

USING SISTA CIRCLES TO EXAMINE SENSE OF BELONGING OF BLACK WOMEN IN  
DOCTORAL PROGRAMS AT A HISTORICALLY WHITE INSTITUTION

by

JOAN NICOLE COLLIER

(Under the Direction of Diane Cooper)

ABSTRACT

This study used sista circle methodology to explore sense of belonging of Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution and represents the collective experiences of fifteen participants, researcher and peer reviewer included. Sista circles were the primary source of data. Participants experienced disconnect through unproductive relationships with faculty, indifferent or antagonistic relationships with peers, and the campus' dominant undergraduate culture. Participants experienced sense of belonging through productive relationships with faculty that helped participants navigate politics and policies and that connected faculty to students beyond participants' roles as a student and through community with Black women that affirmed and encouraged them through the doctoral process. The response to sista circles as methodology was characterized as affirming, reflective, and intellectually stimulating and research informative.

Implications for student affairs practice gleaned are intentional graduate student services and programming, specifically related to mental wellness services and community building, and creating space for Black women to fellowship together beyond the White and male gazes as a

means of self-care and community building. Implications for future student affairs research include increased use of sista circle methodology as a reciprocal inquiry method for research done by and for Black women and a community cultural wealth analysis of Black graduate student persistence.

INDEX WORDS: Sista Circle Methodology, Black Feminist Thought, Endarkened Feminist Epistemology, Sense of Belonging, Black doctoral student socialization, Black women

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Debra Collier, who has been an educator in the Clayton County Public School District for over twenty years and whose love, commitment to excellence, and unrelenting belief in my ability, character, and brilliance encouraged/encourages me daily.

This dissertation is dedicated to my sister, Brandy Alexsarah Collier, an educator and human rights advocate, whose brilliance, creativity, sisterhood, and commitment to justice role modeled how disruption, resistance, and rebellion advance justice and righteousness.

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory and legacy of my mentor, friend, soror, and confidant, Dr. Pamela Denise Anthony, a higher education professional and ordained minister of the gospel, whose faith, style, grace, humanity, creativity, tenacity, and work ethic encouraged me through each professional and personal life transition until she took her rest.

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This dissertation is dedicated to Black women before, with, and after me who make their way through this life in community with other Black women.

This dissertation is dedicated to the work of the Lord that requires me to labor, mourn, and rejoice with those who labor, mourn, and rejoice.

Ase. Amen.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“People want to dismiss the truth that I speak... as anecdotal. If I don’t have a scientific database where I can prove that what I’ve experienced is true for so many people, then it’s not true. So, the epistemological sea of forgetfulness is when people take truth that hurts, truth that goes to the core of the being, truth that goes to the marrow of the bone, and people wanna say if you can’t prove it scientifically, factually, then it doesn’t exist. So what I try and encourage people to do is- that kind of truth that stings like a serpent’s tooth, that kind of truth that makes your teeth itch, that kind of truth that make some people lose their minds up in here, up in here- So even when some people call your truth a lie, tell it anyway. Tell it anyway.” (Cannon, 2014)*

Earlier in my doctoral journey, I completed a pilot study on the experiences of Black women with natural hair (i.e., hair that has not been chemically straightened for people within the African Diaspora) and found that, among other things, women in my study looked to other naturals on campus for support, affirmation, and community related to the experiences of being a Black woman with natural hair at their university. I had all intentions to pick up where that study left off and do a community cultural wealth analysis of an intersectional support group (i.e., an organization that centered Black women and their natural hair). This had been my plan, and then I changed my mind.

I am one of more than ten Black women in my doctoral program. I did not take their presence for granted, and in conversation with some of them one day, I reflected on how affirmed I feel walking into our doctoral seminar and being one of many Black women in a building named for a man who fought to keep Black people out the University. I remember telling my sista-scholars that our experiences in constant proximity to other Black women in doctoral study was not the case for many of our sista-scholars across the country who shared that

they were often the only one or one of a couple Black people or Black women via social media (e.g., #BlackDocsMatter, #CiteASista, etc.) and personal conversations.

In the summer between Year Two and Year Three of study, a classmate, friend, and fellow Black woman scholar and I developed a digital counterspace dedicated to discussion about, affirmation of, and centering Black women within and beyond the academy. Our digital counterspace, a monthly twitter chat titled #CiteASista, had been occurring since July 2016 and each chat was heavily supported by our Black women scholar friends on and campus. I affectionately call Black women in education sista-scholars, and the sista-scholars in doctoral programs were showing up month after month to support my colleague and I in our chat and to connect with other Black women.

I chose to take up sense of belonging for Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution because I have a responsibility as a Black woman scholar to amplify the voices and raise up the experiences of Black women as counternarratives of a dominant narrative that often leaves us at the margins or nowhere to be found (Collins, 2000; Stanley, 2007). I chose to bring Black women in doctoral study from margin to center (hooks, 1984).

I am very connected to the work of this study. My own experiences as a Black woman in doctoral study at a historically White institution shaped, in part, my desire to study sense of belonging of similarly situated women. My knowledge and experiences as a higher education professional shaped my desire to take up this course of study. I knew from personal and professional experience the role connectedness plays in students' success at an institution. Through professional experiences in residence life, first-year and transition programs, and service-learning and personal lived experience as a Black women doctoral student at a

historically White institution, I knew that belonging to someone, a place, or a community typically encouraged students to persist toward their academic and personal goals. This study was a professional and personal, and I have no conflict with it residing, simultaneously, in both spaces.

### **Black Graduate Women**

Black women earned approximately two-thirds of all degrees earned by Black students per the U.S. Department of Education (2016). That figure remains the same for doctoral degrees granted. Earned doctoral degrees by Black students increased 47% over the past decade. Black student enrollment has increased over time, with Black student enrollment being concentrated at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU), two-year colleges, and four year, predominantly White institutions (PWI) that are not identified as ivy league (Baum & Payea 2004; Ellwood & Kane 2000; Thomas & Perna 2004).

Research about the experiences of Black women in graduate programs is limited. Studies examining this population center on mentoring (Patton, 2009), participation and retention (Johnson-Baily, 2004), and critical pedagogy (Tuitt, 2010) make up part of the limited literature that exists exclusively about Black graduate women. In a study about graduate students of color at a historically White institution, participants reported experiencing both cultural and physical isolation and hypervisibility (Gay, 2004; Nettles, 1990). Strayhorn's (2012) work had a large representation of minoritized students and focused on graduate students' sense of belonging.

The lack of literature on the experiences of Black women in graduate school, their sense of belonging during doctoral study, and the centering of Black women sharing voicing their own truths is supports a study of this kind. Patton (2004) encouraged more research on the experiences of Black women in graduate and professional study programs, pointing to the lack of



literature available to support their success or amplify their voices within the academy. Patton called for the centering of Black women in research and for Black women scholars to invest in our own communities by writing and researching about the experiences of other Black women within the academy. This study took up Patton's charge by centering Black women's experiences and advancing literature on the experiences of Black women in graduate (i.e., doctoral) study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Doctoral student attrition is about 50%, meaning that half of the students who begin a doctoral journey do not finish (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). The academic socialization process is the primary avenue for fostering a sense of belonging for graduate students. On campuses where graduate learning is an afterthought to undergraduate learning, fit, retention, and progression, socialization within the academic department and program are essential to a student's understanding of their fit within the department and program. At historically White institutions where undergraduate education appears to be the priority, double minoritized students, like Black women in doctoral programs, may experience further marginalization or feel more at the periphery of the institutions and their academic programs.

Much of the research on sense of belonging of students centers on undergraduate students, and studies of Black students and sense of belonging have focused mostly on Black men students (Harper, 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2007, Wood & Palmer, 2015). Studies that have sought to understand graduate students' experiences, which can be related to sense of belonging, are few but growing in number (Blockett, Felder, Parrish & Collier, 2016; Gay, 2004, Tuitt, 2010). Black students seeking to earn a doctorate at historically White institutions have little research about their experiences (Ellis, 2001; Felder, 2010; Felder & Baker, 2013; Felder, Stevenson & Gasman, 2014). Black women earning doctorate degrees represent two-thirds of

Black students enrolled in doctoral programs (US Department of Education, 2010). Although they outpace Black men, as people who occupy the intersection of woman and Black, their experience often become flattened to Black or women (Crenshaw, 1991). Black women doctoral students require research that amplifies the unique experiences related to sense of belonging that do not require them to be Black or woman and that encourage an interrogation and exploration of the fullness of their experience as “Other” (Collins, 1990).

If Black women represent the majority of Black students who enroll in doctoral programs and if they account for a growing portion of women in doctoral programs, graduate recruiters, program administrators, and concerned faculty need access to literature that informs them of experiences that have encouraged and discouraged retention and persistence for this population of learners. That their experiences will be co-constructed through dialogue about lived experiences in a *sista circle* format will provide a reassuring and familiar space for participants to learn about other Black women’s experiences, while also being able to support women who they may identify with to varying degrees and building relationships that might encourage them through their experience.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore sense of belonging for Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution. Despite the history of exclusion of Black people (Pratt, 2002), Black women continue to persist through toward graduation. This study explored how they experienced belonging in their doctoral experience. Using the *sista circle* methodology to explore their lived experiences with other similarly situated Black women might create more authentic space for participants to make meaning of or gain clarity on what their experiences have been regarding belonging within their doctoral experience. The purpose of this study is to

help Black women deconstruct their experiences by identifying oppression around identity- specifically race, gender, and misogynoir- and recognizing ways that they have managed, overcome, and created solutions to challenges faced during the experience related to belonging (Collins, 2000; Collins, 2016). The knowledge claims put forward by this study serve to highlight experiences of Black women in doctoral programs, add to the growing but still limited literature base on Black doctoral student experiences, and enhance support for Black women in doctoral programs through services, programs, and increased community. This work also served as a microphone for participating sista-scholars to have their voices, individually and collectively, centered within an academic setting, which in and of itself, is an act of opposition to systems of patriarchy and White supremacy that work to stifle Black women's voices and marginalize our experiences.

### **Guiding Research Questions**

This study had two guiding research inquiries:

- How do Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution experience sense of belonging?
- How useful was sista circle methodology as both a method of inquiry and as a support group for a study about sense of belonging for Black women at a historically White institution?

The emphasis of the first research inquiry is the way Black women in doctoral programs experience the concept of sense of belonging. I wanted to know what connections helped them belong or made them feel valued as Black women in doctoral programs. The second research inquiry was originally intended to provide feedback on the methodology, as it was a relatively new concept within research in higher education. After coding responses to the question, I knew

that that more emphasis needed to be added on how sista circle methodology functioned in a study about Black women and conducted by a Black woman.

### **Conceptual Framework**

As conceptual frameworks, Black Feminist Thought and sense of belonging serve to craft the overarching research questions and will help in analyzing data, which will be discussed in Chapter 3. This study requires an intersectional framework in order to explain and more fully understand the experiences of Black women as both Black and woman within the institutional context of doctoral study at historically White university. The sense of belonging operationalized by Strayhorn (2012) recognizes that Black women at a historically White institution might have a heightened drive to belong given their minoritized status as women of color. Further, as complementary frameworks, Black feminist thought and sense of belonging recognize the importance of daily lived experiences and the impact they have on what a person knows and how they make meaning through those interactions and experiences.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is a critical social theory for analyzing and meaning-making experiences of Black women within the United States context (Collins, 2000). BFT centers Black women's experiences within a larger framework of intersectionality. Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) is credited for coining the term intersectionality; however, the idea itself is not novice. In her work with the idea, Crenshaw argued that unique knowledge is situated at the intersection of identities (e.g., race and gender, sexuality and religion, etc.) and single identity analysis make vulnerable populations at the intersection of minoritized identities (i.e., Black women). Through an intersectional framework, an examination of experiences of Black people and an examination of women would still overlook the specific experiences of Black women.

Intersectional approaches to issues requires an examiner to interrogate intersections between identities to provide the most accurate support for all parties (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality provides a conceptual umbrella under which Black feminist thought, a theory that specifically centers Black women and their multiple, intersecting identities is situated.

BFT has five distinguishing features: 1) Gender, class, race, sexuality, and nation form a matrix of domination within the US context that frames oppressions and challenges experienced by Black American women 2) Womanhood for Black American women is shaped by oppression and resistance 3) Within the collective identity of Black American womanhood, individuals' experiences vary along divisions and differences based on social locations of region, age, religion, sexual identity, and social class 4) Group knowledge, shared memory, a shared daily experience of being a Black woman in the US, and a consciousness derived collective memory exists (Collins, 2000). The Black woman standpoint describes the day-to-day experiences of Black women in the US context. Knowledge describes the theories and truth claims put forth about Black US women's experiences based on and about the Black woman standpoint and 5) The idea that Black feminist thought is a critical social theory made possible by the interplay between Black feminist thought and Black feminist praxis.

While the intersection of race and gender are centered in this study, other identities intersect with these two to create varied social locations for participants. I am a cisgender Black woman who identifies as Christian, heterosexual, fat-bodied, and mixed social class background whose social location differs from another Black woman who occupies a different social class, spiritual or religious status, or sexual identity. This is not to say that she and I both do not experience similar oppressions (e.g., White supremacy, anti-Blackness, and sexism), but our identities as sexual persons, connectedness to spiritual or religious ideology, and class

socialization inform how we experience oppression and how we resist. Recognizing the influence and realities of intersectional experiences provides a more nuanced understanding of Black women's experiences.

In addition to their identities as Black women, *sista*-scholars' spoke from their social identities as first-generation college students, of ethnic heritage, of job status (e.g., full-time, professional, etc.), and of relationship status explicitly during discussion in *sista* circle. The additional context of identity made for a more informed and nuanced conversation between *sista*-scholars. Figure 1 in Chapter 4 provides an overview of participants' self-identification.

