why they possessed them. In addition to that the researcher sought to answer what the function of the relationships were in relation to their identities as graduate students. Due to the very specific sample population, there were few demographic factors worth analyzing, other than participant's GPAs and prior experience in MWUU contexts. Something else worth noting in respect to the analysis is the small sample size of the study (15 participants) as well as the fact that the sample did not include other institutions (all women's colleges, HBCUs, strictly online colleges and universities, etc.), only MWUUs. Thus, the conclusion drawn for this study should only be relative to those included, which were the 15 participants. Overall, this chapter is an offering of the way in which the research understood and made meaning of *these* participant's experiences as graduate millennial Black women aspiring or acting leaders. The next section offers another perspective in synthesizing the findings, and presenting possible interpretations and consequences of each finding.

Synthesis

In answering the study's overall research questions: (a) What types of peer relationships and for what purposes do graduate MBWALs experience peer relationships within MWUs? and (b) How do MBWALs perceive that peer relationships help them to persist and sustain themselves in MWUUs? Findings suggest that MBWALs have three distinctive and purposeful types of peer relationships, of which they interact with frequently and have held either prior, before, or during their time as graduate students. MBWALs perceived their peer relationships as vital components to their existence as not only graduate students, but as Black women. These relationships acted as a means for MBWALs to buffer and/or cope with institutional or career

encounters of negative race-related behaviors such as microaggressions and stereotype threat, both of which are cited as having unhealthy psychological and emotional consequences.

A lack of institutional support also surfaced through participant interviews--with MBWALs expressing the absence of culturally responsive spaces of affirmation and recognition. In addition to this, several participants spoke about the often exclusionary nature of Black programming and organizations on campus, with one participant stating that "*it just wasn't for me*". She went on to express that due to her age and academic status (graduate student) that the programming seemed more targeted towards undergraduate students of color, as opposed to graduate students of color—MBWALs perceptions of institutional support were expressed again during the focus group when 1 participant (Dysis) spoke about the significant changes that multicultural programming had undergone, in order to make things more inclusive. Emotionally, participants felt that their peer relationships were a significant emotional safety net. Peer relationships also emerged as a keen source of identity affirmation for MBWALs. Throughout their experiences as graduate students, participants shared that they leveraged their peer relationships as a way to feed their multiple identities as Black women, mothers, leaders, and millennials.

The anticipation of negative race-related behaviors also resonated as a deep barrier to MBWALs emotional and psychological well-being. Although participants did not share instances of overt racism and discrimination--due to past experiences and warnings from others--they anticipated that some form of negative racialized behavior would happen to them at some point in their interactions as a minority in their academic and professional settings. In addition to this, all participants expressed that they had past institutionalized educational experiences (primary, secondary, and/or undergraduate) within majority white settings. The final emergent

finding indicated that participants shared a deep personal need and responsibility to set an example for other young Black women—particularly since they did not have a significant number of these throughout their academic journeys.

Knowledge Integration

Findings from the study underscore and accent existing bodies of research knowledge surrounding graduate Black women in majority white universities, institutional implications for students of color in majority white universities, leadership perspectives for Black women, and one article citing the intimate relationships of millennial Black women. This study's findings position MBWALs as individuals that possess dynamic relationships as a means for sustainability and persistence, adding to research about the way in which Black women sustain themselves in MWUUs. Previous studies seldom, if at all, examine the unique relationships had by women in pursuit of master's degrees. However, this study provides additional insights to how MBWALs may struggle to form relationships in MWUU settings (Fries-Britt & Holmes, 2012), particularly if they are the only persons of color within their departments.

Literature interrogating predominately white universities and their approaches to supporting students of color has seemingly not centered around the growing population of *millennial* Black women and their unique political and social perspectives in regards to how they approach education. Aside from this point, most MBWALs within this study appeared not to expect any “special treatment” from their universities, other than their concerns about the lack of social programming and lack of frequent opportunities to connect with other students of color that worked full time outside of the university or were mothers. Prior research articles around Black women in higher education appear to be focused on issues of retention, identity, and other

psychosocial factors inhibiting Black women's optimal performance as graduate students. These articles, however, do not interrogate the Black women from a generation perspective or as aspiring and/or acting leaders. The premise of this research study aims to add the aforementioned perspective as a valid population of study.

Making Meaning Through Interpretations

The meanings from Finding 1 suggests that other MBWALs or other Black women in general that do not experience or have peer relationships as graduate students may not fair very well academically, emotionally, socially, or psychologically. This absence may expose a significant gap in emotional and academic support, of which the majority white universities may be unable to fill, given the examples of lacking supportive avenues from the participants within this study. Another interpretation from this finding may be that MBWALs may have or form peer relationships in HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) or other institutions where the racial demographics are similar; however, the peer relationships' functions may be different than the ones discovered in this study, given that MBW will be the majority, and may have more opportunities to connect with peers on campus, in order to establish a solid relationship.

Finding 2 illuminated the function of peer relationships as modes of sustainability and persistence against negative race-related behaviors from White faculty, classmates, and colleagues. Through the interview process, MBWALs did not mention the university's awareness to these issues and/or interactions—which could impact a university's ability to do anything about MBWALs psychosocial, academic, and emotional struggles—if, in fact, they (the university) do not know about them (the issues negatively impacting MBWALs). This finding

also suggests that MBWALs perceive their tenure as graduate students to be one of significant stress and adaptation, there are pockets of literature that address unhealthy or suboptimal coping strategies as modes of persistence; however, establishing and nurturing relationships that function as support tools is what the women in this study seem to have expertly crafted, and could be something that they became proficient in long before their graduate studies.

Finding 3 reconciles peer relationships as means for identity affirmation, alluding to the possibility that MBWAL's identities are not often affirmed or recognized in majority white universities, another interpretation of this finding may be the fact that although the participants in this study have peer relationships that affirm their identities, it is through no consequence of the university's facilitation. In addition to this, their status as graduate students makes it more likely for them to already be in their professional careers, which means they are simultaneously student and professional, potentially making it difficult for MBWALs to form relationships due to time constraints and inability to connect during hours when universities may offer social and/or professional programming that suits MBWALs' needs. For example, some of the participants of this study mentioned universities often hosting social networking opportunities during afternoon hours, when they are working—leaving little opportunity for them to attend.

Finding 4 unearthed the theory that MBWALs anticipated some form of negative race-related behavior from Whites during their time within the university. This finding suggests the fact that MBWALs may grapple with issues of distrust for Whites, particularly in regards to their education. This can also be substantiated through some participants sharing stories of negative-race-related behavior towards them from Whites in education settings prior to graduate school—therefore creating a cycle of distrust and a hyper-vigilance of these behaviors possibly happening again. In addition to this theory, the researcher interpreted this finding as one that has been

derived from the history of Black people's treatment in regards to equitable education in America. MBWAL's histories as Black people in America has profoundly impacted their approach to higher education and their placement in these settings. Finding 5 discussed the idea of "Familiar Terrain", finding that all participants has some type of previous encounters with majority white educational settings, and therefore were more familiar with climates similar to those in MWUUs. Therefore, participants were not blindsided by negative race related behavior. Finding 6 described MBWALs desire to set an example for other women of color, and particularly those that wanted to go into the types of fields that these women went into.

The following chapter presents conclusions for the above interpretations and research outcomes. Chapter 6 is meant to act as a resource for those seeking to understand the experiences of MBWALs as graduate students in MWUUs. Furthermore this chapter offers recommendations for university and MBWAL stakeholders, in response to the study's findings.

Chapter 6: Conclusions & Recommendations

The aim of this study was to understand and identify the type of peer relationships that graduate Millennial Black Women Aspiring or Acting Leaders experience during their enrolment in master's degree programs. Furthermore this study sought to understand how MBWALs perceived that these relationships enabled their sustainability and persistence. The conclusions drawn from this study are based upon the study's research questions and findings, of which are broken into six different categories: (a) the identified three types of peer relationships, (b) peer relationships as alternate paths to persistence and sustainability, (c) peer relationships as identity affirmation, (d) anticipatory negative race related behaviors, (e) familiar terrain, and (f) trailblazing. Recommendations are included in this chapter's discussion as well.

Identified Peer Relationship Types

Among the 15 participant sample, three major types of relationships surfaced (sistah girl relationship, rival peer relationship, and the proxy mentor peer relationship). These relationship types have distinctive purposes and characteristics. A conclusion can be drawn that MBWALs have some type of peer relationship, despite the peer relationship's purpose. It can also be concluded that students who have peer relationships prior to enrolling into graduate school are more likely to remain in peer relationships with those individuals, and form new relationships as graduate students—whether they be same sex or race. Another conclusion is that participants place a significant amount of value on their peer relationships and most MBWALs made efforts to connect with and talk to their peers as often as possible.

Alternate Paths to Sustainability & Persistence

Research literature cites an array of coping mechanisms Black women collegiates engage in as a means for preservation during their time as students. More often than not, these studies

focus on undergraduate and doctoral Black women. In this study master's degree students were the focus, and therefore the way in which MBWALs responded to their environment added a new layer to existing coping literature on Black women in higher education. Conclusions for this study are that MBWALs used their peer relationships as a means for coping, which appeared to be far less mentally taxing than some of the coping strategies cited in research literature around "identity shifting" and "academic masking" (Shavers & Moore, 2014). In addition to this, the researcher concluded that participants also used these relationships as buffers against negative race-relations that were often encountered or anticipated by MBWALs.

