NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FACTORS INFLUENCING CAREER DECISION MAKING AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

by

STEPHANIE ANDREE DAVID

(Under the Direction of Diane Cooper)

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study, grounded in the methodological traditions associated with Black Feminist Theory and Career Constructivist Theory, incorporates the use of storytelling and narratives to identify the factors that influence career decision making among African American women. The researcher utilized semi-structured interviews to elicit stories from participants regarding their experiences as they engaged in the career decision making process. Through the use of narrative analysis, the researcher concluded that pursuit of happiness/interest, exposure to the field through work experience, financial security, and parental direction emerged as factors that influenced career decision making among the participants.

INDEX WORDS: African American women, Career decision making, Qualitative, Ph.D., Counseling and Student Personnel Services, The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

This process has been one of the toughest experiences of my life. Throughout this journey, I have been humbled as I experienced failures and felt validated as I experienced triumphs. Oftentimes, I would hear comments about my strength and endurance for being able to go through this process of writing a dissertation while being a wife, mother, and full-time school counselor. People would compliment me for continuing with my doctoral degree despite all of my many responsibilities. People often asked me how I was able to make it to the end of the program. Well, I only made it through because of God and a dear friend whom He placed in my life.

While I was developing as a scholar, I was also developing as a follower of Christ. I believe that God used this program to show me that He can get me through anything as long as I rely on Him. Although His word often strengthened me and gave me assurance, He also placed Avie in my life to show me how to walk through life knowing He keeps His promises. When I think about a person who portrayed the very essence of what God wants from us, I think of one of my closest friends, Paul “Avie” Durr. As I journeyed through this program, I stumbled often, and I would lose sight of the blessings I receive every day from God. Avie reminded me to enjoy every aspect of life. Avie was someone I relied on to make me laugh and who helped me appreciate every aspect of my life, even the stumbles and free falls.

Avie was also a graduate student who worked full time. He was not married with children, but he had his own burden. Avie became very ill a few years ago and had been
hospitalized for extended periods of time. Avie eventually had to have part of his foot
amputated. This amputation impacted his ability to walk. Avie never allowed his illness or
injury to keep him from embracing life with joy and optimism. Avie believed God.

Avie passed away on April 27, 2012 at the age of 32. Until his death, Avie used his
triumphs and challenges to encourage others to develop a relationship with God, since he knew
that ultimately God brings us through every good and bad moment of our lives. Avie often wrote
devotionals, which helped me to persevere through this journey. Avie’s devotionals encouraged
me to continue to pursue God’s plan for me despite my failures and setbacks.

I would like to end this section with Avie’s words:

*Finally, I was told that the best way to get to recovery is to keep walking. Despite the
need for adjustments . . . despite the pain . . . despite alignment issues . . . the best way to
heal is to keep on walking. In our Christian walk we will hurt. We will make missteps.
We will occasionally be out of place. However, that is never an excuse not to keep on
walking. You see, unless YOU are moving The Blood will never flow in you. We have to
have the courage to stand and to keep on walking, knowing that God is with us. (Isaiah
43:2).*

Thank you, Avie, for embodying the friend that God created us to be for each other. You
are a brother to me. Although you are gone, our friendship and my love for you live on, as I
know I will reunite with you in eternity. This dissertation is dedicated to you, Avie!
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There is no way I could have completed this dissertation without God and the support of my family. I thank God for strategically placing people in my life who encouraged me to finish. God provided people who believed in me to the extent that they sacrificed their time in order to help me complete this study. Firstly, I thank God for everything. I would be nothing and do nothing without Him. He is everything. Secondly, I thank God for giving me my parents, Serge David and Marie Michelle Honorat, who encouraged me to pursue my dreams. Thirdly, I thank God for my husband, Jason Caine, who believes in me and pushes me to strive for God’s infinite blessings. Jason reminds me every day to grow in Him, knowing that God can and will do anything for me. Jason is the only person with whom I feel comfortable sharing my fears and uncertainties. Jason knew how to push me past my fears by reminding me of God’s promises to me.