As a conceptual framework, BFT recognizes intersectional experiences of Black women related to race, gender, sexual identity, national origin, class, and other identities as they relate to experiences of resistance and oppression within the matrix of domination (Collins, 2000). I shared an overview of BFT within conceptual framework as a prelude to the introduction of Black feminist epistemology that undergirds *sista* circle methodology in Chapter 3. While this study examined sense of belonging at the intersection of race and gender for Black woman identified people in doctoral programs, I respected and recognized the multiple identities *sista*-scholars embodied or embrace in their daily lived experience within and beyond the *sista* circle.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Schlossberg (1985) introduced mattering and marginality to higher education literature as a means of encouraging administrators and faculty to consider the ways students experience the college environment that makes them feel like they matter to people there or feel marginalized, out of place, and unwanted within the campus community. The concept was not novel when introduced (Maslow, 1962); however, framing mattering and marginality as a theoretical concept within higher education and student affairs practice put emphasis on fostering

campuses that encouraged increasing a sense of mattering and minimizing a sense of marginalization for students within the academic context.

Sense of belonging is comprised of seven core elements identified by Strayhorn (2012) based on an extensive review of the literature. Those seven elements are sense of belonging as a basic human need, a driving motivation of human behavior, a heightened importance for people at the margins, within certain contexts, and at various development levels, an approximation and consequence of mattering, being affected by intersecting identities, giving rise to positive outcomes, and needing to be satisfied and evolving on a continuous bases. As a framework for this study, sense of belonging recognizes and organizes the ways approximation to mattering can be conceptualized (e.g., within institution, within program, within context of peer group, etc.).

For students who are marginalized or minoritized within a context (e.g., students of color a predominantly White institution, LGBT individuals), experiencing a sense of belonging within the college environment is of heightened concern (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Within that context, Strayhorn (2012) operationalized sense of belonging as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (p. 17). Also, environmental or institutional culture help shape students’ sense of belonging. This study focused on Black women in doctoral programs’ sense of belonging as connectedness within the context of a historically and predominantly White institution in the American southeast.

### **Significance of the Study**

Sense of belonging has been shown to have correlations to academic achievement and positive outcomes (Strayhorn, 2012). For students from minoritized backgrounds, like Black

women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution, in potentially new, unfamiliar spaces, achieving a sense of belonging may be heightened and impacts student success and motivation to learn. For graduate students who exist at the periphery or margins of campus culture due to undergraduate focused and designed campuses, sense of belonging occurs mostly through departmental socialization (Strayhorn, 2012). Most of what we know about sense of belonging within higher education focuses on undergraduate students.

This study provides faculty and student affairs practitioners with knowledge about how Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution experienced sense of belonging and implications for student affairs practices and future research related to the findings from this study. The knowledge produced through this study can be used to inform graduate faculty and university administration in transforming potentially hostile environments into welcoming ones that foster sense of belonging for Black doctoral women and encourage faculty and administration to consider the ways that Black doctoral women from this study persisted in spite of challenges, structural and individual, faced during doctoral study.

### **Summary**

Students who experience sense of belonging tend to have more academic success than students who do not experience sense of belonging (Astin, 1984; Strayhorn, 2012) and because minoritized students' need for sense of belonging is heightened in contexts where they are marginalized, this study focused on sense of belonging of Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution with a primarily undergraduate population. Little research has addressed sense of belonging for graduate students, Black women, or Black women in doctoral programs. Sense of belonging, as conceptually defined by Strayhorn (2011), served as the conceptual framework for this study. I introduced Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) in this



chapter to help frame Black feminist epistemology that undergirds sista circle methodology, which will be introduced in Chapter 3.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This chapter provides a review of the literature related to the experiences of Black students at historically White institutions, graduate student socialization, and Black women's experiences in higher education. An overview of sense of belonging is provided here, along with an introduction to Black feminist thought, which serves as the epistemology for sista circle methodology used in this study.

#### **Higher Education**

Higher education in the United States began in the 1600's. Institutions were private, small, contained environments that prepared White male learners for seminary and public life (Anderson, 2002; Caple, 1998). Because of beliefs of inferiority of African descendent people, Black people were absent from much of higher education for the first hundred years. (Anderson, 2002; Lewis, 2004). Beliefs that Black people were inferior to White-identified persons undergirded laws and policies that kept higher education restricted through the middle of the twentieth century (Anderson, 2002). African descendent people within higher education prior to racial desegregation mostly attended institutions that are now categorized as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) (Anderson, 2002). Historically White institutions, those institutions that maintained a history of racial exclusion, particularly those in the American South fought vigorously to maintain racial segregation (Anderson, 2002; Pratt, 2002). HBCUs continue to educate Black identified students in the United States. Unlike their historically White

counterparts, HBCUs do not have a history of racial discrimination by race, choosing instead to welcome learners of all races.

Presently, institutions of higher education have been racially integrated, and except for single gender institutions (e.g., Spelman College, Bennett College), men and women learn together. Despite evidence that diversity has educational benefits (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), campus histories with exclusion continue to experience the latent effects of discriminatory practices and histories (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998). Black students at historically and predominantly White institutions report feeling the need to demonstrate their intellectual competence in ways that White students did not have to, experiencing stress related to race, and bearing insensitivity from faculty and administrators (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Keller, 1989). Racial stress and hostile campus climates can jeopardize Black students' academic success and sense of belonging at historically campuses (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Smedley, Myers, & Harrel, 1993).

### **Black Women in Higher Education**

Black women make up approximately two-thirds of Black students in higher education from undergraduate to doctoral study (US Department of Education, 2016). Undergraduate Black women's experiences on campus are dynamic, filled with triumph and struggle (Hannon, Woodside, Pollard & Roman, 2016; Porter, 2013; West, Donovan & Daniel, 2016). Hannon et al.'s (2016) phenomenological study of undergraduate Black women's experiences at a predominantly institution were reduced to simultaneously living in a Black world and White world, coping with exclusion, and managing the expectations they believed others had of them.

Research specifically on Black graduate students is limited, even more so for research specifically on Black graduate women. Tuitt (2010) explored pedagogical elements that Black

graduate women believed made curriculum more inclusive. Those elements included dialogical faculty-student relationships in and out of the classroom, diversified course content, faculty attentiveness to diverse backgrounds.

Johnson-Bailey (2004) explored participation and retention of Black women graduate students. Participants reported their participation and recruitment being influenced by mentoring and support from professional staff and faculty, networking with Black students, funding, and feeling respected by faculty. Patton (2009) explored Black graduate women's experiences with mentoring. Participants reported challenges related to finding culturally competent faculty mentorship, seeking career and personal support from staff and community members in lieu of or in addition to faculty mentorship, and seeking support from other Black women on campus. Additionally, the study implied that White faculty should seek training on supporting Black graduate students, male professors should learn to engage women students, and that Black faculty were stretched too thin and not available in high quantities to mentor Black graduate students who wanted Black faculty mentors.

Black women persevere through all levels of education, including doctoral studies, at inspiring rates. Unfortunately, little is known about their experiences within the process, particularly from a values-added perspective. This study will add to the small body of literature that exists on Black women's sense of belonging as graduate students at a historically White institution.

### **Relevant Theory**

Student affairs professionals use theories and conceptual frameworks to support student needs (e.g., belonging, hierarchy of needs, etc.) and to analyze environments to foster inclusion for students who experience marginalization. This section introduces theoretical and conceptual

frameworks that highlight social need considerations social needs related to Black women's sense of belonging in doctoral programs at a historically White institution.

### **Mattering and Marginality**

Tangential to transition is the concept of mattering and marginality (Schlossberg, 1985). Existing on a spectrum based on the degree to which a person feels included, mattering and marginality bound the upper and lower end, with mattering being operationalized as feeling more included than excluded and marginality being operationalized as feeling more excluded than included. For students in transition, such as doctoral students, feelings of inclusion and exclusion may accompany the transition through graduate school. Their situation, self, scope, and strategies in managing the transitions through graduate study can impact doctoral students' sense of mattering and marginality. The degree to which students have the attention of other people, feel that others care about the importance of their actions and thoughts, feel that others will be affected by their successes and failures, and feel that they have others to depend on affects their senses of mattering and marginality.

Mattering and marginality (Schlossberg, 1985) provide theory that will help parcel out aspects of inclusion and exclusion, as well as person specific qualities (e.g., situation, self, scope, and strategies) that Black women in doctoral programs experience and employ during this transitional period of being a doctoral student. Further, there is no research that explores the application of these theories specifically with Black women in doctoral programs.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Sense of belonging relates to the "level of integration in a particular context (e.g., school, college)" (Strayhorn, 2012, p.8). Various definitions of sense of belonging exist within literature (Osterman, 2000; Anant, 1966; Tovar & Simon, 2010; Goodenow, 1993a). Sense of belonging is

many things, two of which are a precursor to being a part of a community (Strayhorn, 2012) and an essential factor for psychological wellbeing (Hagerty, Lynch-Bauer, Putasky, Bouswsema, & Collier, 1992). When people experience a satisfied sense of belonging, positive emotions (e.g., joy, happiness) are expressed.

Within higher education, most research is focused on undergraduate sense of belonging. Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods (2007) argued that within an educational setting, sense of belonging has a positive influence on academic achievement (e.g., retention and persistence). Maestas, Vaquera & Zehr (2007) posited that sense of belonging was critical in maintaining all students, but especially students of color. Positive interactions with community members encourage students to build relationships with peers and community members, which provides the student with a sense of belonging. A healthy sense of belonging, Strayhorn (2012) argued “will enhance students’ commitments, connections, and consequently, retention” (p.9).

Conversely, a poor sense of belonging manifests as disengagement, poor performance on graded material, and difficulty maintaining academic commitments in environments where people do not feel valued (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Goodenow, 1993b; Weiss, 1973). In closing, Strayhorn (2012) argued that faculty and staff needed to understand the impact of sense of belonging because students who experience it appear to succeed and those who do not appear to have more challenges in being successful in college.

### **Graduate Education**

Graduate education (e.g., masters, professional, doctoral) accounted for approximately 11% of enrolled students in the United States and reflected a 75% masters, 24% doctoral split (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Little research exists on students’ motivations for attending graduate school; however, the research that is presents suggests that students enter

graduate programs to gain field specific knowledge and skills, conduct research to advance knowledge within their field (Poock, 1999; Burgess, 1997; LaPidus, 1997). Ellis's (2001) work supports the notion that graduate students have a more unique criteria for selecting their academic programs than undergraduate students. Graduate students noted their interest in a program's faculty, financial assistance offered, institutional ranking, and reputation of particular programs. With 50% of graduate students separating from programs prior to degree completion (Nerad & Cerny, 1993; Nettles & Millet, 2006), students' academic success and retention and persistence toward graduation must become the focus once students enroll in graduate study.

### **Graduate student socialization.**

Socialization is defined as a process for understanding and knowing the member values, norms, and expectations of a given field of study (Boyle & Boice, 1999; Brimm, 1966). Weidman, Twale, & Stein (2001) conceptualize three core elements of socialization as knowledge acquisition, investment, and involvement. Acquiring information that translates to knowledge that informs a learner and increases their familiarity with and understanding of their academic discipline and professional field constitutes knowledge acquisition (Stein, 1992; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Positive feedback from faculty, peers, and colleagues related to acquired knowledge increases graduate student confidence related to their field or profession. Investment requires the giving of or taking on things (e.g., time, relationships with faculty and peers, courses for specialized knowledge, finances, etc.) toward the building of an identity within a field or practice (Stein, 1992; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Finally, involvement is associated with how engaged and active graduate students are within their academic departments and professional fields (e.g., professional organizations, depth of relationship with peers and faculty, etc.) (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Core elements work collaboratively to build the

others. For example, a graduate student who signed up for an advanced qualitative methods course (knowledge acquisition and investment) in order to apply to be a part of a qualitative research study within their department (involvement) is an example of the core elements working collaboratively and not in isolation.

Felder, Stevenson, and Gasman (2014) investigated how race influenced the graduate student socialization of eleven Black doctoral degree holders related to faculty advising and support, perceptions of faculty behavior, and perceptions of faculty support. Participants in the study valued a racially diverse faculty, learning about the expectations of being future faculty of color, faculty who were racially aware, and faculty who supported difference-critical research within their field of study (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014). Researchers found that participants Researchers provided strategies for understanding race in doctoral student socialization through three paths under three headings: perceptions of faculty diversity, perceptions of faculty behavior, and faculty advising and support (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014). Researchers concluded that additional research about the role of race in the doctoral socialization experience was needed to better understand how race impacts doctoral student socialization.

A successful socialization often results in students embracing the norms of their field of study, connecting with peers and colleagues within the field, and seeing themselves as part of the field or community. The previous positive outcomes encourage a sense of belonging for students in graduate education. Because sense of belonging is contextual, it is important to remember that students may have a varied sense of belonging between classes within a department or between formal and informal peer groups within a department.



Strayhorn completed multiple studies from 2008 to 2011 using interviews and questionnaires to interrogate sense of belonging among graduate students. Qualitative responses served to provide more context for the quantitative data and to gather more information related to the underpinnings of socialization as a process. Racial and ethnic minority students, masters level students, and recent master level graduates comprised the majority of the respondent pool. Successful socialization for graduate students engenders a sense of belonging and academic success. Students who are able to develop their competency, build supportive relationships, and confirm their own professional identity were able to move from the periphery of their graduate community toward the center, establishing a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). One student in Strayhorn's study discussed formal and informal opportunities to work with faculty and peers as ways to have community members value their competency, which allowed peers and faculty to accept the student as a valued community member. Students who experience belonging in the study had higher GPAs. Students disclosed that as they became more immersed in their program through formal and informal means (e.g., advisement, research, social gatherings, etc.), they felt a sense of belonging within their respective areas. Students who felt a higher sense of belonging tended to earn higher grades. A statistical analysis for survey responses might suggest that sense of belonging matters more for doctoral students than master level students (Strayhorn, 2012).

Students who had a sense of belonging felt safe and comfortable with peers and faculty, which motivated them to learn and provided a sense of support in times of need. Strayhorn encouraged program faculty to be clear about expectations, norms, and values so that perspective students can decide for themselves which programs might be a better fit for them and to provide

students with formal and informal opportunities to build meaningful relationships with peers and staff and demonstrate competence.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

Black Feminist Thought debuted in 1990 as a critical social theory about the way Black women in the United States make meaning through dialogical learning, particularly with other Black women, and everyday lived experiences (1990, 2000). Collins (1990, 2000) framed Black feminist thought as an oppositional framework that equipped Black women to deconstruct and analyze systems of oppression and reconstruct strategies for addressing the matrix of oppression. Black feminist thoughts as a conceptual framework was laid out in Chapter One. The following sections will define and outline Black feminist epistemology.