Identity Affirmation

A tremendous body of research literature treats the notion of identity, in regards to Black women, as unfixed and environmentally contingent. As a conclusion for this study, MBWALs made the case for the importance of leveraging peer relationships as a means for identity affirmation. This leveraging came as a response to MBWALs not having a solid means of racial and cultural identity affirmation throughout their campus interactions (i.e, the environment, professors, classmates, university programming, signage, and language). Participants expressed their need for feeling acknowledged and recognized, yet they did not express any faith in their institutions to do so, especially since their prior experiences in MW educational settings had *not* done this (recognized, acknowledged, and affirmed) their existence and/or struggles. Another conclusion can be drawn on the basis that MWUUs and other MW educational institutions, should make efforts to acknowledge, recognize, and affirm the existence of Black women, and all women of color.

Anticipatory Negative Race Relations

A tone of anticipation among the participants in regards to how others would interact with them was evident. The researcher concluded that this anticipation had not *recently* been fostered, yet it had been cultivated over numerous interactions within educational and professional settings where they had felt the impact of discrimination or micro-aggressive behavior. A conclusion that MBWALs' support networks, played a significant role in establishing their consciousness to race related behaviors, especially if those support network members had been in similar settings and had experienced negative consequences of their race or gender. To some extent, the anticipation of these behaviors may have a significant impact on how MBWALs cope with these occurrences, in the sense that because they are already "on guard" of these things happening, they are likely not to be as devastated should something actually occur, bringing me to my next conclusion that MBWALs that do not have previous experience in MW institutions, or who may not have been cautioned or forewarned by friends and family--may have a more difficult time coping with negative race-related instances.

Familiar Terrain

Like the former section, MBWAL's prior experiences within these settings were a major find from both the demographical data and the empirical data from the interviews and focus groups. The noted experiences of MBWALs having spent extensive time in MW settings, allowed them opportunity to develop the needed resources to sustain themselves, through this study's findings—one of those resources was their peer relationships. In a previous section, I concluded that MBWALs that may not have had these in depth experiences, may be ill equipped for the often unrecptive environment of MWUUs.

Trailblazing

This finding came into play when participants were asked what their motivation was for attending graduate school. Almost all participants stated personal reasons for doing so, more specifically, they wanted to be a role model and to occupy spaces that were uncommon for Black women. Earlier, I concluded that participants arrived at their reasoning largely because they “wanted to be what they could not see”. Despite the burden, psychological ailments, and other relationship implications, MBWALs were willing to take on this feat and endure the sometimes taxing climate of their academic and professional spaces. In conclusion, MBWALs were unafraid in their graduate and professional endeavors, and are thought to be trailblazers for other historically underrepresented groups.

Recommendations

This following narrative provide possible recommendations for the conclusions drawn above. This section is parted into the following categories: (a) recommendations for current and future MBWALs graduate students in MWUUs and (b) recommendations for MWUUs. Research reports that the millennial population is slated for a steady increase in college enrollment. Although these numbers are not clearly stated for Black women millennials in pursuit of or currently pursuing graduate degrees, some thoughtful recommendations can still be made.

MBWALs should:

1. Remain open to establishing relationships with individuals that may not be similar in age, race, culture, or program—in doing so, MBWALs maintain a diverse perspective from others that may not necessarily identify with them. The establishment of these

relationships may also be more similar to those that MBWALs will have in their professional lives as leaders.

2. Screen graduate programs for culturally and racially conscious teaching and learning practices. Make efforts to reach out to faculty members to learn about their research interests and experiences, to determine if a connection can be made.
3. Be an advocate! Advocate for your academic, professional, and emotional needs to others invested in your well being.
4. Identify possible opportunities to connect with other MBWALs through social media outlets.
5. Share your story. Take opportunities to share your experiences with others MBW. Including those thinking about graduate school.
6. Have an outlet. Findings from this study suggest that MBWALs are experiencing a significant amount of stress outside of their academic work—which is often related to negative racialized encounters. Finding activities to engage in that are mentally replenishing can be extremely helpful. These activities can be: meditation, exercising, rest, painting, reading (for pleasure), shopping, weekend get aways, pet therapy.
7. Conduct research. Even small scale research projects can be insightful. As a graduate student, identify your passions and channel it through research that puts your interests on the map and in the forefront. Research may be centered around a question, an experience, or a course. Whatever the case may be, use your courses to develop and identify possible projects.

MWUUs should:

1. Create mental health programs specifically geared towards addressing issues of racism and discrimination for students of color and for members of other underrepresented groups. These programs can be accessible to students on a daily basis, and may be located in various areas of the school campus.
2. Develop an app for students to anonymously report instances of negative race-related behaviors (i.e. microaggressions, discrimination, etc.). This would be especially critical for graduate students who are also working professionals.
3. Identify spaces on campus and publicize them to MBWALs as areas where they can go and process any negative behaviors. These spaces should be equipped with mental health professionals during certain hours.
4. Develop programming that addresses each facet of MBWALs identities, along with a task force to ensure the fidelity of these programs.
5. Pay close attention to the times and dates of scheduled programming, to ensure that all MBWALs can be included.
6. Conduct large scale qualitative and quantitative studies that investigate the how peer relationships impact other groups of underrepresented minorities.
7. Host focus groups among underrepresented school populations to develop an understanding of those who likely have different educational experiences than you.

In addition to these recommendations the idea of stereotype threat was something that surfaced among participants as real and impactful. I would like to briefly address, in narrative form, what MWUUs can do to address this issue:

Towards Creating a Stereotype Free Environment in MWUs

Researchers Walton, Spencer, and Erman (2011) insist that the “potential of stereotyped students depends critically on the nature of the psychological environment present in a school” (Logel, Walton, Spencer, Peach, & Mark, 2012 p. 46). Degree-seeking African American students frequently find the circumstances surrounding their academic goals to be less than accommodating, often getting lost in a world of Eurocentric social norms and habits that do not reflect their own backgrounds or racial identity, leaving little room to feel accepted or “good enough” to be granted access into the dominant white culture within MWUs. In *Whistling Vivaldi* (2011) Steele talks about the stress of wanting to obtain something that “was precisely the characteristic [his] group (African Americans) was stereotyped as lacking” (p. 153), and how that stereotype insidiously penetrated his mindset as a young black male in predominately white academia. Lack of recognition for this phenomenon challenges even the vastly talented, yet stereotyped students, in that it psychologically undermines their ability to perform as well as they are capable (Logel. et al., 2012, pg. 46).

Mitigating psychological damages. Research literature suggests that MWUs can establish a stereotype-safe environment by providing students with “psychological strategies” to cope more effectively with negative stereotypes. In doing so, MWUs can facilitate workshops that provide students with the tools to identify themselves and their place within a MWU as valuable. Recent scholarship suggests that African American students susceptible to racial stereotypes be taught to “replace” thoughts of worry, underperformance, and inadequacy when

attempting to complete a task that requires mental exertion with thoughts of “important personal identity” (p. 46). Researchers caution that this strategy may not be as effective in diverse situations or as a strategy to be used over long periods of time. Extended exposure to threatening school environments, such as the ones identified in MWUs, may be impossible to overcome through the situational implementation of the afore proposed strategies. Cohen (2006) argues that reducing the psychological anguish caused by *stereotype threat* should be addressed through the use of self-affirmations, which allows African American students an opportunity to reflect on personally important values, social relationships and skills outside of academics (p. 46).

Removing perception. MWUs can assist in creating a stereotype free environment through the lessening of situations that create “perceptions” of a threat (p. 47). Establishing environments that allow African American students an opportunity to be involved in campus or departmental academic social activities without the persisting halo of stereotype threat are most ideal. Assessments, for example, prefaced by institutional authorities and/or professors as *not* diagnostic of African American students’ intellectual capacity, can ensure that students do not fear being judged by the outcome of their scores. According to recent research on African American degree seeking students’ persistence within MWUs, the largest factor in establishing a stereotype safe environment is through the reduction of perceived likelihood for stereotyped students to be seen stereotypically (Logel. et al., 2012, pg. 47), which means changing who *else* is present in the academic environment. Marx and Goff (2005) found that African American students are far more comfortable in predominately white settings when they have access to positive interactions within their “in-groups” (p. 47). In such cases, African American students are able to interact with faculty and staff members in an effort to build relationship bonds that may help students to persist throughout their studies.

Strategy Implementation

The organizational frameworks of MWUs were not derived to nurture the academic aspirations of African American students. Many MWUs are fashioned to accommodate its majority and the abundant Eurocentric culture therein, leaving students of color devoid of cultural, social, and academic connections within the university, and oftentimes the surrounding communities. Making an effort to foster a sense of belonging starts with MWUs recognizing the importance of African American students gaining the university's commitment to prioritizing retention efforts among this population. Institutions must realize that creating a campus environment that is welcoming and culturally responsive, starts long before students arrive on campus, meaning that MWUs should make conscious efforts to accommodate African American students during the recruitment stage. Within the past 15 years, social-psychological research shows that the largest factor in minority academic underperformance is due to the confronting of "pervasive negative intellectual stereotypes in common academic environments" (Logel. et al., 2012, pg. 49). If MWUs can prioritize using research to inform strategies to create stereotype-safe academic environments, African American and other students of color can begin to find significant success.