I thank God for my in-laws, James Caine and Cynthia Caine, as well as my sister-in-law Joy Holmes. My mother, along with my in-laws, often sacrificed their time to watch my twins as I spent hours at Starbucks working on this paper. My family never showed any frustration as I asked them time and time again for assistance in watching my children. Rather, my family prayed for me and supported me, believing that I could complete this journey. The Caine family emulates Christ by embodying love, every day to everyone. Although my dad, Serge David, and brother, Stanley David, were not able to watch my children, they encouraged me to finish and prayed for me.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Career decision making is an essential aspect of life, as some theorists contend that it takes place throughout one’s lifespan (Gibbons, Woodside, Hannon, & Sweeney, 2011; Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011; Savickas, 2011; Super, 1953). Interests (Parsons, 1909; Zunker, 2005), career knowledge (Falconer & Hays, 2006), and personal experiences (Amundson et al., 2010; Elley-Brown, 2011; Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011) have been reported by multiple theorists as factors that may dictate career decisions. Some theorists suggest that personal characteristics such as ethnicity, culture, class, and gender, among others, impact career opportunities and experiences, as people may encounter barriers in the form of discrimination and prejudice at the hands of employers and colleagues in the workplace (Alfred, 2001; Booth & Meyers, 2011; Cheatham, 1990; Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003). It is important to research the career experiences of ethnic minorities as they strive to achieve career success, particularly as the labor force is diversifying and practitioners will need to work with ethnic minority clients who are facing challenges in the workforce as a result of their ethnicity, class, race, or other traits (Walsh et al., 2001; Sue et al., 1999).

This study focused on African American women as one particular minority group that has faced challenges in the workforce as a result of the intersections of race and gender they possess. This study explored the career decision making process of African American women by portraying the career decision making stories of the African American female participants.
Through a critical analysis of the stories shared by the participants, the researcher identified themes that influenced the African American female participants’ career decision making.

This chapter explores the career experiences of African American women, as the researcher discusses the need to address social justice in organizations seeking diversification of their workforce. The researcher describes the representation and experiences of African American women in the current labor force. The researcher applied Black feminist theory as a theoretical approach to contextualize the challenges African American women experience as they encounter negative stereotypes in the workplace. Finally, the researcher depicts the stories of African American women in history who have used their careers as platforms to expose gender, racial, and class discrimination as well as to advocate for access to resources for their troubled communities.

**Diversity and the Labor Force**

More women and ethnic minorities are entering fields from which they have previously been absent (Alexander, 2010; Alfred, 2001; Alleyne, 2011; Combs, 2003). As corporations seek to diversify their departments, ethics and social justice are excluded as factors justifying the need for diversity (Giscombe & Mattis, 2004). There is also a lack of discussion regarding the discrimination and other barriers members of marginalized groups encounter when addressing the need for diversity within organizations (Giscombe & Mattis, 2004). The lack of recognition of social justice and ethics with regards to diversifying the workforce in corporations perpetuates a lack of cultural awareness, as managers and employees who are members of the dominant group fail to acknowledge the barriers members of marginalized groups encounter as they enter the world of work and operate in the work setting (Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Giscombe & Mattis, 2004).
If the dominant group in the workforce remains ignorant of the impact of discrimination and prejudice on minority employees, they will be unable to combat behaviors and practices in a work setting that prevent equal treatment of all employees (Alfred, 2001; Combs, 2003; Giscombe & Mattis, 2004). It is critical for members of the dominant group to be knowledgeable about the barriers members of marginalized groups encounter in the world of work. Members of marginalized groups not only experience barriers at the entry level, but also at the point of advancement in the workplace (Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; Holmes et al., 2007; Taniguchi, 2002). This study focused on African American women as members of a marginalized group who face barriers and challenges as they attempt to assimilate into the workforce.

**African American Women in the Labor Force Today**

The majority of the African American population is comprised of Black women. Sixty percent of the 34 million African Americans are women (Black Career Women, 2007). Given their numerical dominance within their population, Black women have the opportunity to impact the evolution of the Black community for years to come. Black women’s career decision making not only impacts their families, but also influences the development of the Black community as a whole (Rabaka, 2003; Kaba, 2005). There are 9,447,000 African American women in the U.S. labor force, comprising 6.1% of the labor force. It is projected that by 2018, the number of Black women in the labor force will be 10,667,000 (Catalyst Inc., 2011).