#### **Epistemology**

This study will position knowing as a process that occurs through lived experience and dialogical learning through conversation with others, specifically in this case with Black women. White men who have been the dominant group in this society shaped much of what we consider legitimate knowledge in the United States. Collins (2009) posted that Black women turned to alternative ways of knowing that they had control over to make meaning of the world around them.

Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) will serve as the epistemological and theoretical framework for the study. I will be a part of the sharing that will occur in this study. This position counters the researcher as outsider or researcher as detached from the researched thoughts that have shaped much of my early development as a researcher. To remain distant or separate from this work as a Black woman working with other Black women would be culturally dishonest because “the challenge to our academic lives and work is to move beyond simply receiving (that

is, getting something from others in the research encounter): it is also about what we can give” (Dillard, 2006, p.86).

### **Epistemological components.**

Collins (2000) believed that Black Feminist Thought, as an epistemology, “determines which questions merit investigation, which interpretive frameworks will be used to analyze findings, and to what use any ensuing knowledge will be put” (p. 252). This study will center the lived experience of and dialogue between Black women as a way of knowing. This epistemological stance undergirds Black feminist thought as a conceptual framework and compliments the sista circle methodology used in this study. This section outlines the components of Black feminist epistemology.

### **Lived experience.**

Collins (2000) asserted that lived experience is a legitimate way of knowing for people from subjugated identities. Within the academy, knowledge is mostly legitimized through systematic review or study; however, Collins (2009) determined that for people who lack access or legitimization within the academy- in this case Black women- “... those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences.” (p. 257). This is not to say that legitimized knowledge is not a way of knowing; however, it is to say that it is not the only way to know. For Black women, a group that is marginalized by both race and gender and whose experience is erased from or misrepresented by the dominant narrative, lived experience is a way of knowing.

**Dialogue.**

Talking in community, and particularly with other Black women, is a way to form and affirm truth claims with BFT (Collins, 2000). As African descendant people, Black women are a part of a long tradition of oral storytelling that pre-dates enslavement in the United States. Living subordinate to men due to patriarchy and sexism, women affirm each other and come to understand who they are as Black women through non-adversarial conversation (Collins, 2000). In alternative spaces that Black women make for themselves, they are able to share narratives that counter dominant narratives that invalidate their own lived experience and define for themselves who and what they are or want to be. These conversations help Black women create counter narratives that they can embody and put forth to the dominant narrative (Collins, 2000). Because of this, dialogue is an element of BFT as an epistemology.

**Ethics of caring.**

Ethics of caring is composed of three parts: value of individual expression, appropriateness of emotions, and capacity for empathy (Collins, 2000). Taken together or individually, these components provide for rich, interpersonal community and connectedness. Value of individual expressions relates to the way individuality is highly regarded within African descendent communities. Often talked about as a monolith, the value of individual expression honors the unique contribution each person shares with others on this earth. Appropriateness of emotions honors the interplay between cognition and affect and rejects the notion emotion and passion discount intellect. To the contrary, within this context, emotion and feeling are understood as a gauge for belief in one's words or expressions (Collins, 2000). Capacity for empathy relates to the ability to feel empathy for another person. In varying combinations, these components are intertwined throughout African descendent communication and communities.

Black women engage in ethic of caring in everyday conversations with community members and are supported in this ethic of caring by institutions rooted in African American culture (Collins, 2000).

### **Ethic of personal accountability.**

Personal accountability requires that individuals develop knowledge claims through dialogue, present knowledge in ways that reflect the sincerity of their knowledge, and be responsible for the knowledge claims they put forward (Collins, 2000). Through an ethic of personal accountability, Black feminist epistemology calls into question the character, values, and ethics of the person putting forward a knowledge claim. Collins (2000) recounted Black women students' interrogation of a Black male author's character and values regarding an analysis (e.g., knowledge claim) he put forward regarding Black feminism.

Black feminist epistemology provides for counter cultural ways of knowing (e.g., care, dialogue, lived experience) and a rebuke to the notion that intellect is of higher value than emotion with regard to knowledge claims. Together, the components defined and described in the above section provide a context for Black feminist thought as a concept and the underlying assumptions of knowledge claims for sista circle methodology for this study.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of literature pertaining to the role of student developmental theory in supporting students, the epistemology underpinning the conceptual framework of Black feminist thought, the conceptualization of sense of belonging used for this study, and the context of Black women's experiences within higher education. Collectively, this information informs the study of sense of belonging of Black women in doctoral programs at historically White institutions.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter on the methodology for this study outlines the researcher's epistemological stance and details the study's design, including participant selection and recruitment and data collection and analysis. Participant information will be provided in this chapter, but information that might weaken confidentiality has been changed or omitted by design. The chapter closes with an overview of how the researcher ensured the study's authenticity and a summary.

#### **Researcher Epistemological Positionality**

*“Envisioning research as responsibility might just be one of the shifts we need.”* Cynthia Dillard

Concrete ideas and intuition ground my ways of knowing. I know things that have been confirmed by traditional research means, and I know things that come from a daily lived experience (Collins, 1990). Dillard (2006) articulated an endarkened feminist epistemology that utilizes feminist and African diasporic ways of knowing. “Simply put, perspectives have merit and standing simply because they exist, and our role as educational researchers becomes one of recognizing and embracing them as such” (p. 21). The following five assumptions outlines by Dillard undergird an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology.

*Assumption 1: Self-definition forms one's participation and responsibility to one's community.*

The first assumption in EFE requires the researcher, regardless of positionality, to be responsible for the people and culture of Black women in inquiry and teaching (Dillard, 2006). As a Black woman who researched sense of belonging with circles of similarly situated Black women, I was acutely aware of and responsible for the ways in which I engaged sista-scholars,

cared for them, and represented the knowledge they shared. In asking Black women to join with me in discussing how they connect to campus, faculty, peers, and other Black women, as well as how they care for themselves, I had a responsibility to believe what they offered in response because their offerings were rooted in lived experience, a legitimate form of knowledge (Collins, 1990).

*Assumption 2: Research is both an intellectual and a spiritual pursuit, a pursuit of purpose.*

Educational research of and by Black women is more than an intellectual endeavor. Transformative work requires contextualized understanding of and connection to the people being studied (Dillard, 2006). In the absence of context, the inquiry fails to honor the fullness of knowledge offered by participants and lack transformative power to encourage shift. Dillard (2006) noted, “*An endarkened feminist epist/emology draws on a spiritual tradition, where the concern is not solely with the production of knowledge (an intellectual pursuit) but also with uncovering and constructing truths as the fabric of everyday life (a spiritual pursuit)*” (p. 20). As a purely intellectual process, this dissertation would have been culturally dishonest and a dishonored the spirituality and contexts that produced the knowledge of this work.

*Assumption 3: Only within the context of community does the individual appear (Palmer, 1983) and, through dialogue, continue to become*

Within community, dialogue allows for participants to make connections to other participants, encourages reciprocal instead of transactional exchanges, and draws close the vulnerability required to speak closely held truths. As such, dialogue is an invaluable and necessary aspect of educational research and examining truths (Dillard, 2006). Participant’s contributions through verbal exchanges are “embodied in the wisdom and knowledge of Black women’s lives” (Dillard, p. 20).

*Assumption 4: Concrete experience within everyday life form the criterion of meaning, the “matrix of meaning making” (Ephraim-Donker, 1997, p. 8)*

Lived, everyday experiences are how African American people make meaning of the world around them (Collins, 1990). Assumption 4 is rooted in Collins (1990) assertion that Black women must have both wisdom and knowledge for survival, noting that the difference between the two as lived experience. Collins (1990) went on to remark that Black women do not have the luxury of not knowing, that being Other requires us to understanding the difference between and the appropriateness of knowledge and wisdom “*is essential to the survival of the subordinate. (p. 208).*” Experiences are opportunities to interrogate and form notions of what we know as Black people and as Black women. Thus, when Black offered their lived experiences within sista circles, women dialogue ensued related to similar or contrary personal experiences to know more accurately knowledge and wisdom.

*Assumption 5: Knowing and research are both historical (extending backwards in time) and outward to the world: To approach them otherwise is to diminish their cultural and empirical meaningfulness.*

Through an endarkened feminist epistemology, I could recognize and believe the social location of participants’ experiences and voices. Historically, Black women’s voices have been marginalized, erased, or distorted within theory and research. In understanding that absence, I moved forward with the awareness that the knowledge that emerged from this inquiry might be new to consumers who engage in value-neutral research, or research that lacks context.

Endarkened Feminist Epistemology is a way of knowing that recognizes the ways in which Black women make meaning through lived experience and know themselves more accurately through dialogue and in-community conversation. Further, endarkened feminist



epistemology honors the contexts that shape Black women's existence and places responsibility of care for participants with the researcher during inquiry. With these understandings as my epistemological guide, I undertook the sacred work of examining the sense of belonging of Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution.

### **Research Design**

This study centered and examined the experiences of Black women in doctoral programs related to sense of belonging at a historically White institution. Sista circle methodology was created by and for Black women as a means for Black women researchers minimize the historical distance between the researcher and the researched (Dillard, 2006; Johnson, 2015). This section outlines the nature of sista circles, prior use of sista circles, and sista circle as methodology.

### **Sista Circle Methodology**

As a methodology, sista circles are group discussions and conversations between Black women that a researcher centers to explore and interrogate experiences and topics (Johnson, 2015). In her dissertation, Johnson defined the goal of sista circle methodology as that of "gain[ing] an understanding of a specific issue, topic, or phenomena impacting Black women from the perspective of Black women themselves" (2015, p.45). As a method, sista circles are designed to provide a reciprocal relationship between members of the sista circle and the researcher, as the researcher is a participant-observer. Johnson (2015) conceptualized Sista Circle methodology as "mentoring as research methodology" (p. 43). Methodically, Sista Circle methodology seeks to further develop what Neal-Barnett, Stadulis, Payne, Crosby, Williams, and Williams-Costa (2011) called "culturally relevant, gender specific" research methodologies for understanding the experiences of Black women (p. 2). Sista circles have been used by health

scientists and psychologists to study Black women about making positive health changes, risk reduction related to physical inactivity, stress, and managing anxiety and stress (Gatson, Porter, & Thomas, 2007; Neal-Barnett et. al., 2011).

### **Nature of Sista Circles**

Neal-Barnett, Stadulis, Payne, Crosby, Mitchell, Williams, and Williams-Costa (2011) defined sista circles as “support groups that draw upon the strength and courage found in African American women's friendship networks” (p. 214). Sista circles have a history within the Black church and Black women’s club movement (Neal-Barnett, et. al., 2010). Black women have noted that “communicating with African-American women in small groups provides a unique support; one that is unwavering sources of strength for them” (Dorsey, 2001, p.71). Sista circle methodology provides a space of Black women, by Black women, for Black women where participants and researcher can support one another during the research process.

As a Black woman, I have been a part of and am still a part of several sista circles situated within my spiritual practices, academic journey, experiences of Black womanhood, and professional praxis. This qualitative research method honors the tradition of the unique support Black women create for themselves through conversation in shared spaces with each other (Dorsey, 2001).

Collins (2016) argued that for Black feminist thought to remain practical in making sense of and creating oppositional knowledge, within the academic realm, it should be used with methodologies that challenge restrictive boundaries of what gets legitimized as knowledge and who gets to legitimize knowledge. By legitimizing the lived experience of Black women, privileging dialogue as a way of learning, employing an ethic of care, and naming personal accountability, sista circle methodology manifests a Black feminist epistemology. Through

sharing, listening, and reflecting on personal experiences and the personal experiences of other sista-scholars, sista circles honor dialogical learning that is central to Black women's ways of knowing (Collins, 1990; Dillard, 2006). The following section outlines the defining features of sista circle methodology.

### **Distinguishing Features of Sista Circle**

Sista circles share some overlapping functions of group interviews or focus groups, but this section will parcel out three features that distinguish sista circles as a methodology:

Communication dynamics, centrality of empowerment, and researcher as participant (Johnson, 2015).

#### **Communication dynamics.**

The first tenet of sista circle methodology, communication dynamics, describes the in-group language used between members of the same affinity group (Johnson, 2015). In spaces and groups comprised of Black women, language takes on fluidity, moving back, forth, and between Mainstream English Vernacular (MEV) and Black English Vernacular (BEV) (Dorsey, 2011). Campbell (1986) suggested that Black women's conversations required its own analysis. During a prior study, I found this to be the case. After having six interviews transcribed by a person who was not a Black woman, phrases and words were missing from the transcription. The missing phrases and words were mostly related to vernacular around Black women's experiences with their natural hair or BEV.

Because sista circle as methodology simulates informal sista circles, the methodology encourages communication dynamics that are present during informal sista circles, including use of non-verbal communication and use of BEV. Lastly, Johnson (2015) noted that space matters. In her study, she, the researcher as participant, hosted participants to her home for dinner, in part,

because shared meals on Sundays have a familiar element for her participants.

**Centrality of empowerment.**

The second tenet of sista circle methodology, centrality of empowerment, means that sista circles are designed as a space where Black women support and encourage one another (Johnson, 2015). Johnson cited Collins (2009) proclamation that Black feminist thought had to “redefine and power and empowerment” to reach its full potential (p.292). Power for Black women, Johnson (2015) insisted, was their experiences and wealth of knowledge. As such, when Black women participate in sista circles, they should be empowered by sharing their wisdom with each other.

**Researcher as participant.**

The third tenet of sista of sista circle methodology is researcher as participant. This tenet sets sista circles apart from focus groups because in sista circles, researchers are engaged in the conversation with participants, not distant from the participants as with focus groups (Hennink, 2014; Puchta & Potter, 2004). Because sista circle methodology values reciprocity, the researcher as participant and participants can share their experiences and knowledge as part of the dialogue, which allows for the researcher to give back to participants and not just take from them.

I will be a part of the sharing that will occur in this study. This position counters the researcher as outsider or researcher as detached from the researched thoughts that have shaped much of my early development as a researcher. To remain distant or separate from this work as a Black woman working with other Black women would be culturally dishonest because “the challenge to our academic lives and work is to move beyond simply receiving (that is, getting

something from others in the research encounter): it is also about what we can give” (Dillard, 2006, p.86).