Recommendations for Future Research

Here I recommend additional research studies to develop a more well rounded perspective of MBWALs educational experiences in MWUs. This will allow for a more indepth understanding of how the relational aspects of Black women's collegiate experiences factor into knowledge regarding their sustainability techniques.

1. A large scale quantitative study can be conducted in order to add scope to this study's research questions, and to correct the potential researcher bias that comes along with

qualitative studies. A potential research question may be what percentage of MBWALs experience peer relationships in MWUU graduate programs.

2. A similar study can be proposed for Black women of different generations, to compare and contrast the types and functions of their peer relationships, if any. The potential research question may be: Which generations experienced different types of peer relationships during their time in a MWUU graduate school.

Reflections

The journey to this point has been ripe with fear, self-doubt, paranoia, eagerness, joy, patience, and gratefulness. I pray that my interpretations of the participants findings have captured their innermost thoughts and feelings in regards to their educational journeys thus far. This creative process has taught me many valuable lessons about myself and those that were on this journey right along with me. It is my hope that this work honors, acknowledges, and recognized your contribution to the world.

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List of Tables

Definition of Terms¹¹

TERM	DEFINITION
African American	The terms <i>African American</i> and <i>Black</i> are used interchangeably and include women of African, Black Latina, or Caribbean descent (Winkle-Wagner, 2015).
Persistence	The term <i>persistence</i> in this paper is used to describe African American female's continuance in majority white urban universities in spite of difficulty or opposition while maintaining a healthy psychological and academic outlook. Individuals in the sample will have completed at least one year of graduate studies, and be in good academic standing. My definition of persistence is derived from the U.S. Department of Education's definition that persistence is a student's enrollment pattern with respect to staying on track to a degree. For example, students are counted as "persisting" if they are still attending college or have graduated from college (USDOE, 1995).
Perseverance	The ability to overcome obstacles when working towards achieving a goal (Broome, 2012); in this study the goal is persistence.
Majority White Urban University (MWUUs)	The term <i>predominantly white urban university</i> is defined throughout this work as a majority white university located in a metropolitan area that is concerned in outlook and programming that nurtures its surrounding urban environment. More specific criteria includes: (a) student enrollment of 20% or more on a part-time basis (b) located in a city with a population of 250,000 or more (c) has graduate and professional schools (d) grants the Ph.D. degree (Spicer, 1976, p.4).
Peer Relationships	A mutual relationship of similar hierarchical status-- <i>in terms of educational level or age group</i> --where both parties perceive themselves as equals (McDougall & Beattie, 1997). Peer relationships can also be fostered individually or among a group of individuals that is either "inter- or extra organizational" (McManus & Russell, 2007, p. 275), in this case the organization is a MWUUs. This relationship assists in the growth, learning, and development of a person, in this case the

¹¹ This is a working list; of which I will add to as the study progresses

	MBWAL. This definition is not to be confused with that of a mentorship, as mentors are often thought to provide more of a career based function (Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001; McManus & Russell, 2007).
Millennial Black woman aspiring or acting leader (MBWAL)	A graduate student born between the year 1982 and 2003 who is preparing and/or poised to lead and influence policy decisions at the local, state, national, and international levels to solve the grand challenges of social justice and society—particularly those challenges that affect the Black community. She may choose to impact change through activism, advocacy, research, teaching, scholarship or mentorship.
Black Feminist-Womanism	Perspective cited by Lindsey-Dennis (2015) that postulates the idea that BFW epistemologies exist to weave together Black girls and women’s “worldview, behaviors, and psychosocial outcomes” (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Kincheloe, 2001; Sheared, 1994; Lindsey-Dennis, 2015 p. 513).
Leadership	I define leadership throughout this work as: “movement, taking the organization or some part of it to a new direction, solving problems, being creative, initiating new programs, building organization structures, improving quality” and “influencing one or more people in positive ways” (Davis, 2003; Alston, 2011, p. 8)
Psychosocial	psychosocial is defined here as factors that refer to the evolvment of one’s identity in relation to social, interpersonal, and environmental interactions that serve as the foundation on which individuals build healthy interpersonal relationships, approach sovereignty, and establish their individuality (Pope, 2000; Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Henry, Butler & West, 2011, p. 138)
Eurocentric	Defined as the implementation or display of <u>European</u> or Anglo-American values and experiences.
Scholar	An intellectual or learned person, not necessarily one that is an academic or in a professoriate role.
Micro-aggression	brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group (Sue, Capodilupo, et. al., 2007, p. 273)
Race-Related	Having to do with a person’s race, culture, or ethnicity.

Sustainability

Showing endurance

Demographic Table

NAME	HOMESTATE/COUNTRY	AGE	PROGRAM	GPA	STATUS	NOTES
ALLIYAH	Georgia	23	Health Sciences	3.5	Enrolled	Track athlete
CELESTE	New York	30	Humanities	n/a	Enrolled	Former restaurant owner; Ivy League graduate
DYSIS	Virginia	23	Informational Sciences	3.6	Enrolled	“Southern belle”; dates internationally
KORI	Illinois	32	Social/Behavioral	3.8	Enrolled	Active military; proud mother of two; 1 st generation
LIZA	Central Africa	25	Social/Behavioral	3.9	Enrolled	Speaks 4 different languages
SUNNY	Wisconsin	23	Business	3.2	Enrolled	Proud role model; enjoys social media
TARA	Wisconsin	25	Health Sciences	3.5	Enrolled	Active social life; passionate leader; 1 st generation
ZORA	West Indies	26	Education	4.0	Enrolled	Future university president
MONA	Connecticut	30	Social/Behavioral	3.4	Enrolled	Has a twin; 2 nd master’s degree
URSALA	Maryland	25	Criminal Justice	2.6	Enrolled	Journal editor; future attorney
KIM	North Carolina	25	Education	3.9	Enrolled	“Black Ambassador”; proud mother; studied abroad
ABBY	Wisconsin	32	Business	3.6	Enrolled	Tech entrepreneur

ROSE	East Africa	24	Education	n/a	Enrolled	Bi-lingual
DENISE	Jamaica	32	Humanities	3.94	Enrolled	International artist
LAILA	Wisconsin	32	Education	n/a	Enrolled	Lover of research; mother

Frequency of Interaction

NAME	DAILY	WEEKLY	MONTHLY
ALLIYAH	X		
CELESTE			X
DYSIS		X	
KORI			
LIZA	X		
SUNNY	X		X
TARA	X		
ZORA	X		
MONA	X		
URSALA	X		
KIM	X		
ABBY	X		
ROSE		X	
DENISE	X		
LAILA			X

Categorical Descriptions of MBWALs' Peer Relationships

Categories	Sistah-Gurl PR	Rival PR	Proxy-Mentor PR
Profile	<i>usually same sex around the same age similar educational interests similar social interests formed from a deep bond similar identities as black women can be formed before or during graduate study non-family member</i>	<i>sharing coursework having consistent academic interactions (between classmates) usually via classroom or course related interactions</i>	<i>can be male or female around the same age or slightly older shares coursework, academic and/or social interests similar career aspirations substitute or alternative to a formal mentor relationship</i>
Purpose	<i>emotional safe haven "cheer leaders" hang out/spend quality time outside of coursework buffer for emotional breakdowns buffer for negative and/or discriminatory behaviors related to race (inside or outside of graduate school)</i>	<i>healthy competition in courses challenges and pushes thinking fosters a competitive spirit inspires one to "get on his/her level"</i>	<i>coursework and program navigations career advice and academic opportunities helps to develop professional relationships consults with peer around leadership goals</i>

List of Figures

Figure 1. Who Is Responsible for Black Women's Success in College?

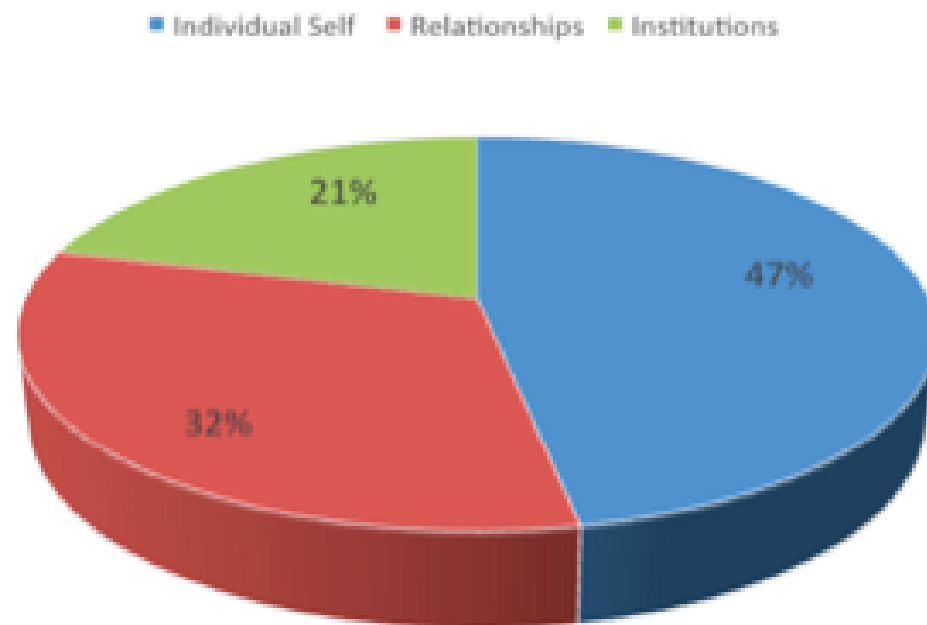


Figure X. Adapted from "Having Their Lives Narrowed Down? The State of Black Women's Success", by R.W. Wagner, *Review of Educational Research*, 85, p. 189.