Since 1998, the number of Black women in the workforce has increased by 26.3%. Sixty-four percent of Black women work outside the home, while 45% are heads of their households (Black Career Women, 2007). Black women who work outside the home while heading their households have a responsibility to provide for their families, a responsibility that
may influence which career field they choose to pursue (Collins, 1998; Fouquier, 2011; Kaba, 2008). This also means that many young Black females live in homes where they observe their mothers working, which may affect their career decision making. The number of homes headed by working Black women may also have impacted the number of Black females pursuing post-secondary education. In 2008-2009, among students who obtained bachelor’s degrees, 6.4% were Black women while 3.1% were Black men. Similarly, among students who obtained masters degrees, 7.6% were Black women while 3.0% were Black men. Finally, among students who obtained doctoral degrees, 4.4% were Black women while 2.1% were Black men (Catalyst Inc., 2011).

Table 1

Percentage of Black women versus Black men earning degrees

This data suggests that Black women are dominating post-secondary education in comparison to Black men as they earn bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees. By identifying factors that influence some Black women to pursue advanced degrees, practitioners may be
better equipped to encourage Black women to choose a path. It would be helpful for school
counselors, career counselors, student affairs practitioners, and mental health counselors to
identify the factors that influence Black women to pursue higher education and management
positions so they can encourage more young Black females to consider options in professional
careers and education, despite the barriers they face (Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003).

Black women’s experiences in institutions of higher education reflect their experiences in
the workplace (Alfred, 2001; Booth & Meyers, 2011; Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003;
Nichols & Tanksley, 2004). In addition to typical academic challenges, African American
women also face racism and sexism at higher education institutions (Alfred, 2001; Booth &
Meyers, 2011; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Falconer & Hays, 2006; Holmes et al., 2007; Nichols
&Tanksley, 2004; Sule, 2011). African American female college students experience a lack of
support and accessibility to academic services and faculty members in predominantly White
institutions (Alexander, 2010; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Falconer & Hays, 2006). Practitioners
have the opportunity to expand African American female college students’ knowledge of careers,
which can lead to greater representation of African American women in distinguished careers
(Constantine & Greer, 2003; Walsh et al., 2001). African American women’s career goals are
limited as their exposure to various careers is restricted, they face a lack of access to prominent
career options, they encounter negative racial and gender stereotypes, and they are less likely to
encounter role models who share their gender and race in certain fields (Alexander, 2010;
Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Smith, 2008; Taniguchi, 2002).

This study focuses on the career decision making experiences of African American
women as they share stories about their career decision making process. Recognizing the
challenges African American women confront in the workplace increases understanding by
contextualizing the stories the participants in this study shared as they discussed their career experiences. African American women confront institutional barriers such as racism, sexism, tokenism, lack of role models, and few mentoring opportunities (Alexander, 2010; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Nichols & Tanksley, 2004). While operating in the workplace environment is a different experience for racial/ethnic minorities in comparison to their male and female majority counterparts, African Americans also encounter different workplace interactions than other racial/ethnic minorities, experiencing more discrimination and more barriers to accessing training and promotion, in addition to feelings of disconnection from colleagues (Alexander, 2010; Combs, 2003).

African American women face the need to manage biculturalism, which includes the culture of their group and the culture of the institutions they enter (Alfred, 2001; Nichols & Tanksley, 2004). Giscombe and Mattis (2002) observe that members of the majority group hold positions of power, causing the dominant group’s culture to remain prevalent in the work setting. African American women seeking to pursue career advancement thus contend with obstacles that avert opportunities for promotion. African American women are often overlooked for positions of authority in organizations as a result of negative stereotypes (Alfred, 2001; Carr & Steele, 2010; Combs, 2003; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). African American women managers also experience covert discrimination and understated prejudices that prevent building relationships that would contribute to career advancement (Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003). A Black feminist perspective provides an explanation for how stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination impact African American women through the intersection of their gender and race as they enter the world of work (Collins, 1990, 2010a, 2010b; Griffin, 1991).
Application of Black feminist Theory to African American Women’s Career Experiences

The researcher contextualized the career decision making process in the participants’ stories by incorporating Black feminist theory. Black feminist theory addresses issues and experiences of Black women (Collins, 1990, 1996, 1998, 2010a, 2010b; Griffin, 1991). The core of Black feminism is to illuminate Black women’s experiences and ideas (Collins, 1990; Few, 2007). Black feminist theory is appropriate for this study as it addresses the intersection of race and gender (Collins, 1990; Few, 2007; Griffin, 1991). The researcher applied the perspective of prominent Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins, who delineated the tenets of Black feminist theory, to African American women’s experiences in their careers.