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

The call for participants was sent via email to Black women in doctoral programs within my personal network. In the email, I asked that recipients consider forwarding the call for participants to Black women in doctoral programs at the selected site. The call for participants was also disseminated through the weekly listserv of the graduate student organization for racially minoritized students at the university. Inclusion criteria required a person to a) identify as woman b) identify as Black or African descendent c) be enrolled in a doctoral program at the study site (professional terminal degree seekers [e.g. juris doctorate, etc.] were not eligible for the study) and d) have been socialized in the United States for at least half of their life.

Recruitment materials instructed interested parties to contact me via my university email to learn more about the study or to continue to the Qualtrics-based consent form and demographic survey. Participants accessed detailed information regarding the study’s purpose, inclusion criteria, and consent via Qualtrics. After acknowledging that they understood their rights related to the study and consented to being a part of the study, participants completed a demographic survey, selected a pseudonym, and identified their availability regarding ability to meet for the sista circle. One person was interested in being a part of the study but did not meet the requirements for being a part of the study. Two women met the criteria for being a part of the study but were unable to be a part of the study due to timing.

### **Participant Information**

Participants, also referred to as sista-scholars, represented various disciplines, ranged in age from 25-36 at the time of their sista circle, and were between their first of fifth year of

doctoral study. Because of their identities as Black women in doctoral programs at Early University, I chose to make broad categories for their academic disciplines to better maintain confidentiality. All but one participant had full-time student status. One participant identified as Haitian American. As noted elsewhere in the study, most participants had prior relationships with women in their circle or were within a few degrees of separation of women in their circle. There was no interaction between participants across circles related to this study. Figure 1 is included in Chapter 4 and provides participants' academic focus, racial/ethnic self-identification, and self-identification. Participant pseudonyms are listed alphabetically. Age and year in program categories were removed to maintain confidentiality.

### **Data Collection**

Sista circles were the primary form of data collection. There were a total of four sista circles over a two-week period. Circle lasted from 90-110 minutes each. Including myself and the participant-observer peer review, sista circles had five, six, five, and seven participants, respectively. Sista circles were recorded for transcription. I used a third-party vendor for transcription services.

Sista circles occurred in the home of a participant for each circle. A home was used to create a more comfortable environment than a classroom or meeting space on the campus. As with the original sista circle study, I served food to simulate common occurrences of breaking bread and talking with a friend group. I reminded participants of that the purpose of the study was to explore how Black women in doctoral programs experienced sense of belonging on the campus. I then asked participants to introduce themselves to the rest of the circle, regardless of if participants knew each other. I began recording after introductions, except for Circle 3, in which I began recording a discussion that the circle had about my role as a researcher-participants and

thoughts on how I might engage in the circle. I recorded that discussion because I wanted to capture any potential feedback participants had about sista circle as methodology.

Each sista circle began with a discussion prompt using a quote by Audre Lorde (1988) from a collection of essays, *A Burst of Light*: “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” I read the quote aloud, citing Collins’ (2000) determination that Black women experience both oppression and resistance, and asked participants to respond with their thoughts about the quote and what the quote meant or might mean to them. I chose this quote for discussion so that participants could reflect on their own experiences in preparation for discussions about their time as a doctoral student at Early University.

After the centering discussion, I reminded participants that this was a discussion based experience in which any participant can ask questions or speak on a topic. I asked participants to reflect on their experiences at Early University as Black women in doctoral programs and to consider the experiences they had had with faculty, peers, other Black women, and other entities that shaped how they connected to the university. Across circles, participants shared our experiences as doctoral students through storytelling.

Sista circles closed with a 15-20-minute discussion about reactions to sista circle methodology and reflective thinking in community with other Black women in doctoral programs. These discussions were more robust than I imagined, with participants sharing how the experience provided unanticipated benefits to participants.

### **Data Analysis**

This section outlines the mechanisms used to organize and analyze data. Topics include introduction of the peer observer, coding, and data authenticity. Present in analysis was the

critical, endarkened epistemology of Black feminist thought which that the analysis process recognize the everyday experiences of Black women and valued the knowledge claims that were rooted in those experiences and constructed through dialogue with other Black women. The Black feminist epistemology that undergirded sista circle methodology, the endarkened feminist epistemology that was my theoretical perspective, and sense of belonging as a conceptual framework were used to organize and analyze the data collected from sista circle transcriptions.

### **Peer Observer**

Because sista circle methodology was a new concept to my committee and me, and because the researcher as participant element of sista circle methodology meant that I needed to be as present as possible during each sista circle, I chose to include a peer observer for data collection. The peer observer for the study was a Black woman doctoral candidate who was also using sista circle methodology in her dissertation study and who, under the advisement of her dissertation committee, included a peer observer. The role of the peer observer was to be present during each sista circle and process each circle with the researcher after each circle. This looked like the peer reviewer taking mental or written notes during sista circles and then providing a prompt for me to write about after the circles or acting as a sounding board for me to process my thoughts with after each circle. Because of the conversational nature of sista circles, her presence allowed her participation in each circle, making her a participant-observer.

I used researcher journaling to process my own thoughts related to sista circle discussions and prompts from my Peer Observer. Journaling was formal (e.g., prompts) and informal (e.g., ideas that revealed themselves to me throughout the course of the study). I used voice notes as a form of journaling in this study. Voice notes on my iPhone allowed me to capture processing sessions with myself, with the peer reviewer, sista circle members, and a faculty member.



## Coding

The purpose in coding is to organize data for analysis (Saldana, 2009). Coding for this study reflected Johnson's coding plan: data reduction, data display, and verification and conclusion (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In data reduction, the first phase of analysis for this study, I reviewed transcripts to identify identity information related to experiences with or connections to their academic programs, the university, faculty, peers, and Black women, as well as mentions of experienced or perceived oppression or resistance against oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, misogynoir). I also noted statements within the transcripts that stuck out to me but that might not have fallen into a concrete category from above. I did this because I wanted to honor the notion that there might be knowledge available for learning that fell beyond the scope of this study, but might still clarify the experiences of Black women in doctoral programs or there was knowledge that did not address a particular prescribed concept but that needed to be emphasized when taken collectively with the prescribed concepts. My independent contributions to the *sista circle* were not coded for analysis (ex. my own reflections about my experiences as a doctoral student); however, if my comments were positioned prior to a contribution that was coded for analysis and that life note is used to build a theme, my contribution is included under a pseudonym.

Phase two of analysis involved organizing phase one data into themes under a prescribed concept (e.g., faculty, peers, Black women, etc.) in a data display. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe data display as a mechanism that organizes the product of data reduction. A matrix was used to organize data in phase two. The matrix used concepts (e.g., faculty, peers, Black women, etc.) as column headers, themes as row headers, and quotes from the data reduction phase placed at their proper intersection to support the theme's emergence. From endarkened feminist

epistemological and Black feminist thought stances, these themes are knowledge (Collins, 1990; Dillard, 2006). As such, themes and knowledge are used interchangeably throughout Chapter 4.

In the final phase of analysis, drawing conclusion and verification, I reviewed the data from the data displays and interpreted the meaning of the data. The goal of verification is to ensure data authenticity, or the assurance that readers and participants have in the data to act on it (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). To ensure accuracy, generated knowledge (themes) from phase two were sent to participating sista-scholars and peer reviewer for review and critique after analysis as part of the verification protocol. Three sista-scholars provided feedback on the preliminary findings: two in writing and one verbally. All three affirmed the preliminary findings. Sista-scholars provided no amendments to the preliminary findings. Written feedback from Phoenix and Erica is respectively included below:

“Thank you again for extending an invitation to all of us and for including us in your work. I related to all of the findings and appreciate the summary that you provided. The Sista Circle is definitely one of the few places on campus where Black women can fellowship and receive various forms of affirmation and validation. Also for me, as a Haitian American women I recognize the similar challenges with other Black despite our ethnic backgrounds.”

“Looks good! I do not have any additional insight to add. Your findings are right on!”

### **Data Authenticity**

Data authenticity is a five-part concept: fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Fairness requires equitable inclusion of data from the study, particularly to reduce bias and acting in the interest of inclusion related to data (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). For this study, that translated into using participants’ lifenotes from across sista circles and being intentional to include contributions from each sista circle. After analysis, I sent participants an overview of preliminary

findings for feedback and review to ensure that my findings were in alignment with their contributions and sentiments.

Ontological and educative authenticity are coupled together and relate to data raising consciousness and being used in ways that bring educational value to people who interface with the data (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This manifested during sista circles as sista-scholars shared their experiences, reflected on the experiences of other sista-scholars, and came to new knowledge about their own experiences. I encouraged sista-scholars to share their realities, whatever those were related to connectedness on the campus. “Realities” implies that more than one exists, and for this study and in lived experiences, realities can vary, even if they are similar.

Lastly, catalytic and tactical authenticity relate to participants 1) being encouraged to take action after being a part of the study and 2) the researcher providing training for methods of action, if requested by participants (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Put more plainly, researchers should provide training or guidance for participants who act upon knowledge gained through participation in research. After data collection ended, the peer reviewer and I continued monthly sista circles as a support space for participants in both studies. Continuing sista circles was done to model how sista circles work to create space for Black women, to normalize community and fellowship among Black women in graduate programs, and to make due on our responsibility to Black women as researchers. A sista-scholar opened her home to the group for the first post-research sista circle. The second sista circle was a photo shoot for Black women in graduate programs at the university. The final sista circle will be held after this dissertation is scheduled to be defended.

## Summary

This chapter provided an overview of endarkened feminist epistemology as researcher's epistemological stance, sista circle as methodology, recruitment and selection, data collection, and data analysis. Data was collected through four sista circles over a two-week period and transcribed by a third-party vendor. Sista-scholars were introduced in this chapter, and their pseudonyms will be used to designate contributions through lifenotes. Sista circle methodology proved to do what it was designed to do during this study: act as a support group and make space for dialogical learning. Sista circle methodology provided participants with much more than we anticipated. That topic will be discussed in Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER 4

### “TELL IT ANYWAY”: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings for the research questions that outlined this study. Findings are expressed through narrative to reflect the conversational nature of sista circles. Life notes are narrative representations of “unedited, uncensored, woman talk” (Bell-Scott, 1994, p. 13). Life notes took shape as passages from sista circles. I chose to translate the study’s findings in a way that honors the gendered and cultural wealth of sista circle methodology, the sacredness and joy of the vulnerability shared between sista-scholars, and the experiences, wisdom, and knowledge shared during each sista circle. This representation honors the often marginalized, minimized, or erased voice, knowledge, and learnings of African descendant women by centering their own words in inquiry. This oppositional representation attends to power dynamics by centering Black women’s voices and knowledge. To display the knowledge that emerged from this study in a traditional format robs the knowledge of its invaluable richness and de-centers the producers and keepers of the knowledge. The following section provides context to the nature of sista circles in this study. Table 1 is included in this chapter and provides sista-scholars’ pseudonyms, academic foci, identification, and self-identification.

#### **Context of Sista Circles**

Sista circles were held in my on-campus apartment where sista-scholars shared a meal, shared hugs, and kicked off their shoes. For some, my home was a familiar, comfortable place where they had previously broken bread, rested on my couch, attended my birthday party, laughed hard about silliness seen on a digital media platform, or spent the evening writing and

reading. For those unfamiliar with my home, the well-lived in space boasted colorful Black woman centered wall art, a bookshelf stocked with leisure and cultural readings, soft lighting, and the smell of freshly prepared food for the shared sista circle meal.

Table 1

*Sista-Scholar Demographic Information*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Academic Focus</b>	<b>Identification</b>	<b>Self-Identification</b>
Alexa	STEM	African American	Female
Alicia	Education	African American	Female, Straight, Christian, Able-bodied
Allison	Education	African American/Black	Christian, female, heterosexual, cisgender
Chantel	Education	African American	Christian, working class, heterosexual, first-generation college student, cisgender, able bodied, minded, etc.
Charlotte	Education	African American	Black, Christian, Heterosexual, Single, Able-bodied Female
Crystal	Education	African American	Queer, mixed class, Black female spiritual
Erica	Education	African American	First Generation College Student
Giselle	Education	African American	None provided
Joy	Education	African American	Mixed social class, spiritual non-religious
KY17	Public Health	African American	None provided
Nicki	Education	African American	First gen, gifted, Christian
Pam	Education	African American	Heterosexual, partnered, working class, Christian, more spiritual than religious at this time, cisgender female
Phoenix	Education	Haitian American	Christian, heterosexual, working class, bilingual
Sage	Human Development	African American	None provided
Sandra	Education	African American	Christian. Working-Class. Cisgender. Heterosexual. Able-bodied.
Trina	Education	Black	Gender Non-Conforming, Working Class
Vashti	Education	African American	Black, Womanist Christian, working class raised, middle class assimilated, able bodied.

Creating an atmosphere that welcomed sista-scholars in and encouraged them to let their proverbial hair out was central to them being able to be comfortable during conversation. Because of the small number of Black women in doctoral programs at Early University, most of the sista scholars were friends, had prior knowledge of each other, or were within a few degrees of separation from other sista-scholars. Coming together with other Black women was familiar and normal for women in the study. Coming together to do that as research was a different, but welcomed pace for sista-scholars.

In-group language and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) were used during sista circles and is reflected in the transcription from sista circles. The use of culturally familiar language affirmed to me that sista-scholars were in a comfortable space to speak more freely and honestly than they might be in other spaces on the campus.

*RQ1 How do Black women in doctoral programs experience sense of belonging at one historically White institution?* Findings from this study show that belonging as connectedness took shape as community with Black women and supportive relationships with faculty. To contextualize the findings, I will provide findings that situate connectedness as belonging within experiences that served to alienate or disrupt possible connections for sista-scholars in doctoral study. Alienating experiences in this study included unproductive relationships with faculty, indifferent and antagonistic peer interactions, and institutional history and culture.

### **Disconnect**

The following sections provide excerpts from sista circles in which sista-scholars shared experiences of alienation and exclusion. I have summed these experiences as disconnect. Three subcategories emerged from disconnect: unproductive or antagonistic relationships with faculty, indifferent and antagonistic peer interactions, and institutional history and culture.