Figure 2. Peer Relationship Conceptual Framework

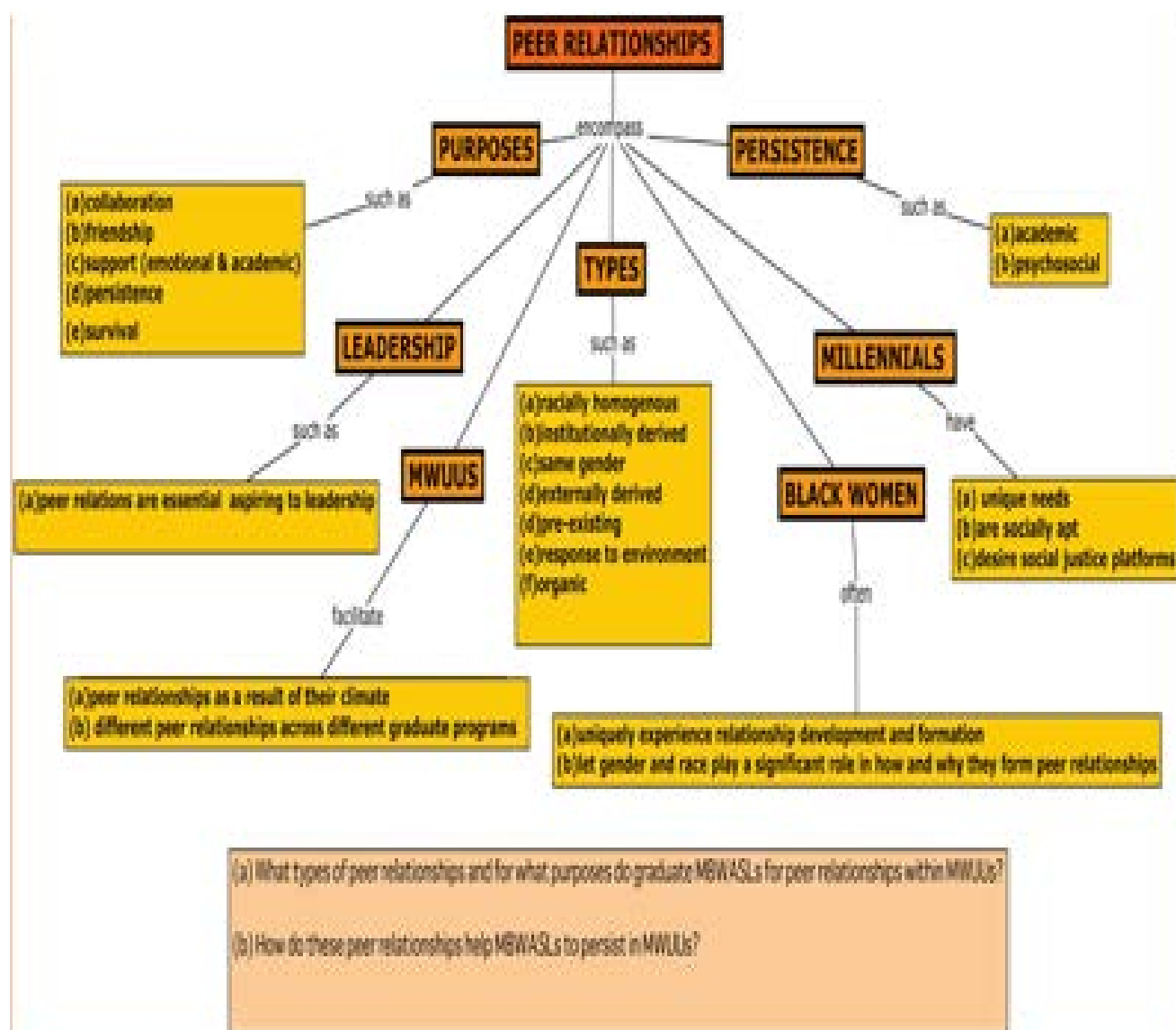


Figure 3. Peer Relationship Commonality Representation

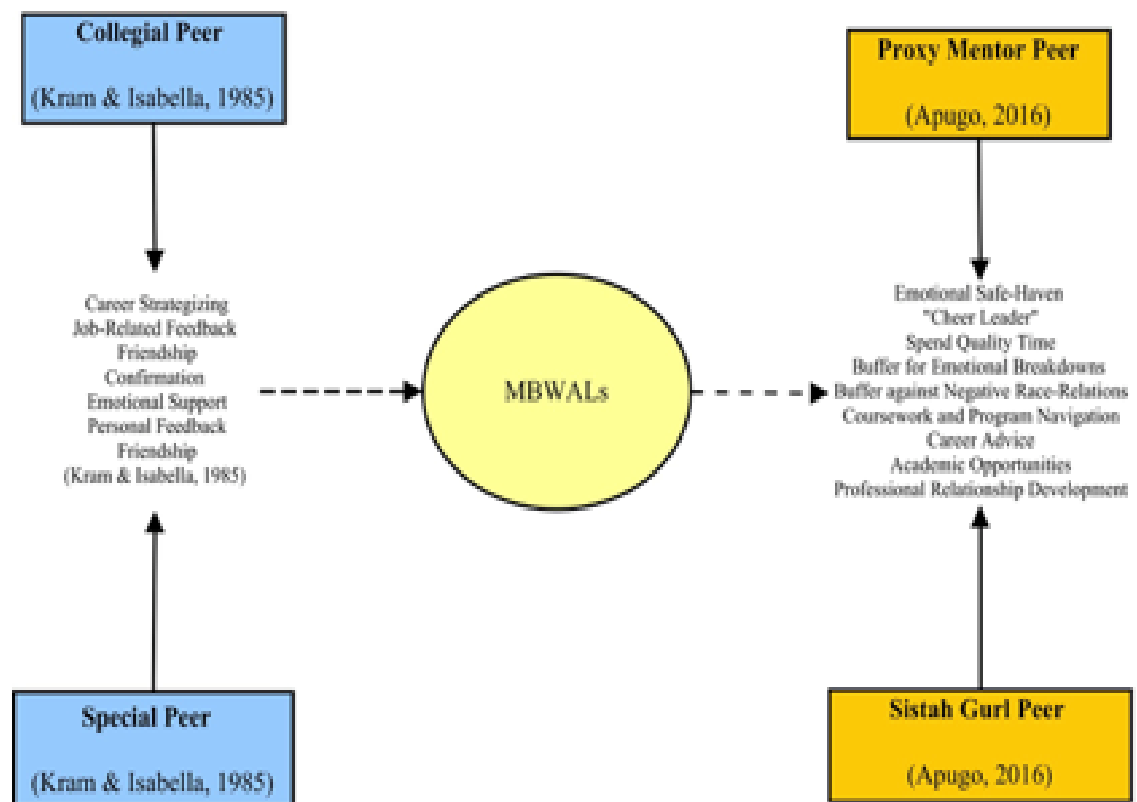
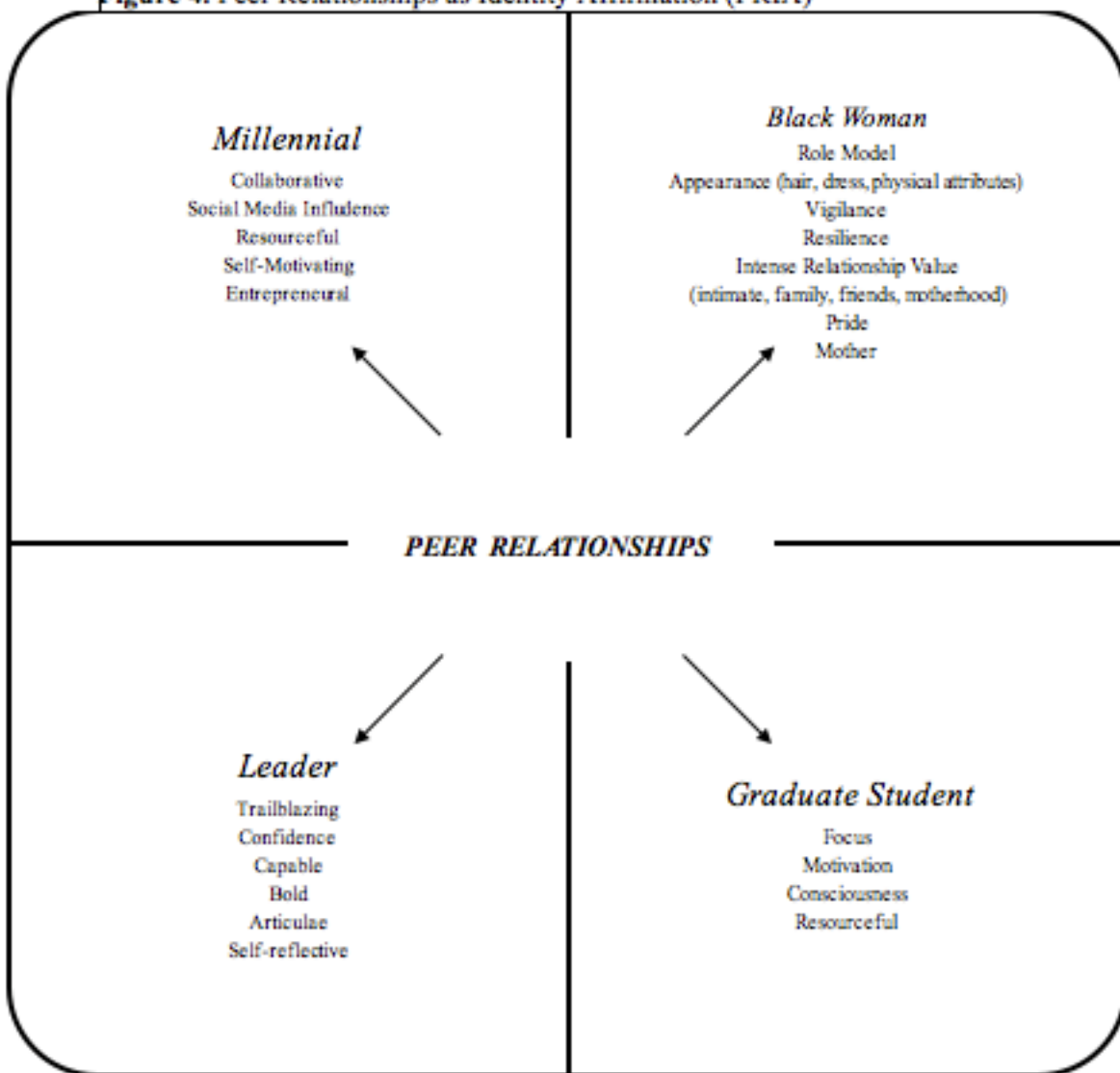