Collins discussed the impact of oppression and discrimination on African American women in terms of power (Collins, 2010a, 2010b; Griffin, 1991). Collins (2010b) described power relations as being formulated from core ideas that involve everyday knowledge, beliefs, and ideologies adopted by society. Collins (2010b) explained that power relations are the basis for social relations, as they frame social structures that are understandable to people. For example, negative stereotypes associated with African American women may impact workplace relationships as African American women seek support or opportunities to advance in their careers. Colleagues who are members of the dominant group may be resistant to forming relationships with African American women or may overlook them for positions of authority, as they have an adverse perception of them based on the adopted beliefs of society through the negative portrayal of African American women in the media (Alexander, 2010; Collins, 1990; Dimitriadis, Fine, & Lavia, 2009).

Collins (2010a) defined racism as a “domains-of-power framework” that includes four structural domains: institutional; disciplinary (i.e., in organizational rules); cultural (i.e., in pop
culture and media); and interpersonal (i.e., in relationships among individuals and communities) (Collins, 2010a). Collins’ domains-of-power framework addresses the antagonistic yet indirect inequalities that exist across social structures (Collins, 1990, 2010b; Griffin, 1991). African American women experience the domains-of-power framework as they face barriers resulting from biases at an institutional level, whether at an institution of higher education or in a work setting; within organizational rules that require access to resources or the building of relationships from which African American women are excluded; and in the media where they are portrayed as being either sex objects or servants (Collins, 2010b; Damaske, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Parlea-Buzatu, 2010). While Collins defined racism as a system of power, race is not the only characteristic of African American women that can prevent them from succeeding in their career pursuits (Collins, 1990; Kaba, 2008). Women of color are “doubly marginalized” as they encounter barriers because of their race and gender (Collins 2010a, 2010b; Griffin, 1991; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; Kaba, 2008, 2005; Parlea-Buzatu, 2010).

Collins’ concept of the “outsider within” illustrates how African American women are often received in the work setting. Collins proposed this concept to express how Black women may be invited into a setting in which they are the minority yet excluded from the dialogue, remaining voiceless (Grant, 2012; Holmes et al., 2007). In the work setting, African American women are often disregarded in building relationships with their colleagues and unrecognized in social interactions (Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Giscombe & Mattis, 2004). The African American women thus remain outsiders, as relationships are typically not formed with members of the dominant group (Alfred, 2001; Betz, 2002; Combs, 2003). African American women must decide whether to remain outsiders or conform to the dominant group in order to engage in interoffice relationships (Alfred, 2001; Combs, 2003). African American women
encounter challenges as they enter White institutions because their cultural values are not recognized, which compels African American women to discard their culture and adopt the values of the majority (Alfred, 2001; Nichols & Tanksley, 2004).

Collins (1996) explained her theory in an article entitled, “Outsider Within: Black Feminist Theory.” The “outsider within” status is a special standpoint theory on self, family, and society for African American women, exploring and explaining the sociological significance of three characteristics of thought: (1) self-definition and self-valuation; (2) the interlocking nature of oppression; and (3) the importance of culture. These are three key themes that African American women, as outsiders within, may draw upon to develop a distinctive standpoint on existing sociological paradigms (Alexander, 2010; Collins, 1996).

Through reflecting on their career decision making process, African American women are better able to examine the three characteristics of standpoint theory as they identify the factors that shaped their career decision making and assess their career decisions. African American women may reflect on how racism, sexism, and other “isms” have impacted their career decisions, as well as their experiences within their career, through the concept of the “outsider within.” Understanding the origins of the discrimination, oppression, and negative stereotyping African American women encounter in the workplace today may strengthen our awareness of how African American women have evolved despite the injustices they face (Dimitriadis, Fine, & Lavia, 2009; Kaba, 2005).

**Impact of Stereotypes on African American Women in the Workplace**

The origin of African American women’s careers in the U.S. is slavery. Most African American women were brought to the U.S. as slaves in a system of brutal oppression (Johnson, 2004; Steward, 2010). Collins (1990) defines oppression as a discriminatory situation in which
one group is subordinate while the other group is dominant. In the dynamics of oppression, the dominant group withholds access to resources from the subordinate group (Alfred, 2001; Bose, 2012; Collins, 1990; Dimitriadis, Fine, & Lavia, 2009). Oppression may be based on race, class, gender, sexuality, national origin, age, or ethnicity, among other characteristics (Alfred, 2001; Bose, 2012; Collins, 1990; Dimitriadis, Fine, & Lavia, 2009).