## **Unproductive or Antagonistic Relationships with Faculty**

Sista-scholars shared stories about the ways faculty members influenced their experiences as doctoral students. This section will highlight unproductive experiences with faculty that also affected sense of belonging for sista-scholars.

Nicki, in education, shared with her sista circle that in spite of a favorable rapport with her advisor and high productivity within the department, her experiences with other departmental faculty had not been as productive or supportive.

My department head hates me. Constantly looking for things that I, I'm slacking on, but she can't find it. [Sista Circle chatter] And so um, it's just like you have to, like you have to keep so many things close to you.

Nicki's frustration with and disappointment in the lack of productive relationships with department faculty was evident as she shared her experiences with faculty. Although not as connected to other faculty, her relationship with her advisor helped her to navigate departmental politics and remain productive.

For Pam and Alicia, in education, discouragement from their advisor related to desired research agendas and differences in advisement style served as points of contention for them and their shared advisor. They were both initially advised by an African American woman who they hoped to build productive relationships with, but their expectations were not met. Their experiences are shared below.

Alicia had come to Early University to work specifically with a faculty member who she met while completing her master's degree and to take up research on an agreed upon focus. Adding to Alicia's anticipation was the opportunity to be advised and mentored by a Black woman faculty member. She shared with her sista circle how the relationship's deterioration



ended in her changing advisors. Alicia's frustration with the situation was still very evident as she shared with her *sista* circle.

“Talk to her, she really did- I will give her that. She did advocate for me to come to this program. Uh, I didn't have a whole lot of research experience. My test scores weren't that great, but she said she would take me and they said cool. Get here and home girl switched up the whole program. I'm talking about like "Oh, you want to do x-amount of work and you want to do this health work? Oh well, no. like I don't really deal with that faculty member who's really doing that... I'm not- I'm not really with her. So, we can find you some other way to do it.” I'm like huh? How that's gonna work?... So I'm like I am- I really wanted her to be my mentor, and I told her, I said "I really regret this because I came [here] because I wanted to work with a Black woman". Like I haven't had Black women as faculty or academic mentors. As a helping professional, like my professional goal- and she was just, you know, it didn't work out. So you kind of gotta just move on.”

For Pam, experiences with the faculty member transitioned from great to contentious between the two, leaving Pam confused and unsure of her way forward. In the excerpt below, Pam described the relationship and its deterioration.

“...I initially got into the program it was specifically to work with one person in particular, an African American professor, a woman... Initially, it started off great, you know... and then, there's like this shift, there's like this switch, and then, you don't know like, where do you stand with this professor, and you're wondering like, you feel like a burden to the, to the advisor, to your advisor. That's how I felt, and so, it's like, okay, we are two Black women. You're supposed to be holding me down, and I feel like I can't afford for you to hold me down, and show me the way, but I felt very lost, and I felt very, um, oftentimes, like it seemed like our interactions are kind of catty”

Later in the chat, she added that her then advisor offered what she felt like were unnecessary critiques to her personal appearance.

Like, one time, I had on some, I think I had on some pink flats, and she would not let me hear the end of that, or if I had my hair slicked back one day, "Oh you got it up today." I'm like, "Okay, so when it's out, is that a problem?"

Both Pam and Alicia expressed disappointment in discontinuing work with the faculty member they both credit for their decision to attend Early University, but they recognized the need to move on to other faculty for advisement and support. Additionally, Pam and Alicia

recognized that their faculty member, who was a trailblazer for Black women in their field, had likely been well intentioned in trying to prepare them for the hostilities of white supremacist within the academy.

Charlotte, in education, shared a regrettably memorable experience with a faculty member during a departmentally sponsored event. As one of several students of color, but the only Black student in the pro, Charlotte recounted a faculty member's use of a racially aggressive term toward her in front of the faculty member's spouse and her peers. The event took place at the faculty member's home.

Charlotte: So while I'm standing there, the [bon]fire was up and everything and he was like, "I just want to thank everybody for coming. You know, it's great to have you all here and we've got Charlotte, our token."

Sista-scholars: Ummm (negative)! He did not say that?!

Charlotte: Honest to God.

Sista-scholar: No ma'am.

Charlotte: Hand to God.

Charlotte recalled that the professor's partner's attempt to correct him were casually dismissed by the professor and that other students in attendance did not seem to understand the problem with the professor's language because they were not socialized in or familiar with the racial contexts of the United States. For Charlotte, this experience was jarring experience emphasized that her Blackness, which was a point of pride for her, was useful for comedic relief for at least one faculty member in her department.

Sista-scholar KY17, in public health, shared an experience encountering anti-Black racism in the classroom. Recalling her experience as the only African descendent student in a classroom of students from various races and ethnicities, KY17 was still vividly frustrated and

upset by the experience. Her peers' lack of response served to compound the emotions related to the experience.

KY17: My first semester as a doctoral student, I was taking a Stat[istics] course and um my professor made a racial comment. I was the only Black person... and her comment was, let me try to say it right "If I was grading an exam from one of my students and it was a low test score, I would automatically assume it's an African-American". Um, so she made a comment. I was like "Huh?" Why, everyone else was like- everyone else didn't make any facial expressions. I guess they didn't- they just eased right through it. I was like, "Wait a minute".

Sista-scholars [collective]: What?!

KY17: So I was like "Okay" and it was like bothering me the entire class period. So during our break, um, I talked to her and I was like you know, really, I didn't make a big scene and I was like "Hey, you know can I talk to her- can I talk to you?" And I was like "Um, the comment you made was really offensive" um, and I told her why. Um, and I was like you know just for future references, it may be better if you use a different example and not use race. Um, and she was like "Well um", she was like "I'm sorry if I offended you, but I'm not sorry because this is the stats, um, and" what did she say? Um, "This is the stats and this is the education department so this is real life situation".

KY17 explained that she followed up with the professor to explain her concern and frustration with the use of race related statistics, as KY17 believed that the statistics implied that she, the only visibly African descendent person in the classroom, was implicated by the statistics. KY17 talked about how the professor's insistence that the statistic was beyond reproach emphasized that her intelligence was in question in the professor's statistics class.

KY17 contacted the department to report her concerns about the faculty member's decision to use that statistic in the classroom, and the faculty member denied making the comment. KY17 went on to tell the sista circle that this experience caused her great concern about potential retaliation from the professor (e.g., grade interference, making comments that would reflect poorly on the student, etc.). KY17 also discussed how the comment made her

question the professor's assumptions about her ability to do statistics based on the professor's willingness to use an example that marginalized Black students' math abilities.

Excerpts shared in the above section highlighted experiences that shaped how sista-scholars' experiences negatively impacted their connectedness, even if just for a short period. The latter finding for faculty will describe how relationships with faculty contribute to connectedness as belonging.

Early University's troubled history with racial exclusion was known to sista-scholars prior to their arrival to campus. Sista-scholars were aware of Early University's turbulent history with African descendent people and tokenization of African descendent persons within the historically and predominantly White student body. The following lifenote offers insight into sista-scholars' understandings of their experiences at the university.

Alexa, in STEM, often felt alone in her program as the only or one of a couple Black people or Black women within the larger department. She recalled feeling tokenized by her department after finding out that she had been asked to speak to a prospective student who was Black because they were both Black.

Alexa: And even within the department um, I've even felt used because if there's a prospective student that comes in and they're African American, there's just, "Hey Alexa, can you talk, can you talk to this student."

Crystal: Wow.

Alexa: So usually, we [the department] send out a mass email and we say all graduate students come to room blah, blah, blah at this time, and so, I was just like, "Well dang."

Vashti: When your faculty asks you to come speak specifically to a Black person, do they say why, or is it just implied or known why you're going to talk to them?

Alexa: It's implied, and I actually didn't figure it out until afterwards. My format advisor, I've had two, so my former advisor actually pulled me aside and she was like, "You did a great job with so and so. I think she's going to come here, but you do realize that they only asked you because you're the Black woman here?" And I said, "Oh no, actually I

didn't, because I'm super naïve and I thought you know, with most of the department being international students, I was just, doing some service.

Alexa went on to share that her naivety caused her not to realize what had happened until her former advisor pulled her to the side after the recruitment event and asked her if she was aware that she had been asked to talk with the perspective student specifically because she was the Black woman in the program.

### **Indifferent or Antagonistic Peers**

Interactions with peer-level colleagues can shape how students make connections. In the following section, sista-scholars I share portions of discussed interactions with peers that caused disconnect or contention with colleagues in their academic programs. The following lifenotes offer narratives of interactions with peers that impacted sista-scholars' sense of belonging.

Joy, in education, shared with her sista circle that in academic spaces or in company of some people who had finished their doctoral processes, she often felt pressured to prioritize the doctoral process above everything else that she was or that she had to do. For Joy, who is married and the mother of a small child, family was the priority and it would always come first.

Joy: I am a partner, and I'm a mother, and so, those are two identities that are very important to me, and so, in a lot of spaces with other doctoral students, or people who have finished PhDs, I feel like, sometimes, I kind of get that side eye when I'm like, yes, these are all things that are important but, at the end of the day, if my kid wants to go to the park, I'm going to go to the park, and so that's that is my self-care because that is my why. That is my whatever, and so, for me, I remember someone telling me, "Well, you have re-, or you have to, you need to re-prioritize because going to the park can't be your main priority."

Sista-scholar: Ut oh!

Joy: I was like, "Well... going to the park is kind of like my priority. After that, I do XYZ, and work is done."

For Joy, school and family responsibilities could coexist. Being told that she should choose her student status over her marital and parental status was frustrating and not in congruence with her priorities. At best, the advice provided to Joy was well-intentioned, but at

worst, it was experienced as a point of tension for Joy and possibly a microaggression to her womanhood.

Trina, in education, discussed the role peer interactions played in her sense of connectedness during the doctoral process. For Trina, somewhat guarded and cautious interactions with peers were appropriate, particularly when ideas related to research and applied scholarship were discussed. In the following lifenote, Trina shared her experiences with colleagues that lead to her being more guarded about research ideas.

“People are biting ideas, they typically bite them from either the Black men in the room, or the Black women in the room. People will steal your work. They will go for it, and use it, and I have to make sure I step away, and step out of the bubble, even though I am a work horse, and I love that, because I don't want to get in trouble.”

Trina was clear that she was not afraid of hard work; however, she had to disconnect from the larger group because she was not interested in anyone else taking her research ideas.

Like Trina, Nicki too shared how negative experiences with peers resulted in her being on guard around some of her colleagues. The following lifenote highlights a narrative that Nicki shared about how interactions with peers in her academic program reminded her that she needed to be on guard and strategic in her interactions with peers.

Nicki: Like, how do you matriculate and manage all these, all of these emotions and at the same time and I'm, I can't say I don't like people in our program, but they're teaching me so much.

Sista-scholar: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Nicki: Like I just want to like, man, fuck off. I can't stand you. Get off my Facebook. Nicki's lifenote about her classmates “teaching her so much” was a reference to her learning how to navigate the politics of working with people who had proximity to her but who were not necessarily invested in her success. She did not necessarily dislike them, but she did not fully trust them to let her guard down.

For Charlotte, encounters with peers who were socialized outside of the United States and who had little or no understanding of the system of racism in the US was simultaneously patience trying and not unexpected.

That just amazes me how we are socialized differently. Like, this is the socialization of it, and he [professor] could be making a BLATANTLY, blatantly discriminatory, prejudice, ridiculous statement, and she'll [peer] be like "Okay", or he'll [peer] be like "Okay". Like it's- I think it's ay- and even like and if you had a question- like my major advisor, he's White and he'll be like "Yeah, in the class Charlotte, could you speak up because you know they're [peers] not going to speak up", and that's true. Like 'cause they're- of- because of the socialization- like they don't actively engage. They're not going to counter or like try to debate this, whatever he [professor] said. They don't even ask questions.

Charlotte shared with her sista-circle how an experience with students not socialized in the United States caused her to have to do additional emotional and intellectual labor to protect herself from their lack of awareness around issues of race and racism.

Sista-scholars did not necessarily view actions as purposefully problematic, but in general, recognized that regardless of intention, the experiences were still reason for sista-scholars to invest energies with other peers, in other aspects of the doctoral experience, or in places and people beyond the academy.

### **Sense of Belonging**

The prior section contextualized some experiences sista-scholars had as doctoral students at Early University that served to disconnect them from faculty, peers, and the institution. This section will report how sista-scholars connected with the campus. Two findings emerged: community with Black women and supportive relationships with faculty. Each finding has subcategories that provide lifenotes related to the finding.

#### **“It Looks Like Y’all”: Community with Black Women**

Through lively and sincere conversations across sista circles, community with other Black women students rang clear as a connection that provided a sense of belonging to the

women in this study. The number of Black women of women in community with other Black women varied based on academic program, personality type, and other elements, but across the sista-circles, connections to other Black women students provided encouragement, affirmation, and safety/care that motivated Black women in this study.

### **Encouragement/affirmation.**

In community with other Black women in doctoral programs at the same institution, sista-scholars shared stories of triumph, disappointment, and every day occurrences. During conversations, stories sista-scholars affirmed the experiences, worthiness, value, and realities of other sista-scholars. This section shares lifenotes related to encouragement and affirmation.

Giselle, in education, shared that Black women in cohorts above her in her program made efforts to check on her and welcome her to the program. She counted their examples as a reason why she took up the practice of reaching out to Black women in cohorts behind her in school.

“I would say from the beginning, I've noticed that Black women who were in cohorts before me made an extra effort to come, and build a relationship with me, so let's ... introduce themselves, it's just to say, like, "This is what I'm working on," or because I worked in our department for the first two years as a grad assistant, and a research assistant, they would, they made a point to come by my office if they were having an advisor meeting or something, or, like, "Let's go ... let's go get coffee or something," so I always noticed that extra, um, emotional labor, and that, that was really helpful for me to stay in the program, and so, in turn, it help motivates me to want to do the same for people who come after me...”

Giselle’s decision to reach out to newer Black women in her program who was her attempt to provide them with community in the way that Black women in the program had supported her. Sage, a fourth-year in social sciences, was in an academic program that paired new doctoral students with returning doctoral students to help them transition into the program. Her buddy was a Black woman who was farther along in the doctoral process.