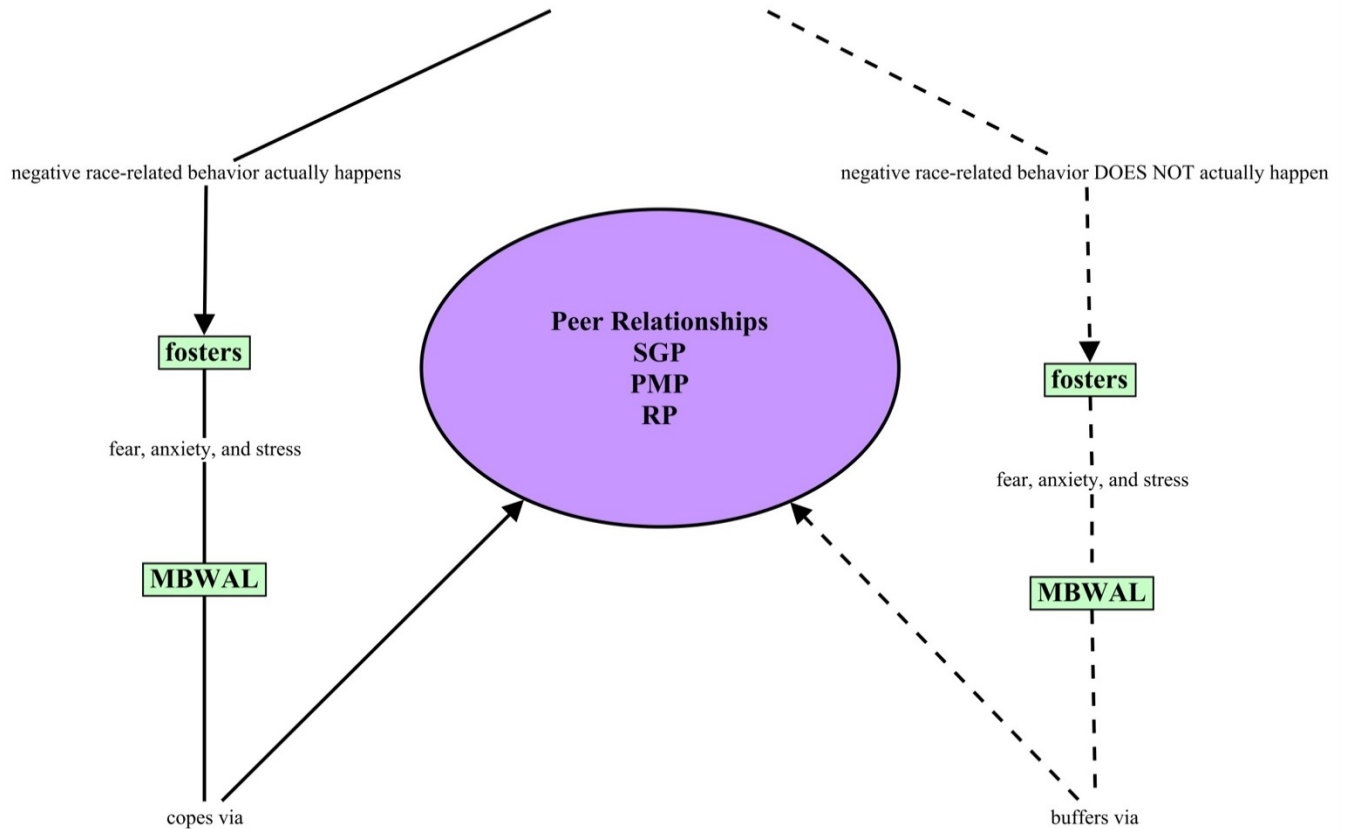
Figure X. Created by D. Apugo (2016) to show relationship between Kram and Isabella's (1985) workplace peer relationships and those existing among MBWALs.

Figure 4. Peer Relationships as Identity Affirmation (PRIA)



**Anticipation of Negative Race-Related Behavior
(Racial Micro-aggressions and/or Stereotype Threat)**

Scenario: Tameka is the only Black woman in her majority white graduate seminar class



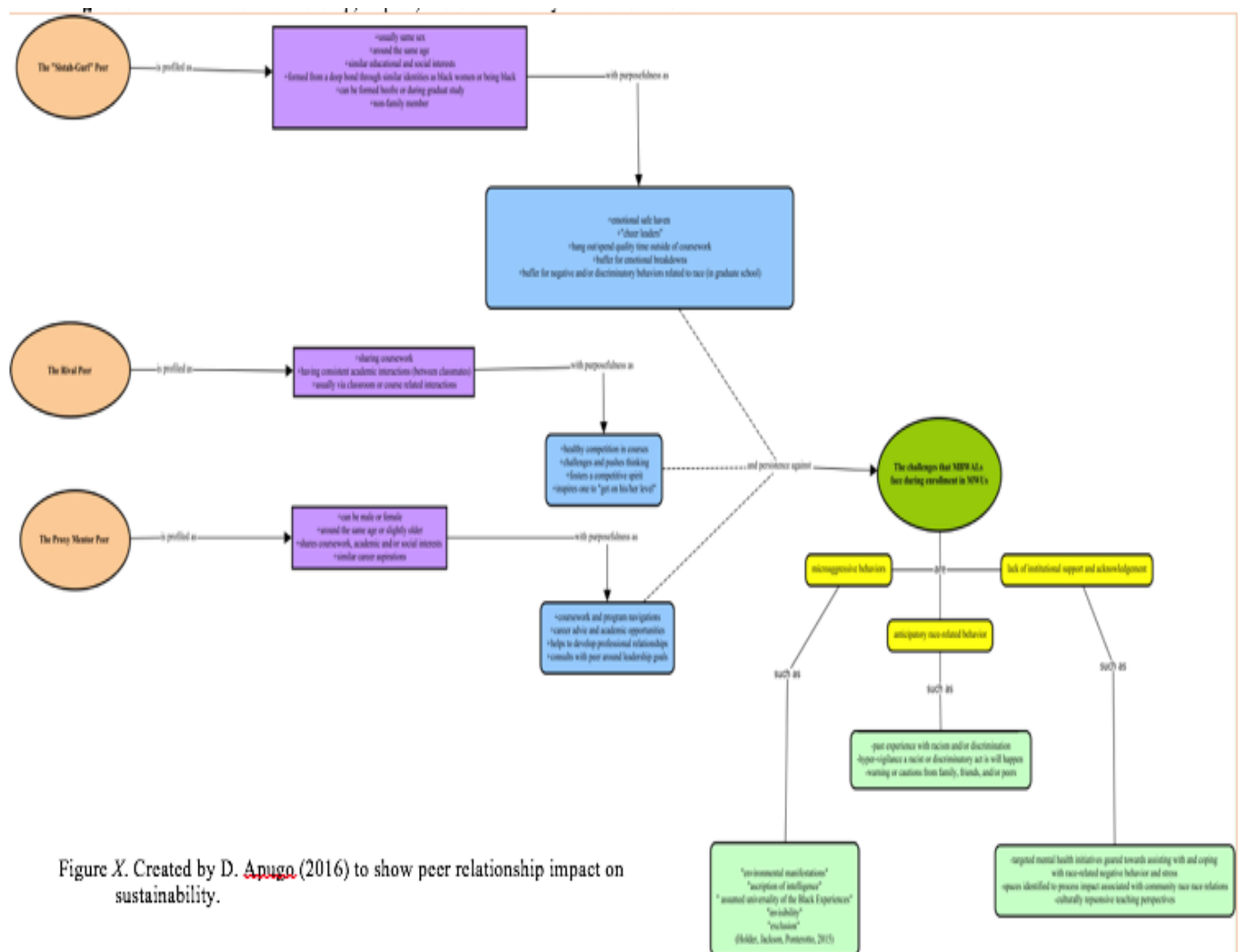


Figure X. Created by D. Apugo (2016) to show peer relationship impact on sustainability.