Sage: My buddy actually was, she was a friend of a really close friend of mine. So she's like my peer mentor, I guess you could say, that's like, three years ahead of me. Um, she's



yeah, she's three years ahead of me. She just graduated. And so she kind of ushered me through, um, she was the only Black person in the program for a very long time.

Sage's pairing with a more established Black woman in her program with who she had a tangential association with prior to the doctoral program provided her the opportunity to be mentored by a Black woman who could support her until the mentor graduated.

Crystal, in education, shared with her sista circle that she had known Sandra, sista-scholar in education, prior to choosing Early University. The two were part of an academic program with multiple Black women. Crystal shared how she found community with other Black women and the role they played in her doctoral journey.

Crystal: ...She [Sandra] was my buddy, and then I had two more um Black women in my actual like cohort. And. so, like all the crazy stuff I had to deal with, especially like racism, my progression within our program, and like dealing with like, just nasty White women. Just awful, and they were, and you know it's a helping professionals program and not seeing yourself and not feeling like I have a helping professional identity and then seeing Dr. Davis and then going to Ubuntu's events. I remember the first Ubuntu event that actually, Queen invited me to was a Christmas, a ugly sweater ...

Nicki: Oh, was that my party?

Crystal: Yes.

Nicki: (laughs) I remember when I used to throw parties. [Sista-scholars over talk one another].

Crystal: (laughs)

Nicki: It was a good party.

Crystal: It had all these snacks.

Female: I had really good parties.

Crystal: That was the first time, I was like, there's other Black women here [Early University]? And I was like, I remember seeing all these black women. They were all like close and I was like, "Man, I want to be a part of the Group" and so then the schedule got hard and I was like, "Damn." (laughs) I want to, and so, I ended up meeting a lot of our doc students, so like Pamela and Alicia and Harriett, so these people who are like in like the cohort above me, in the doc program.

Vashti: Oh yeah, the fun people, yeah.

Crystal: And so like it's been really helpful to have them so close together, because we had shared internship sites and so, like meeting Black women and Black men who are like, able to be like, "We're having a little social. We're going out to dinner. We're going to talk about these professors" has been like really helpful for me, but I'm an extrovert, but I'm also very shy sometimes.

In this passage, Crystal, in education, shared how relationships with Black people, Black women in particular, helped her through challenges with program peers. In sharing her experience, Nicki provided a social space for a sista-scholar who needed community with other Black folk and Black women. For Nicki, the ugly sweater party had been an expression of her extroversion and desire to be social. Nicki went on to share that she could build relationships with women she met through Ubuntu and that she regarded those relationships with Black women as her peace, her "saving grace".

"I love the women that I've met through the Ubuntu. Like all the Black women I met through Ubuntu my first and second year, when I was actually active. Um, but- so they have been my saving grace. My saving grace. They have been my saving grace."

Nicki's emphasis on the role Black women played in her experience as a doctoral student were felt across her sista circle. Several sista-scholars nodded in agreement. Allison, a fourth-year student in education, shared that she had spent the weekend writing with a group of Black women in doctoral programs at the university and that she had been rejuvenated by her time between the writing group and the sista circle.

"I didn't really anticipate it, but, you know, from hanging out with some other Black girl doc students earlier this weekend. Then this is like how much we do need each other, and how much I think it's beneficial to each one another. I feel like my cup has been filled, and I don't even know if I knew it was empty."

Allison's contribution to the sista circle was met with verbal and non-verbal affirmation, indicating that sista-scholars understood and affirmed her offering.

Sista-scholars expressed that community with Black women provided encouragement and support in ways that affirmed them as doctoral students, Black women, and members of an academic community. Sista-scholars discussed experiences where community with Black women was the connection that refueled them and kept them going in a campus environment that was historically and remained predominantly White. Connections to other Black women had been a pathway to connecting with a graduate student organization that centered minoritized graduate students, an avenue for peer mentorship, a venting place to process racism and faculty issues, and a reminder that they are not alone, as Black women, on a campus that is historically and predominantly White.

### **Relationships with Supportive Faculty**

Faculty members are conveyors of doctoral processes for doctoral students. Faculty advisors are often doctoral students' most vital connections to their academic programs, funding opportunities, research opportunities, and guidance through the educational process. Serving as chairs of dissertation committees, faculty advisors often set the tone of relationships with doctoral students. This section presents sub-themes to this finding: navigating politics and process and care for student as a person.

#### **Navigate politics and process.**

Sista-scholars discussed how they navigate and manage politics and varying processes associated with doctoral study. Failure to understand and be competent in navigating politics and processes can hinder doctoral students' advancement. This section shares sista-scholars' experiences with faculty who helped demystify doctoral processes and helped them manage the politics that come in the academy.

Nicki, in education, shared how her relationship with her advisor, a Black man and the only faculty member of color in her department, helped her learn how to navigate institutional and faculty politics, as well as the politics of being the only person of color or only Black faculty by the way he conducts his business. As a future faculty member, these are lessons she must learn to be successful.

Nicki: He overruns himself. He's like, the only (laughs) poor, the only, he is the only Black person in my entire department, and there's three programs within my department.

Sista-scholar: Oh wow.

Sista-scholar: Oh, geez.

Nicki: Yeah, and so the only person of color, the only Black male, and so he [advisor] got to carry himself in a way just for survival. Um and so, looking at him, learning different pieces from and also understanding when I'm faculty how I need to be available to other Black women, and men, but also not overwhelming myself.

Sista Circle: Yes.

Nicki: And so, learning things about how I'm going to get through this, and then also what I need to do if I go into a program where I am the only person of color or I'm the only black woman.

Nicki's lifenote illustrated the way her advisor helped her learn how to navigate politics by role modeling behaviors that allowed him to maintain himself within a racially homogenous department. Her experience with her Black faculty member helped her consider how she can support Black students she may go on to advise as a faculty member.

Allison, in education, has had two advisors, both Black and both supportive. After her first advisor separated from the institution, Allison described gaining a new advisor who willingly offered mentorship and guidance. She described her relationship with her current advisor as helpful, particularly considering education being a new discipline for her. Allison's

lifefote highlights how a faculty member's commitment to making a doctoral process as straightforward as possible allowed her to connect with the professor as a mentor.

“And I think my current advisor is a great mentor. And I think both [current and former advisors] of them are very good about, you know- I never felt like I had to work around fakeness. It was just kind of like, listen. It was like someone was legitimately trying to help you and tell you the ropes, versus playing games. So that was helpful. It's interesting though because technically, well not technically, it is- this is a new discipline for me.”

### **Care for student as person.**

Trina and Chantel, both in education, discussed the many decisions, responsibilities, and pressures that doctoral students have throughout the doctoral journey. The pressure to perform left many sista-scholars feeling like their work, within the academic context, was, to some extent, dependent upon their productivity. Pam and Giselle both shared experiences where a faculty member, in both cases their current advisors, required their best while still treating them with respect and dignity.

Pam, in education, shared her experience changing advisors and how the relationship with her current advisor improved her experience as a doctoral student and decreased the stress caused by the unproductive relationship with her first advisor.

Pam: I had to make a decision [about advisement], and so, I decided to switch advisors, and that whole process was very scary, like, because you don't know, politically, what they're [former advisor] going to do to your future, if there's going to be some backlash from not only this professor, but from the department, or what, what that's going to look like. So, I decided to switch after, like, consulting with like, other students, and even different faculty members, and it turned out fine, and like, now, I feel great. Like I'm on track, and I love my advisor, and he's awesome, and I know he has my back, and he's just like, and I feel like a part of his family. Like, he did a really good job in making me feel included, which is something that I didn't get from this other person.

Vashti: How were, um, did he make you feel included?

Pam: Just, playing up my strengths, and letting me know that he was there for me. Like, anything he needed, like when I was trying to transition, who should I talk to, so, um, so he kind of gave me guidance. He gave me, he's a straight shooter, so he's going to tell you like it is, and I appreciated that. Like, I always know where I stand with him which is

something that I didn't know before, and he invites us to family events, and like, his kids know us, and his kids are like in the research team meetings sometimes, it's like, okay, we're included.

Pam's lifenote highlighted her new advisor's willingness to speak plainly and respectfully to her about her progress as a student, while also including her in aspects of his life that did not related to her research. His explicit support for her as a student and a person helped her relationship with her professor be more than her ability to produce research.

Giselle, in education, discussed how she had considered quitting her doctoral program after faculty in her first year encouraged her to reconsider her readiness for a doctorate. After changing advisors, she explained that her new advisor affirmed her writing and scholarship, and went a step further by affirming her as a person. She went on to say that her advisor recognized her beyond what she contributed academically, and that shift helped her connect with her advisor.

“My advisor is very much, like, supportive. In many ways, she was supportive outside of academic ways as well, so, personal ... just even like inviting me into her home, her personal space, into her personal life.”

### **Section Summary**

This section on sense of belonging through connectedness presented the findings for the first research question of this study. Two themes emerged as pathways to sense of belonging for Black women in doctoral programs in this study: community with Black women and supportive relationships with faculty. Community with Black women was characterized by affirmation and encouragement. Supportive faculty had two themes: navigating politics and process and care for student as a person. Also included in this section were lifenotes that highlighted sista-scholars' experiences with disconnection in the doctoral process as related to unproductive faculty and indifferent or antagonistic peers.

## **Sista Circle Methodology as Inquiry and Support Gro**

*RQ2 How useful was sista circle methodology as both a method of inquiry and as a support group for a study about sense of belonging for Black women at a historically White institution?* Part of this study and the second research question explored how sista-scholars responded to sista circle as a methodology. Because of the relationship that the peer reviewer and I had with many of the sista-scholars, they had at least heard of the concept behind sista circle methodology; however, only three people, myself and peer reviewer included, had experience employing sista circle as methodology. For sista-scholars, participation in sista circle methodology was personally affirming, intellectually stimulating, reflective in nature, and an experience that informed their own approaches to research and facilitation.

### **Affirming**

Erica, in education who had been part of two studies employed sista circles as methodology, was a quiet, soft spoken introvert whose response to sista circle methodology included a nod to the space being a place where she was reminded that she was not alone in experiencing challenges. Her also highlights the dialogical learning that is central to sista circle methodology.

“I feel like I learned a lot from everybody, from different people and from other people, different experiences and how it's also affirming in some ways. That your experiences is not, you're not the only one. But at the same time it's like, "Oh, other people have different experiences as well. And um, so I don't know. I've been enjoying them.”

Chantel, in education, who is one of several Black women in her program, noted how her sista circle experience provided intentional time with Black women that she usually did not get outside of program. Her lifenote highlights the way sista circle methodology can provide support to Black women in spaces where expanded connections to other Black women are desired but do not occur without intentionality.

“Um, and I feel like I don't really get a whole lot of time with other black women, besides being in class. So just being able to sit and talk, is something I just don't get enough of. And it's hard trying to make that time to do that when, there's so many other pressing things (laughing) In the life of a, of a doc student.”

Sista-scholars in college of education academic programs, with the exception of one sista-scholar, were surrounded by fellow sista-scholars, more often than not, because of the number of Black women in doctoral programs in the college. For sista-scholars who were not similarly situated in academic programs with more than one Black woman, sista circles provided an opportunity for, by, and of Black women in doctoral programs.

### **Reflective**

Nicki shared that being a part of the sista circle helped her to better understand how other sista-scholars experienced the doctoral process:

“This is um, my first time participating in a sister circle, but I'm a quantitative researcher. And so, this is really, it just feels really organic. It just feels more like a conversation versus you're just a person where I just looked at your ratings just to see, and so you know, it just really gives me um, more of a feel for what everybody's experiencing. Like you know, are experiences similar or different?”

Trina shared how being a part of a group of Black women allowed her to more fully reflection on the nuanced experience of being a Black woman in a doctoral program.

“ I'm thinking about how I was able to process the things that I'm not as fond of about being a black woman in a doc program, and the things that I really do enjoy, and I feel like, if people meet you, and you're having one of those bad doc days that you think you're really negative, or your program is trash when it's much more, it's-it's much bigger than that, and I don't know that we live in a society where you're able to exist in those multiple realities, and those multiple experiences, even though you consistently have them... Um, so I appreciate the affirmation that comes with being in a sista circle and, even if our experiences are very different, even thinking about how I can approach other things.”



## Intellectual Stimulation and Informed Research

Research areas, methods, epistemologies, and paradigms varied among sista-scholars. Prior experiences with the various methodologies had an impact on several sista-scholars' ideas related to what research could do, what happens during it, and how it could be done.

Several sista-scholars were familiar with Black Feminist Thought through course study. Crystal, a first-year in education, had been a participant in two sista circle methodology studies, this dissertation included. She offered this reflection about the way participation in a sista circle methodology studies allowed her to see theory about Black women at work:

“I think it's interesting when you're in it and then you've read about it. I would really like, so I was, I had to read some stuff on like black feminist thought for last semester. And so hearing about sister circle then I was like, "Wow, that sounds so cool. Wonder what that would look like."... I've been in two [sista circle methodology studies], and they were both kind of different, both very organic conversation, laughter, and I was like thinking I was sitting here, I was like, it's funny because, like knowing the process, like what you're reading and then being in it, it's like a parallel process, because I'm like, aware of the fact that we're really just having conversation, and I'm learning all this stuff about you and it's like, "Yeah, they get me. Yeah, I know what that means. That word means this." And then I'm also thinking, this is actually what's happening even though you're just having this conversation because of the little nuance things that we're doing and like the kind of cultural and traditional things that we're actually doing. This is what's actually happening, and so it's, it's kind of dynamic to be here. It doesn't feel like a dissertation. Not for me.”

Nicki, in education, exclusively used quantitative methodologies in research, as was the legitimized and privileged tradition in her field. She shared with her sista circle how her participation in a sista circle study broadened how she could move forward in future research with Black women.

“This is um, my first time participating in a sister circle, but I'm a quantitative researcher... Um, this is something I would be interested in using uh, with gifted Black women and girls, and so that is like going to be my primary, my secondary area of research, when I actually become a professor. And so... this would be a really cool way to um, facilitate those conversations. Yeah, so talking about just you know, “What do I need from my teacher? What do I need my, from my professors or my advisors, you know, as a gifted individual?” So yeah. It's very cool, very cool.”

Nicki's lifenote highlighted the transformative nature of sista circle methodology for Black women researchers doing research that centers the experiences of Black women. Erica, in education, shared with her sista-circle that sista circle methodology was still new to her, but noted that she thought sista circles provided more information than individual interviews, a method that she was more familiar with as a researcher and learner. Her lifenote affirms the methodology's communal nature and dialogical learning foundation.

"I've been enjoying them. It was not a methodology that I thought of using because I, I always thought maybe I would do more individual. But to see how like a focus group or a sister circle would operate, I kind of like that feeling. You get more, more out of the participant than just doing it individual."

Pam, in education, shared how her participation in the study helped her better understand what facilitated group research could look like. Her prior experience with facilitated group thinking was not research related.

"I think this was a good experience. I think, for me, it helped me to learn what it can look like to be the facilitator."

Chantel, in education, was encouraged by the sista circle experience. Through participation, she was reminded that research could be culturally affirming and organic in feel. Her lifenote highlights the gender and cultural relevance of sista circle methodology.

Chantel: I agree with you [Allison] in that it's um, um, like it [the company of Black women] just pushes you a little more. Like it's, this is a reminder like, this is what I'm here for. This is what I'm supposed to do, or I'm going to do. And I need to do it. Um, and, um, it makes me excited about research too.

Sista-scholar: Yeah.

Chantel: What it can, it doesn't have to be done in a traditional way. It can be done in a way that is, you know, more culturally competent. And, um, that, that's done in a natural way in a natural setting. You know, it can be fun.

### **Section Summary**

This section presented the findings for the second research question for this study. Four themes emerged as responses to sista circle methodology: affirming, reflective, and intellectual stimulation and informed research. Response to sista circle methodology provided more information than anticipated, but was helpful to know as a researcher.

### **Chapter Summary**

The findings for this study were that Black women in doctoral programs at this historically White institution, sense of belonging occurred through community with Black women, particularly other Black women in doctoral programs, and relationships with supportive faculty members. Experiences that did not support sense of belonging, or disconnect, were themed as antagonistic or indifferent peers and unproductive relationships with faculty. Sista circle methodology proved to be an affirming, reflective, and intellectually stimulating and research informative space that allowed for sista-scholars to share experiences with one another and for me, the researcher, to collect data for the study. Chapter 5 will contextualize these findings within the literature and offer implication for student development practice within higher education and future research.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored how Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution experienced sense of belonging and their reactions to *sista circle* methodology. Fifteen Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution in the American southeast participated in the study across four *sista circles*. After analysis, I concluded that *sista-scholars* experienced sense of belonging through community with Black women in doctoral programs in the form of affirmation and encouragement and through supportive relationships with faculty who helped them navigate policy and politics and cared for them as people. To contextualize participants' experiences and sense of belonging, I provided experiences with peers, faculty, and the campus' culture and history that created distance or disconnect from the campus. I concluded that *sista circle* methodology was an affirming, reflective, intellectually stimulating experience that informed participants' thoughts around research.

#### **Sense of Belonging**

Strayhorn (2012) defined sense of belonging as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (p. 12). Findings affirmed Strayhorn’s conceptualization of sense of belonging as connectedness (i.e., community with Black women) and feeling respected (i.e., faculty care for student as a person).

### **Faculty, Peers, and Disconnect**

In the introduction to the findings for the first research question, how do Black women in doctoral programs experience sense of belonging, I shared experiences that sista-scholars had with faculty, peers, and within the institutional culture and history that set a context for comparison for experiences that encouraged sense of belonging for Black women in doctoral programs at this historically White institution. Those experiences included being the target of racially problematic language by faculty members with grading or procedural authority (i.e., Charlotte, KY17), navigating peers who were indifferent or antagonistic toward the experiences of Black students (i.e. Nicki, Charlotte), and relationships with faculty members that failed to produce expected outcomes (i.e. Pam, Alicia).

Black students' experiences with racially hostility at historically White campuses is consistent with literature (Anderson, 2002; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014). Racial experiences like those described by sista-scholars KY17 and Charlotte and racial microaggressions described by other sista-scholars (e.g., international peer using racially insensitive language toward sista-scholar, White colleagues keeping information about professional and academic opportunities amongst themselves and not sharing with students of color, etc.) are consistent with literature. These experiences felt extraordinarily personal to the participants who endured the challenge; however, experiences like these were not exclusive to the women in this study.

Negative experiences with peers within the doctoral process can impede socialization and commitment to the academic discipline and professional field (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Experiences described by sista-scholars Nicki and Charlotte with peers whose actions felt antagonistic or seemed to lack investment in sista-scholars' wellness were examples of how

negative experiences can distance doctoral learners from their academic program or future colleagues. It is important to note that experiences with peers varied by academic program. For example, a sista-scholar in education reported having pleasant, working relationships with peers in her program.

Relationships with faculty members reported in this study were consistent with literature about positive working relationships with faculty (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Sista-scholars described relationships with faculty that helped them navigate politics and policies (i.e., Nicki and Allison) and relationships with faculty in which faculty cared about them as people (i.e., Pam, Alicia). Sista-scholar Nicki's relationship with her faculty member and sista-scholars Giselle and Pam's relationships with their respective faculty members affirms Felder, Stevenson, and Gasman's (2014) work: Black doctoral students value faculty who help them understand the expectations of Black faculty life and appreciate supportive guidance from faculty members of any race. Dialogical faculty-student relationships that occur within and beyond the class room, as experienced by sista-scholars Giselle, Allison, and Pam, are consistent with Tuitt's (2010) emphasis on pedagogical elements that Black women believed foster inclusion.

The academy has its own politics, and doctoral students are not necessarily positioned to successfully navigate those politics on their own. For sista-scholar Nicki, who intends to be a tenure-track faculty member after graduation, part of the politics her advisor helped her navigate were the racial politics of being the only faculty member of color in a department and the realities of being a faculty member of color at a historically White institution. Her advisor's ability and willingness to name and articulate how and why he operates in the ways that he does

related to all the politics at play helped her make sense of the realities of faculty life for faculty of color.

Sense of belonging for Black graduate women in this study occurred through supportive relationships with faculty and community with other Black graduate women on the campus. I encourage graduate faculty to invest in graduate students beyond their production capability (e.g., publications, research, etc.) and to increase cultural competency awareness, knowledge, and skills as a means to connect more authentically and justly with Black women graduate students. Addressing cultural competence might also serve to minimize or eliminate racial biases that create problematic encounters like those highlighted by two *sista*-scholars in this study.

Enhancing sense of belonging for graduate students could prove helpful in lowering the attrition rate and improving graduate experiences. Positive connections to faculty and peers support a positive sense of belonging. In this study, disconnect was present between some *sista*-scholars and faculty and peers, and because graduate socialization experiences are concentrated within academic programs and departments and professional fields, faculty and graduate administrators should be diligent to minimize interactions and ideologies that result in disconnect between graduate students and faculty and peers.

### **Community with Black Women**

This study identified community with Black women as a way that Black women in doctoral programs experienced sense of belonging. Black women in doctoral programs sought connection in community with other Black women at the institution, specifically in Black women in doctoral programs. Described as affirming and encouraging, community with Black women provided a much needed cultural and peer connection to people who are similarly situated in terms of social location (i.e., Black women in doctoral programs). These connections offered

psychological spaces for Black women in doctoral to commune with people whose situated knowledge might be like their own (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006). Sista-scholars' courage to speak freely and be affirmed in who they are through conversation with other Black women was affirmed by Dorsey (2001). Sense of belonging for marginalized students takes on heightened importance (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), and for sista-scholars, affirmation and encouragement were central to the relationships with other Black women in doctoral programs.

As an aside, words do little justice to articulate the support, dialogical learning, and affirmation of the sista circle experiences. I sent the call for participants to my sista-scholar networks via email and social media, and within a week's time, I had enough participants to do four sista circles. Three other women were unable to participate because they were not eligible or had scheduling conflicts. In total 15 Black women made time in their schedules between assistantships, teaching, clinical practice, writing, family responsibilities, and self-care time to be with other Black women and share their experiences as Black women on their campus. That was and is powerful. What I know to be true from personal experience as a Black woman in a doctoral program at a historically White institution and from the experiences sista-scholars in this study is that Black women show up for each other. They showed up for me in my study and they showed up emotionally, intellectually, and physically for each other in this study and throughout sista-scholars' experiences as doctoral students.

A beauty of the finding related to Black women in community with other Black women and their connected to Black women was that the environment of the sista circles provided the much needed space for affirmation, encouragement, and intellectual curiosity without the consideration that a sista-scholars' thoughts were the reflection of all Black people or all Black women that was not readily available to them elsewhere on campus. Black women's involvement



with other Black women can be a pathway to sense of belonging for Black women in graduate school. In their gathering, they engage in resistance, a distinguishing feature of Collins' (2000) Black feminist thought. Resistance in the form of fellowship with other Black women at a historically White campus was one way Black feminist praxis was enacted by sista-scholars in this study. Sista-scholars' experiences with oppression and resistance align with Collins' (2000).

### **Sista Circle Methodology**

The findings of this study support the use of sista circle methodology as a method of inquiry for and support group for Black women (Dorsey, 2001; Johnson, 2015; Neal, et. al, 2011). Participants in this study experienced sista circles as “organic” spaces where they could connect with other similarly situated Black women (i.e., Black women in doctoral study at the same institution), be affirmed in their experiences (even in experiences not shared by other sista-scholars), be vulnerable in their discussions related to their experiences in doctoral study (e.g., mental health, race and racism, loneliness, etc.), and learn more about how other similarly situated Black women experience doctoral programs (e.g., overt racism, proximity to other Black women, experiences with faculty, etc.). Sista circle methodology is consistent with Collins' (2000) determination that Black women engage in reflective learning through dialogue with other Black women. Across sista circles, participants noted the learning and perspective taking they could occur in community with other Black women.

Sista circle methodology is a form of Black feminist praxis in that it centers the experiences and voices of Black women in the telling of their own narratives (Collins, 2000). In fellowship with other Black women, group knowledge, shared memory, and a consciousness of collective memory exist, and through sista circle methodology, Black women, individually or collectively, can engage that knowledge and memory as part of their meaning making related to

daily lived experiences. Within this study, sista-scholars listened to other sista-scholars' experiences with faculty, peers, racism, relationship management, and their own selves, and although sista-scholars did not necessarily share those same experiences, they learned about how other Black women navigate and manage the oppression and challenges associated with navigating the world as Black women.

### **Implications for Student Affairs and Higher Education Practice**

Nationally, Black women account for more than half of the Black students enrolled in graduate programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). If retention and graduation rates for Black students and the overall student retention and graduation rate are important to administrators and faculty, then being aware of experiences of Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution in the American southeast can help inform administrators and faculty on how to better support those. hooks (1984) reminded us that centering those who are at the margins (e.g., Black graduate women at a historically White, primarily undergraduate institution) advances everyone, including those who have historically been centered in those spaces (e.g., White men). Tending to the needs of Black women in doctoral programs, who account for 2% of all doctoral degrees in the United States, could translate into a decrease in the 50% attrition rate for doctoral students in the U.S (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). This section outlines the implications from student affairs practice in higher education.

### **Faculty**

Relationships with faculty who engaged in supportive practices emerged as a conduit for sense of belonging for participants. Faculty members' ability to connect with doctoral students interpersonally beyond course work and program requirements (Tuitt, 2010), as well as their

ability to be aware of the role race may play in graduate students' experience related to belonging (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014) are practical awareness, knowledge, and skills that faculty can employ to better support Black doctoral students. As conveyors of doctoral experiences, faculty should be aware of how their actions impact student sense of belonging. The alternative of poorer, underdeveloped relationships with faculty can be a barrier to graduate students' abilities to connect with research interests and ability to invest and be involved in the doctoral socialization process (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001).

Relationships with faculty who engaged in supportive practices emerged as a conduit for sense of belonging for participants. Conversely, negative experiences with faculty served to hinder a connection with faculty. This is not to say that faculty should withhold rightful critiques of doctoral students' research or scholarship. Critique is part of the doctoral experience. This is also not to say that faculty tenure and promotion metrics value include student connection, experiences, or intangible products of doctoral student socialization (e.g., publications, grants, national presentations, etc.). What I am saying is that if faculty have an investment in doctoral student success, intentionally serving as a point of connection for students can enhance sense of belonging and potentially translate into more successful doctoral students or more rich experiences for students.

Faculty whose scholarship and prior professional practice include student development and learning, particularly those in student development or equity, diversity, and inclusion are encouraged to provide mentorship and training or development for faculty across campus through established or newly implemented programming. I recognize that tenure-track faculty are already committed to activities that count toward promotion and tenure and that non-tenure track

faculty are obligated to their responsibilities within the institutional context; therefore, I encourage institutions to consider how mentorship and training and development can be incentivized through the tenure and promotion and other reward structures (Kezar & Lester, 2009).

### **Graduate Student Community Building**

Graduate student socialization centers on knowledge acquisition that transforms a learner into a more skilled and expert professional or scholar, investment in, and involvement within their academic or professional field (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001), but conceptual frameworks and theories related to mattering and belonging (Schlossberg, 19xx,; Strayhorn, 2012) hopefully, inform practitioners' awareness of students' need to connect with others. Involved students have stronger connects and sense of purpose than students who are not involved (Astin, 1984), and for graduate students, involvement is encouraged through academic department programs and professional activities (e.g., presentations, conference attendance, internships, etc.). The isolating experience of graduate study emerged during the study and highlighted the need for programming that built among graduate students beyond their academic departments. Community building programming that provided formal opportunities for racially minoritized graduate students to connect with other racially minoritized graduate students occurred through Ubuntu, a graduate student organization founded to create social events for racially minoritized graduate and professional students on the campus. For sista-scholars in this study, community building occurred through informal networking but was assisted by knowledge of and association with Ubuntu.