Footnotes

¹ This is a working list; of which I will add to as the study progresses

² The body of literature that examines the studying and teaching of traditional leadership theories and concepts from a Eurocentric white male perspective.

³ Foremothers reveal the circuitous process of African ritual that connects Black women through story. Davis (2008) describes foremothers as being both behind and before Black women navigating the minefields of the academy as a continued presence in the telling of Black women's stories of historic and contemporary significance.

⁴ The terms *African American* and *Black* are used interchangeably.

⁵Refers to the liberation movement that evolved into a civil (human) rights movement sparked by ostracized, marginalized, and oppressed inner-city youth. Grounded in the traditions of U.S. born Blacks, Latinos, and other members of the African Diaspora (see *Hip Hop Culture* (2006) by Emmett G. Price).

⁶ A conscious or subconscious change in self (identity) as a response to one's environment

⁷ To change one's tone of voice or manner of speaking based on the encountered audience.

⁸ See Table 1. for definition

⁹ See Table 1. for definition

¹⁰ See page 169 of Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015 for a detailed chart on the process, coping, and detailed meaning of racial micro-aggressions.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

IRB #: 16.178

Background

1. What would you like for me to know about your past or present educational experiences?
2. What primary factors influenced your decision to pursue higher education?
3. What primary factors influenced your decision to pursue a graduate degree?

Peer Relationships (Define)

4. Sometimes other people can be important to our success in graduate degree programs, who would these people be for you? Tell me about a time where they made a difference.
5. Please share your experiences with any peer relationships you have been in as a graduate student.
6. Based on the information about peer relationships that you have shared thus far, how would you separate these relationships into different types? How would you label them?
7. Describe what purpose these relationships serve or have served.
8. How often do you interact in these relationships?
9. In what ways have you experienced the formation of peer relationships in MWUUs?
10. How do you think the formation of peer relationships in MWUUs might be more difficult than in other universities?

Persistence (Define)

1. To what do you contribute your persistence in this graduate program? Why?
2. Describe some ways that you fostered persistence prior to enrolling in this graduate program?
3. In what capacities have peer relationships helped you to persist? Tell me about a time or times that stick out in your mind.

Leadership (Define)

1. What leadership qualities do you feel that you possess?
2. What are your long term and short term leadership goals?
3. How have peer relationships impacted you as a leader or aspiring scholar leader?

Race & Gender

1. How do you feel that being a BW has specific implications on how you experience leadership opportunities in the United States?
2. What about how you experience education in graduate programs?
3. Have you ever felt that your race or gender impacted your ability to persist? Why? How so? In what ways?
4. How do you perceive your generation's (BW millennials) leadership opportunities and aspirations?
5. What are some leadership characteristics that you feel are unique to millennial Black women? How might these characteristics aid in persistence?
6. What do you want PWUUs to know about MBWASLs?

Appendix B

Letter to Participants

Dear _____,

My name is Danielle Apugo, and I am a doctoral student in urban education and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. I am writing to ask your participation in a research study involving the investigation of *the types of peer relationships millennial Black women aspiring scholar leaders for within majority white urban universities*.

Your willingness to share your experiences as a graduate student for this study would be very much appreciated! Please rest assured that your information is confidential and pertinent to further understanding how millennial Black women aspiring to scholar leadership can impact one's ability to foster relationship in academic settings. For the purposes of this study, you will be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire to better understand your perspectives as a student.

This study will be conducted in a way that postures you (the participant) as an authority of your own experience--and will thusly be reported as such. In addition to your willingness to participate--you are also granted free will to skip or decline any of the demographical information that you wish not to disclose; however, choosing to withhold certain information *may* impact the rich and descriptive nature that I aim for in this study. Please use the link below to complete a brief demographic survey via our university's online survey tool *Qualtrics*. If there are any issues in accessibility with this link please contact me as soon as possible at: 318-773-0093 or dlapugo@uwm.edu

In appreciation,

Danielle Apugo
Doctoral Student-Graduate Assistant
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Enderis Hall
P.O. Box 413, Rm. 644
Milwaukee, WI 53212
dlapugo@uwm.edu
318-773-0093

Appendix C

Member Checking Letter

Dear Participants,

Your participation in the investigation of *the types of peer relationships millennial Black women aspiring scholar leaders within majority white urban universities* is requested.

Please take a moment to look over the concept map of your interview. This phase of your participation is known as the *member checking process*, where the participant (you) have the opportunity to review a synthesis of your recorded statements and determine its validity. If you notice any ethical concerns, please immediately alert study conductor, Danielle Apugo (dlapugo@uwm.edu), to your concerns.

Thanks again for your time and sharing,

Danielle Apugo
Doctoral Student-Graduate Assistant
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
School of Education

Appendix D

University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee Consent to Participate in Interview Research IRB #: 16.178

Study Title: “Counted Out, but Counted On: The Hidden Academic Journey of Millennial Black Women in Majority White Urban Universities”

Person Responsible for Research: Danielle Apugo

Study Description: The purpose of this research study is to understand the types of peer relationships that graduate Millennial Black Women Aspiring Scholar Leaders (MBWASLs) form as a means for persistence in majority white urban universities. Approximately 10 subjects will participate in this study. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview. During this interview you will be asked questions about peer relationships, persistence, leadership, gender, and race. This will take approximately 60 minutes of your time. The interview will take place in a private location and it will be audio recorded.

Risks / Benefits: Risks that you may experience from participating are considered minimal. There are no costs for participating. There are no benefits to you other than to further research.

Confidentiality: During the interview your name will not be used. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity. Your responses will be treated as confidential and any use of your name and or identifying information about anyone else will be removed during the transcription process so that the transcript of our conversation is de-identified. All study results will be reported without identifying information so that no one viewing the results will ever be able to match you with your responses. Direct quotes may be used in publications or presentations. Data from this study will be saved on a password protected computer in room 644 or Enderis Hall, inside the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s School of Education for 1 year. Only I will have access to the data. However, the Institutional Review Board at UW-Milwaukee or appropriate federal agencies like the Office for Human Research Protections may review this study’s records. Audio recordings will be destroyed May 31st 2016.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part in this study, or if you decide to take part, you can change your mind later and withdraw from the study. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. Your decision will not change any present or future relationships with the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. There are no known alternatives available to participating in this research study other than not taking part.

Who do I contact for questions about the study: For more information about the study or study procedures, contact Danielle Apugo at dlapugo@uwm.edu or 318-773-0093

Who do I contact for questions about my rights or complaints towards my treatment as a research subject? Contact the UWM IRB at 414-229-3173 or irbinfo@uwm.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must be 18 years of age or older. By signing the consent form, you are giving your consent to voluntarily participate in this research project.

Printed Name of Subject/Legally Authorized Representative

Signature of Subject/Legally Authorized Representative

Date

Appendix E

University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee Consent to Participate in Focus Group Research

Study Title: “Counted Out, but Counted On: The Hidden Academic Journey of Millennial Black Women in Majority White Urban Universities”

Person Responsible for Research: Danielle Apugo

Study Description: The purpose of this research study is to understand the types of peer relationships that graduate Millennial Black Women Aspiring Scholar Leaders (MBWASLs) form as a means for persistence in majority white urban universities. Approximately 5 subjects will participate in this study. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a focus group. A focus group is a discussion with a group of people about a certain topic. In this focus group you will be asked to discuss/share your experiences about. During this interview you will be asked questions about peer relationships, persistence, leadership, gender, and race. This will take approximately 120 minutes of your time. The interview will take place in a private location and it will be audio recorded.

Risks / Benefits: Risks that you may experience from participating are considered minimal. There may be some questions that make you uncomfortable and you can feel free not to answer those questions. With focus groups there is always the risk that someone in the group will share your responses with others who were not in the group. In order to minimize this risk please do not share anything you do not want others to know. There will be no costs for participating. There are no benefits to you other than to further research.

Confidentiality: In the focus group your name will not be used. Psuedonyms will be used to protect your identity. Due to the group nature of the focus group, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Your responses will be treated as confidential and any use of your name and or identifying information about you or anyone else will be removed during the transcription process so that the transcript of the group conversation is de-identified. All study results will be reported without identifying information so that no one viewing the results will ever be able to match you with your responses. Direct quotes may be used in publications or presentations. Data from this study will be saved on a password protected computer in room 644 or Enderis Hall, inside the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s School of Education for 1 year. Only I will have access to the data. However, the Institutional Review Board at UW-Milwaukee or appropriate federal agencies like the Office for Human Research Protections may review this study’s records. Audio recordings will be destroyed May 31st 2016.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part in this study, or if you decide to take part, you can change your mind later and withdraw from the study. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. Your decision will not change any present or future relationships with the University of

Wisconsin Milwaukee. There are no known alternatives available to participating in this research study other than not taking part.

Who do I contact for questions about the study: For more information about the study or study procedures, contact Danielle Apugo at dlapugo@uwm.edu or 318-773-0093

Who do I contact for questions about my rights or complaints towards my treatment as a research subject? Contact the UWM IRB at 414-229-3173 or irbinfo@uwm.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must be 18 years of age or older. By signing the consent form, you are giving your consent to voluntarily participate in this research project.

Printed Name of Subject/Legally Authorized Representative

Signature of Subject/Legally Authorized Representative

Date

Appendix F

Focus Group Protocol

Number of Participants: 4

Number of questions: 8

Group length in minutes: 120

Minutes per Person per Question: 3.5

Themes from Interview:

1. What are your reactions to the themes?
2. What can MWUUs do to facilitate persistence for MBWASLs?
3. For what purposes have you formed peer relationships in MWUUs?
4. Why do you feel the MBWASLs have the experiences within MWUUs?
5. What immediate changes or actions do you suggest for MWUUs authorities?
6. What long term changes or actions do you suggest for MWUUs authorities?
7. What advice would you give MBWASLs in graduate degree programs?
8. How do you feel that others around campus perceive you?

Appendix G

Demographic Questionnaire

Q1 First Name

Q2 Last Name

Q3 Gender

- ☐ Male (1)
- ☐ Female (2)

Q4 My age is

Q5 My race ethnicity is

Q6 What is your current occupation?

Q7 Do you attend a majority white university?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q8 Where is this university located (list city and state)?

Q9 What graduate degree program are you currently enrolled in (list program and discipline)?

Q10 Where are you in your program?

- ☐ 1 st year (1)
- ☐ 2nd year (2)
- ☐ 3rd year (3)
- ☐ graduated within the last 3 years (4)
- ☐ other (5)

Q11 Have you engaged in a peer relationship of any kind during your time as a graduate student in the program that you are referencing for this questionnaire? For this study I define a peer relationship as: A mutual relationship of similar hierarchical status--in terms of educational level or age group--where both parties perceive themselves as equals (McDougall & Beattie, 1997).

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q12 Are you currently a leader or aspiring to lead in some capacity in your future endeavors?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q13 What is your current GPA or what was your GPA at the time of graduation

Q14 What is your e-mail address?

Appendix H

Study Time Line

December 14th* (Proposal Defense)

December 15th (Apply for Dissertator Status)

December 15th (Apply for IRB)

December 21st-31st (Send out invitations for study pending IRB approval)

January 2nd-Feb 1st (Data Collection)

February 1st-26th (Transcriptions/Analysis on *Nvivo*)

March 1st -25th (Complete Findings and Write Up)

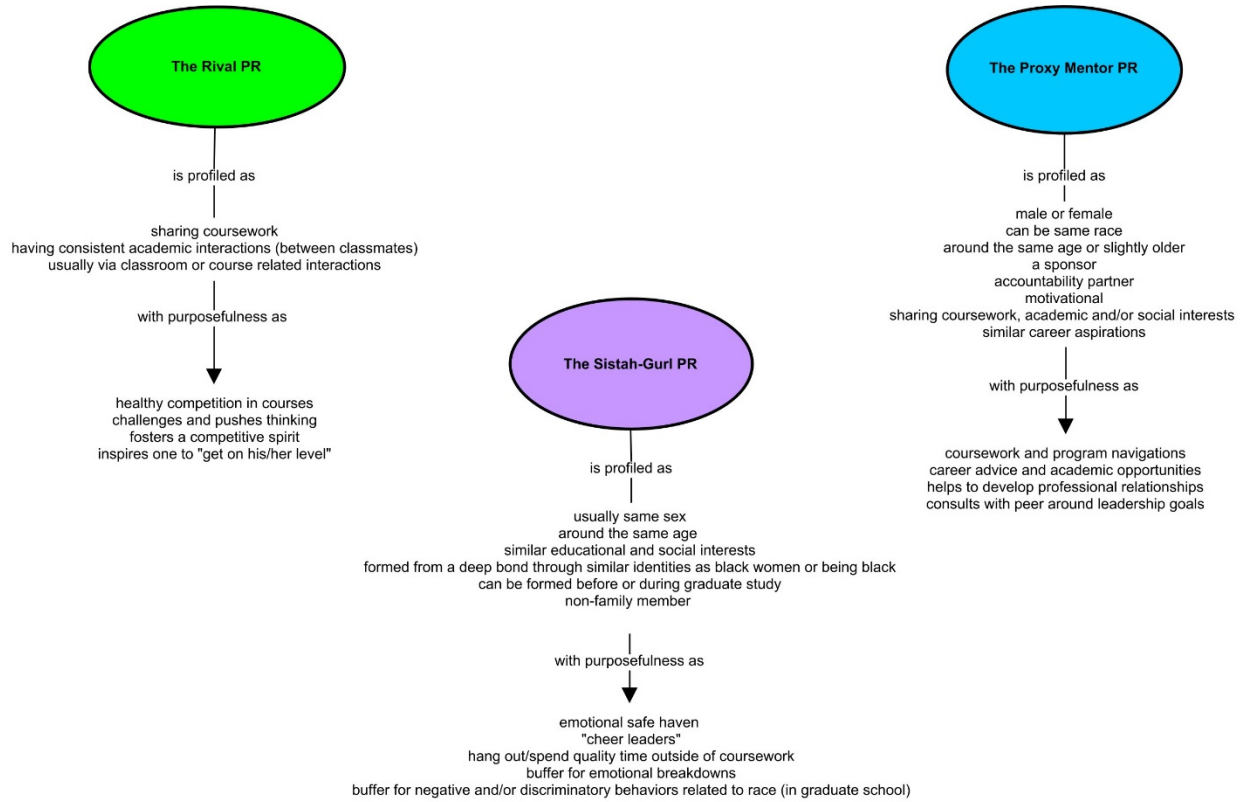
April 1st-May 1st (Consult with major advisor on next steps)