Ubuntu was a fee supported, student run organization that, along with the Graduate Student Union (GSU), created programming for graduate students on the campus. In comparison,

programming targeting undergraduate students was coordinated by a student board that was supervised by a graduate staff and professional staff member and was housed in an office that was dedicated to programming. It is important to note that graduate students can attend events hosted by the undergraduate programming board. I recognize that graduate student socialization is centered within academic programs; however, opportunities to connect with other graduate students, particularly for racially minoritized students seeking connection with other racially minoritized students, is a consideration for student affairs practitioners. I encourage institutions and practitioners to consider allocating funding to staff who could support graduate student programming within colleges or at the university level. Consider that graduate student socialization occurs within academic programs, requires investment and involvement, and graduate students who lead Ubuntu and GSU make time to invest in programming for all graduate and professional students, regardless of academic department. That is work that could be done by a staff member who can work with academic faculty or a current campus programming board to create social opportunities for graduate students so that those students can focus on their academic program and not be mostly responsible for coordinating social opportunities for their peers. For institutions with a graduate school, consider developing or revising a staff member's role to better support graduate student programming within colleges and as an institution.

### **Spaces for Black Women**

Black women need space, in community, away from the White and male gaze. The strength, comfort, affirmation, and representation experienced or desired in community with other Black women emerged in this study. Sista-scholar Nicki said that the Black doctoral women she knew on campus were her “saving grace”, and the sista-scholars in her sista circle

agreed through verbal and nonverbal cues. Sista-Scholar Alexa said that she had mourned the leaving of other Black women from her program because their absences reminded her that she was alone without them. When Black women who need or desire community with other Black women make and take up space for themselves, do not stand in their way. That space may very well be a measure of self-care in a decentralized graduate process.

I encourage Black women at historically White institutions to organize themselves, in-person or virtually, in small or large groups, to connect with similarly situated Black women who may be able to provide support that is situated in lived experiences at the intersection of race and gender. In-group conversations can cultivate learning, affirmation, and renewal not provided or available elsewhere on campus.

Response to the sista circle study was so strong from sista-scholars that the peer reviewer and I planned to host a sista circle each month after the study ended through graduation (e.g., February-April). At the time of my defense, two sista circles had occurred and a final sista circle was being planned for April. These sista circles were open to all people who identified as Black and woman. At a former institution, I advised an organization of Black women that centered on having natural hair (i.e., within the African Diaspora, hair that has not been chemically straightened). Through that organization's social events for members, Black women could let their proverbial and literal hair out, have in-group discussions, and build community with other Black women on campus. Although the organization's primary membership was undergraduate Black women, the premise of space to commune beyond the gaze of White and male identified persons remains. As a Black woman with natural hair and advisor to the organization, I spent many days having impromptu sista circles in my office with executive board members who

needed or wanted to talk about school, share good news, process a personal challenge, or just be in the company of other Black women.

I am admittedly conflicted on how to advise leaders at historically White institutions on how to address supporting Black women on campus, not because I lack an understanding of some of the challenges that people at the intersection of Black and women experience, but because of the histories of exclusion, particularly of person who were Black, woman, or both. I recognize the incongruence in Black women students doing the emotional and cultural labor to maintain themselves (e.g., persistence) and institutions taking credit for their achievements (e.g., retention) without acknowledging the labor of those women. I simultaneously am cautious of historically White institutions' history of tokenizing programs for marginalized groups and marketing these organizations as fixes to systematic issues (e.g., white supremacy, sexism, homophobia, etc.).

As a scholar-practitioner, I encourage practitioners and faculty who are interested in sponsoring or advocating for spaces (e.g., programs, physical space, organizations, etc.) for Black women to simply be to hold universities accountable to not tokenize spaces and programs that meet the cultural needs of students that they have admitted to the institution and to encourage students to create the spaces they need for themselves in the meantime or in addition to or with the resources provided by the institution. For example, university administrators may require programs to be assessed and evaluated each year, but the metrics used to measure program impact or effectiveness may not capture the usefulness of a space for minoritized students to simply be. In that instance, I encourage administrators who require assessment and evaluation to revise their data collection methods (e.g., qualitative instead of quantitative) and

metrics or values. Identifying a definite “right” answer is not the goal of these implications, but submitting multiple, even competing, ways to be closer to that which is just was my goal.

### **Boundaries**

This study is bound to a single institution in the American southeast. It is also bound by race and gender. Data collection for this study occurred over four sista circles, with sista circles varying in size for three of the four circles. Findings should not be generalized to persons or populations beyond this study (Creswell, 2014); however, I encourage readers to use this study as a pathway to learning about the experiences of Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution.

### **Future Research**

#### **Community Cultural Wealth Analysis**

This study examined experiences of Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution through the conceptual framework of sense of belonging. Sista-scholars in this study persisted with the help of the sista-scholars’ personal self-determination, supportive relationships with faculty, and the support of other sista-scholars. In the future, an examination of this groups’ experience through a community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005) might reveal capital that this group of students bring with them to the learning environment. A community cultural wealth analysis of the practices used by graduate students of color could illustrate the wealth of knowledge and communal agency that graduate students of color employ to persist in educational spaces that were not created for them. Sista-scholars in this study created sista-scholar networks when possible, engaged in self-care through time with significant others (e.g., family, friends, partners, etc.), and utilized relationships with faculty to advance in their programs. Expanding the cultural wealth study to include Black women in graduate school who



identified as of the African Diaspora socialized outside of the United States would be helpful since this study centered U.S. American socialized Black women. A study like this would benefit other Black women in doctoral programs in understanding how other Black women navigate relationships with faculty, institutional bureaucracy, structural oppression and individual discrimination, and persist, as well as how community cultural wealth is an appropriate framework for students socialized beyond the U.S.

### **Black Girl Magic as Methodology**

Sista circle methodology was designed to serve as an inquiry method that centered the gendered and cultural experiences of Black women in the examination of issues related to Black women that centered Black women, their voices, and their experiences (Johnson, 2015). In my experience and in the experiences of this study's participants, sista circle methodology did just that. It simultaneously served as a support group for sista-scholars in which they were able to provide feedback to other sista-scholars, affirm each other's experiences, and reflect on what other sista-scholars' experiences meant or could mean for their own experience (Collins, 2000). In community with Black doctoral women from across campus, sista-scholars could let out their proverbial hair and be more vulnerable in that space than many other spaces on campus.

I encourage Black women doing qualitative research with Black women to use sista circle methodology to interrogate and investigate the lived experiences of Black women. Reciprocity in sista circle methodology is instantaneous, with participants engaging in dialogical learning and active reflection during the circle. In completing this study, I was reminded that proximity to and community with other Black women was a challenge for some sista-scholars and that the sista circle provided an opportunity for those women to meet and connect with other Black women.

This chapter focused on the discussion and implications of the findings for the study on how Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution experienced sense of belonging. Findings related to sense of belonging were consistent with literature on Black women's experiences at historically White institutions and emerging findings supported the use of sista circle methodology for inquiry related to Black women. Implications for this study included expanded services and programming for graduate students, awareness raising for the cultural and practical purposes of Black graduate women's gathering together, and responsiveness of faculty to student needs and sense of belonging as a strategy to lower attrition and increase student success. Finally, the chapter closed with implications for future research, which encouraged Black women researchers to consider sista circle methodology for inquiries that center the experiences of Black women and for the utilization of intersectional inquiry to complicate single identity narratives.

### **Summary**

This study used sista circle methodology to explore sense of belonging of Black women at a historically White institution. The study took place at a historically White institution in the southeastern United States in January 2017 and represents the collective experiences of fifteen participants, researcher and peer reviewer included. Sista circles were the primary source of data.

Through four sista circles, participants shared their experiences with faculty and peers, learned about each other's experiences, triumphs, strategies for self-care, and persistence, and connected with other similarly situated Black women on the campus. Participants experienced disconnect through unproductive relationships with faculty, indifferent or antagonistic relationships with peers, and the campus' dominant undergraduate culture. Participants experienced sense of belonging through productive relationships with faculty that helped

participants navigate politics and policies and that connected faculty to students beyond participants' roles as a student and through community with Black women that affirmed and encouraged them through the doctoral process.

The response to sista circles as methodology was characterized as affirming, reflective, and intellectually stimulating and research informative. This study's findings related to sista circle as methodology support the use of sista circle methodology for inquiry where experiences of Black women need to be brought center. The use of Black Feminist epistemology recognizes the multiple and intersectional identities and experiences that shape Black women's understandings of the world around them. Through Black feminist epistemology within sista circle methodology, sista-scholars openly shared their experiences with race, racism, and other Black women and could articulate challenges in nuanced ways that they felt or knew were unwelcomed or risky to articulate in other spaces on the campus.

Implications for student affairs practice gleaned are intentional graduate student services and programming, specifically related to mental wellness services and community building, and creating space for Black women to fellowship together beyond the White and male gaze as a means of self-care and community building. Implications for future student affairs research include increased use of sista circle methodology as a reciprocal inquiry method for research done by and for Black women, a community cultural wealth analysis of Black graduate student persistence, and research on intra-racial community building for Black graduate students.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### Call for Participants

Greetings.

I am Joan Collier, a doctoral candidate under the direction of Dr. Diane Cooper in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services in the College of Education at The University of Georgia. I am recruiting participants for my dissertation study about sense of belonging as it relates to Black women in doctoral programs. The purpose of this study is to explore sense of belonging among Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution and the intent is to position the findings from this study to amplify the voices and experiences of Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution and to better equip graduate faculty and staff in fostering (more) inclusive and supportive learning environments that support Black women in pursuit of doctoral study. The study is IRB approved.

Inclusion criteria are below:

- Identify as Black/African descendant
- Identify as a woman
- Be currently enrolled in and have completed at least one semester of study in a doctoral program at UGA. Students in professional school (e.g. law school) are not eligible for this study.
- Be at least 18 years old, and
- Have been socialized in the US for at least half of your lived experience

If you or someone you know meet the criteria for this study and are interested in being a part of the study, please contact me at [jncollier@uga.edu](mailto:jncollier@uga.edu) if you have additional questions or click the following link to provide your information to the researcher:

[https://ugeorgia.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_6eXWuGYn2uVc0W9](https://ugeorgia.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_6eXWuGYn2uVc0W9)

\*\*\*Participants will have refreshments provided to them during the sista circle experience\*\*\*

## APPENDIX B

### Sista Circle Confirmation Email

Greetings.

Thank you for being a part of the dissertation study related to sense of belonging of Black women in doctoral programs. Your sista circle will be on **Wednesday, January 11 from 8-10 PM at Home of Sista-Scholar.**

Location Address

Your sista circle will last 60-120 minutes, and per protocol, you are free to withdraw your participation at any point during the research process.

If you have further questions or concerns, my contact information is listed below for contact.

404-556-8884 (cell)

[jncollier@uga.edu](mailto:jncollier@uga.edu)

This study is under the direction of Dr. Diane Cooper. Her email address is [dlcooper@uga.edu](mailto:dlcooper@uga.edu) should you have the desire to contact her with a concern or inquiry.

I look forward to learning with and about you during the sista circle experience.

Best regards,

Joan Collier

## APPENDIX C

### Qualtrics Consent Form and Demographic Questionnaire

Dear Participant:

I am a doctoral student under the direction of Dr. Diane Cooper in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at The University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research study entitled Exploring Sense of Belonging of Black Women in Doctoral Programs that is being conducted under the auspices of the College of Education. The purpose of this study is to explore sense of belonging among Black women in doctoral programs at a historically White institution. To be included in this study, participants must,

- Identify as Black/African descendent/African American
- Identify as a woman
- Be currently enrolled in AND have completed at least one semester of study in a doctoral program at UGA.
- Be at least 18 years old.
- Have been socialized in the U.S. for at least half of life.

Your participation will involve completing a demographic survey (5 minutes), participating in a sista circle (60-120 minutes), and providing feedback on initial thematic findings (optional: 30 minutes). Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you decide to stop or withdraw from the study, the information/data collected from or about you up to the point of your withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed. Participants' personally identifiable information will be kept confidential. Participants will have the opportunity to select a pseudonym to protect their identity. I will have access to protected information (e.g. personally identifiable information). Sensitive data will be kept safe on a password protected computer in my personal possession. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or any identifying information will not be used. In fact, the published results will be presented in summary form or represented with pseudonym attachment only.

The findings from this project may provide information regarding Black women's socialization as doctoral students. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me at 404-556-8884 or send an e-mail to [jncollier@uga.edu](mailto:jncollier@uga.edu) or Dr. Diane Cooper at [dlcooper@uga.edu](mailto:dlcooper@uga.edu). Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson,

University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 609 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address irb@uga.edu.

By acknowledging and agreeing with the statements above, you are agreeing to participate in the above described research project. `

Thank you for your consideration!

Sincerely,

Joan Collier

### Demographic Questions

Q1. Name (Last, First)

-Open Response

Q2. Nationality/Ethnicity (e.g. African American, Jamaican, Afro-Latinx Puerto Rican, etc.)

-Open Response

Q3. Current enrollment status:

-Choose one: Full-time, Part-time

Q4. Program of Study (e.g. College Student Affairs Administration, Public Administration, etc.)

-Open Response

Q5. Year in study (e.g. 1st year student, 3rd year student, 4th year candidate, etc.)

-Open Response

Q6. Age

-Open Response

Q7. Time lived/socialized in United States (e.g. all of life, 23 of 35 years, etc.)

-Open Response

Q8. Identities you would like to share with the researcher (e.g. sexuality, socio-economic status, religious/spiritual/meaning-making, gender identity, ability, etc.)

-Open Response

Q9. Chosen pseudonym for the study (If no pseudonym is selected, one will be assigned for the study)

-Open Response

Q10. Sista Circle availability (choose ALL that apply; your official date will be confirmed via email by researcher)



-Prescribed times and dates listed for selection

Q11. If "Other" availability selected in Q10, please indicate the time(s) and date(s) that work for you or your general availability below.

-Open Response

Q12. UGA email address to confirm sista circle date

-Open Response

Q13. Food restrictions

-Open Response

Q14. Additional information you would like to share with the researcher

-Open Response

## **APPENDIX D**

### **Sista Circle Protocol**

#### **Centering Activity**

Audre Lord was quoted as saying, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare.” As Black women in doctoral programs, what does this quote mean to you?

#### **Sense of Belonging Prompt**

Sense of belonging relates to feeling or being connected to and valued by people and communities. Consider relationships with peers, faculty, and other members of the campus community. Who and what are your connections?

#### **Sista Circle Prompt**

What have been your experiences as part of this sista circle? What has been your experience of being in community and in conversation with other Black women in doctoral programs? Any and all responses are welcome.