Appendix I

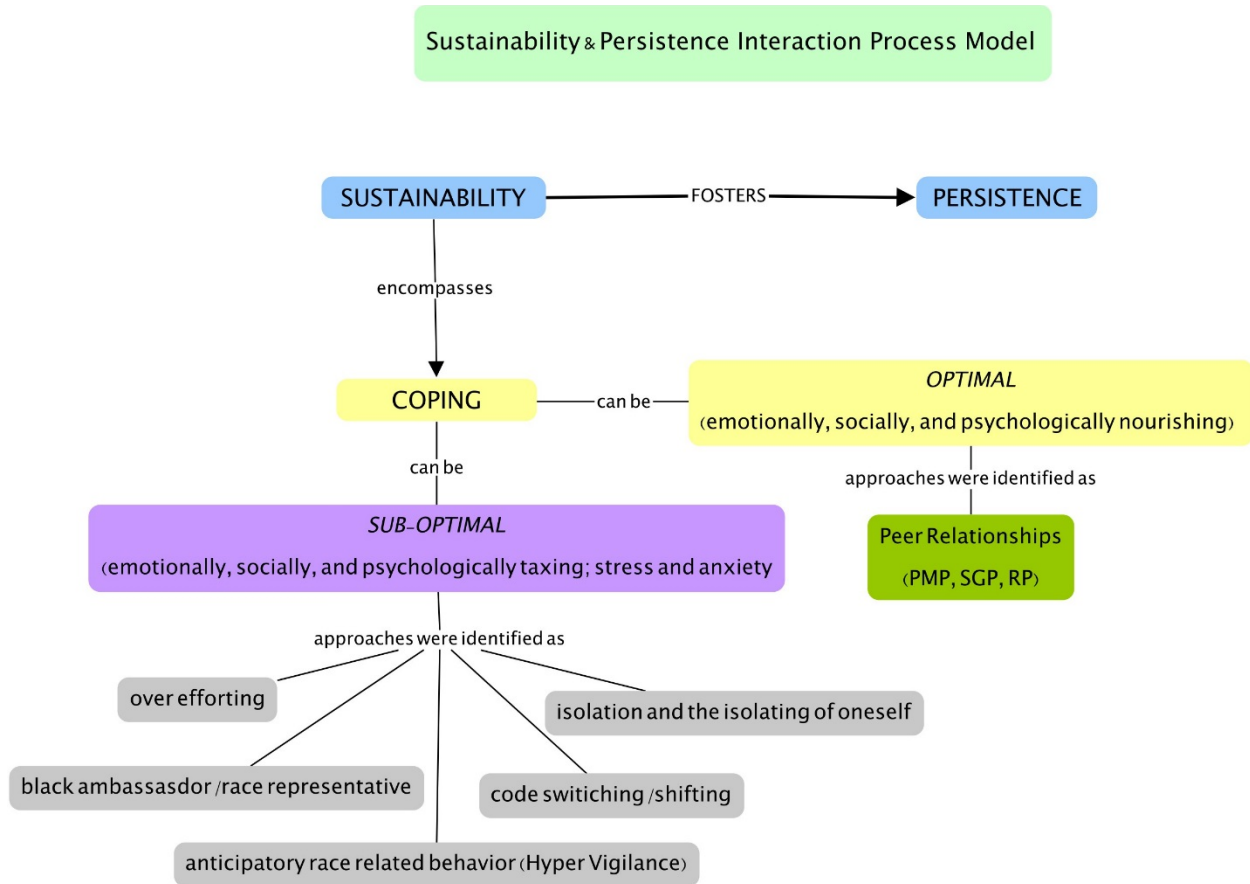
CODE BOOK

<i>Code: Parent</i>	<i>Code: Child</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Anticipatory Negative Race-Related Behavior		Behavior that is perceived to be related to race, and is perceived as negative	These behaviors are identified by participants as MA's and ST
Familiar Terrain	High School Sports or Extra Curricular Activities Undergraduate	Participants have had prior experiences in majority white educational settings	Refer to participants interview transcript to determine their past MW educational experiences
First Generation		First to attend college in their family's generation; parents attended and/or graduated from college	Participant's perspectives and/or could be different based on their parent's experiences.
Parents with College Experience			
Peer Relationships as Alternative Paths to Persistence and Sustainability	Discriminatory behavior Lack of perceived institutional support Perceived micro-aggression	Using peer relationships as a means for sustainability against perceived discriminatory behavior, perceived institutional support, and micro-aggression.	Understand how peer relationships act as buffers against the listed discriminatory behaviors.
Peer Relationships as Identity Affirmation		Using peer relationships to affirm one's identities.	MBWALs have multiple identities.
Proxy Mentor Peer		Peer that acts as an informal mentor.	Type of peer as characterized in study
Rival Peer		Peer that provides a source of competition.	Type of peer as characterized in study
Sistah Gurl Peer		Peer that provides emotional support.	Type of peer as characterized in study
Trailblazing	Overall thoughts about MBW Personal leadership characteristics Showing leadership Showing personal strength	Identified behaviors that can be characterized as being a role model.	Women identify ways in which they developed their leadership identities.
Graduate Degree Pursuit Influenced	Both Family Internal want	Individuals identified that influenced MBWALs decision to pursue a degree.	Participants list those that have impacted their choice to pursue a graduate degree.

Appendix J



Appendix K



CURRICULUM VITAE

DANIELLE L. APUGO

Home Address

3438 N Oakland
Milwaukee, WI 53202
318-773-0093 (cell-preferred)
dapugo@yahoo.com

Business Address

Enderis Hall 644, SOE
UWM-Milwaukee
P.O. Box 413
Milwaukee, WI 53201
(414) 229-4771 (o)
dlapugo@uwm.edu

FORMAL EDUCATION & STUDIES

Ph.D. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Major areas of Study: Urban Education & Administrative Leadership, Specialization: Adult, Continuing & Higher Ed, Minor: Education Administration, anticipated May 2016

Howard University, Leadership & Educational Policy Studies
Fall 2012-Spring 2014

M.Ed. University of Texas-Arlington, Summa Cum Laude, Major: Curriculum & Instruction: Multicultural Literacy Studies (PK-6) Fall 2011

B.A. Northwestern State University, Major: Secondary English Education (6-12), Minor: Public Relations Fall 2009

RESEARCH INTERESTS

Urban Education
Cultural & Racial Equity
Dignity Based Teaching & Leadership
Critical Race Feminism

UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCES

GRADUATE RESEARCH/PROJECT ASSISTANT-DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP IN URBAN EDUCATION, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, August 2014-present. Collaborate in team research projects with faculty for publications, administer and manage web-based courses and program platform logistics, design and administer multi-media marketing materials for the department's certificate and 8 graduate programs.

AD-HOC PROFESSOR University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI, January 2016-May present. Responsible for teaching graduate students theories and models of operation for school administration and facility logistics.

TEACHING ASSISTANT University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI, August 2015-December 2015. Responsible for teaching graduate students culturally responsive theories and

paradigms of student development in college in collaboration with faculty. Maintained virtual and on campus office hours to work with students Course listed as AD LDSP 797: *Students in the Collegiate Context*.

TECHNICAL PROCESSOR Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, LA, January 2006-December 2009. Responsible for the managing, ordering, and processing of library media for over 10,000 students and faculty.

SECONDARY EXPERIENCES

INDEPENDENT RESEARCH CONSULTANT AND COACH, Greater Milwaukee Foundation, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, May 2015-October 2015.

TITLE I RTI READING INTERVENTIONIST & READING SPECIALIST, Brown Deer Public School, Brown Deer Elementary, Brown Deer, WI, August 2014-June 2015.

READING SPECIALIST & RTI COORDINATOR, Achievement Preparatory Academy, Southeast Washington, D.C., June 2013-July 2014.

NATIONAL COLLEGE BOARD-PRE AP COORDINATOR, Rusheon Middle School, Bossier City, LA, June 2011-July 2012.

PBIS (POSITIVE BEHAVIOR INTERVENTIONS & SUPPORTS) COACH & TRAINER, Rusheon Middle School, Bossier City, LA, May 2011-June 2012.

NCTE (NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH) *READING THE WAY* LITERACY INITIATIVE PROGRAM FOUNDER & DIRECTOR Urbana, IL, April 2010-May 2012.

7th GRADE READING & WRITING WORKSHOP TEACHER The Seed Public Charter School, S.E. Washington, D.C., August 2012-June 2013.

MIDDLE SCHOOL PRE-AP & HONORS TEACHER Rusheon Middle School, Bossier City, LA, November 2009-May 2012.

SELECTED RESEARCH PROJECTS IN PROGRESS

CONSIDERING DIGNITY-BASED TEACHING APPROACHES IN URBAN SCHOOLS: A SERIES OF INTRINSIC CASE STUDIES University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI March 2016-Present

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF LEARNING YOUTH WORK: STUDENT CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF DEVELOPMENTAL PRAXIS University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI January 2016-Present

PERSISTING TO COMPLETION: THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN OF COLOR IN ONLINE MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMS University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI, October 2015-Present.

PUBLICATION (S)

REFERREED ARTICLES (S)

Apugo, D.L. (Forthcoming, October 2016). Transformative Leadership in Education: Equitable Change in an Uncertain and Complex World. *Journal of Transformative Learning*.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

Apugo, D.L. (2015). Black woman's burden: A critical analysis of stereotype threat and persistence strategies in predominately white urban universities. Proceeding of AERC African Diaspora Pre-Conference, Manhattan, KS. May 19-22, 2015.

WORKING PAPERS

Apugo, D.L. "Considering Peer Sustainability Networks as Proxy Mentor Relationships".

Apugo, D.L. "No mirrors, no windows: Exploring teacher's use and attitudes towards culturally responsive multicultural literature selection criteria and access".

SUBMITTED MANUSCRIPTS

SNAPSHOTS IN LEARNING: FORMING PEER RELATIONSHIPS AS A MEANS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL PERSISTENCE University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI, August 2015-November 2015. (Under review). *Journal of Negro Education*. Summer 2016. Special Edition "Why We Can't Wait: (Re) Examining the Opportunities and Challenges for Black Women and Girls in Education".

RECENT GRANT ACTIVITIES

Deta Research Center-U.S. Department of Education

"Seeks to advance understanding of the key factors in distance education that impact success, especially for students of color, first-generation college students, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students"—\$ 5,000 requested. November 2015.

PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS

International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (Forthcoming/Spring 2016) - "Considering Radical Empathy and Dignity Work as Frameworks for Reform in Underserved School Communities". To be presented by Danielle Apugo & Monique Liston
Teach for America (Spring 2016)- "Establishing an Ethic of Care in Teaching and Leadership through Radical Empathy"

AAACE Conference Presentation, Oklahoma City, OK (Fall 2015) - “A Critical Lens for Leadership: Managing Attributions in Race/Ethnicity Critical Incident Reports in Learning Organizations”. Presented By Dr. Larry Martin & Danielle Apugo

AERC African Diaspora Pre-Conference, Manhattan, Kansas (Spring 2015) - “Black Woman’s Burden: A Critical Analysis of Stereotype Threat and Persistence Strategies in Predominately White Urban Universities”

LCTE (Louisiana Council for Teachers of English) Shreveport, Louisiana (Fall 2011) “Multicultural Literacy Strategies for Students of Color in Urban Settings”. Workshop Presenter

PBIS (Positive Intervention Behavior System, Bossier City, Louisiana- (2011 & 2012)

Statewide Workshop Presenter & Trainer

NCTE (Indianapolis, Indiana) (2010) Early Career Educator of Color Leadership Award-Proposal Presentation.

HONORS & AWARDS

Chancellor’s Award (2015)

SOE Dean Research Grant (2015-16)

Russell D. Robinson Adult Education Scholarship (2014-15)

Singer School of Education Scholarship (2015-2016)

College Boards’ Pre-AP Summer Institute Participant (2012)

NCTE Early Career Educator of Color Leadership Award (2011)

Jane Few Marx Educational Leadership Scholarship (2006-2009)

Ben D. Johnson Minorities in Education Scholarship (2006-2009)

Bossier Parish Educator Excellence Award (Fall 2010)

CONSULTING

TEACH FOR AMERICA, Milwaukee, WI. Culturally Responsive Work: Building Organizational Capacity to Create Equity

GREATER MILWAUKEE FOUNDATION, Milwaukee Succeeds Initiative, Milwaukee, WI. Transformative Reading Instruction (TRI) for foundational reading skills coaching and progress monitoring.

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English)-2009-Present

LAE (Louisiana Association of Educators)-2009-Present

IRA (International Reading Association) - 2010-Present

NABJ (National Association of Black Journalists)-2008-2010

Phi Delta Kappa-2007-present

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. 2007-Present

LRA (Louisiana Reading Association)-2010-Present

AERA-2012-Present

COMMUNITY SERVICE 2015-16

AAACE (American Adult and Continuing Education) Conference-Connection Central
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Program Recruitment
Milwaukee Succeeds-Parent Engagement Early Reading Acquisition Presenter
Diploma Plus, INC-Advisory Board Member (Partnerships & Awareness Committee)