Although it has been approximately 150 years since African American women were enslaved in the literal sense, they have been enslaved figuratively as they lived in a society where the dominant group ignored their value as citizens by excluding them from same civil rights the majority enjoyed and utilized to navigate through life (Collins, 1990; Rabaka, 2003; Johnson, 2004). While Black women have evolved in establishing themselves as valuable citizens and have accomplished educational and professional success, they still encounter oppression, discrimination, and negative stereotypes in various settings and experience hardships as a result of their gender or race, among other characteristics (Alexander, 2010; Combs, 2003; Collins, 1990; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Dimitriadis, Fine, & Lavia, 2009; Giscombe & Matiss, 2002). Although Black women have proven to be tenacious and have exhibited perseverance, the injustice they have experienced in the past and continue to face should be recognized (Collins, 1990; Dimitriadis, Fine, & Lavia, 2009; Griffin, 1991; Kaba, 2005; Walsh et al., 2001).

Society’s ideology regarding Black women is influenced by images of Black women that originated during slavery (Collins, 1990; Damaske, 2011; Ladson-Billins, 2009; Parlea-Buzatu, 2010). Collins highlighted how systemic discrimination has been normalized through the pervasiveness of stereotypical images of Black women as mammyes, matriarchs, Jezebels, or welfare queens (Collins, 2010b; Damaske, 2011; Gillum, 2007; Harnois & Infatunji, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Parlea-Buzatu, 2010). The exploitation African American women
experienced as slaves used for cheap labor manifested into images of being mammies, jezebels, and breeders through the media to society (Collins, 1990; Gillum, 2007). These images were then transformed into such representations as the iconic Aunt Jemima, as well as the welfare mothers and Black prostitutes seen in popular culture (Collins, 1990).

These negative stereotypes associated with Black women contribute to their oppression. Oppression is present in various settings including the workforce (Alexander, 2010; Alfred, 2001; Constantine & Greer, 2003). Black women may encounter stereotypes that prevent them from developing in their careers or that may impact them as they make career decisions (Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001). Negative stereotypes and oppression may impact the way African American women engage in the career decision making process and ultimately make career decisions (Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001). This study presents the career decision making process of African American women as they describe the factors that impacted their career decision making.

The media perpetuates the stereotypes Black women face as they participate in the workforce (Damaske, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Parlea-Buzatu, 2010). Damaske (2011) argues that the media’s messages about race, gender, and class influence societal expectations of the types of women participating in paid labor. The media’s portrayal of Black women, in particular, has influenced the way Black women feel they are perceived by their colleagues in the workplace (Damaske, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2009). The media’s depiction of African American women represents one barrier that circumscribes Black women’s vision of who and what they can become (Collins, 2010b; Damaske, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Parlea-Buzatu, 2010).
Such representations influence public perceptions of African American women as well as Black women’s views of themselves (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Meyers, 2004). Meyers (2004) argued that “racism, sexism, and poverty are normalized and naturalized by defining African American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mammas” (p. 99). These stereotypical images inevitably impact the kinds of positions Black women hold in the workplace. As mammies, they are viewed as a support system; as Jezebels, they are viewed as unqualified; and as Sapphires, they are seen as having attitude problems (Damaske, 2011; Parlea-Buzatu, 2010). Such stereotypes have been seared into the American consciousness, excluding Black women from consideration for certain types of positions and limiting their opportunities for advancement (Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Giscombe & Matiss, 2002).

Although “strong” may appear to be a positive description, it disadvantages Black women by preventing them from receiving support or advocacy from others in their efforts to overcome obstacles (Damaske, 2011; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2008). “Perhaps the only stereotype that does more harm to Black women in the workplace than the angry or loving Black woman is the representation that characterizes Black women as ‘strong.’ This interpretation of the Black superwoman forces Black women into a narrow space between heroic imagery and burdensome experience” (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2008, p. 326). Practitioners may serve as advocates for Black women by providing support when they encounter barriers while choosing careers (Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001). Practitioners who are knowledgeable about the various stereotypes of Black women are more equipped to process the concerns Black women may feel as they consider nontraditional fields, or as they share stories of painful experiences in the workplace (Combs, 2003; Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001).
The stereotypes African American women encounter in the workplace have deep historical roots (Collins, 2010a, 2010b; Damaske, 2011, Ladson-Billings, 2009; Parlea-Buzatu, 2010). Since slavery, African American women have faced having their identities established for them at the hands of their masters (Johnson, 2004; Rabaka, 2003; Siemen, 2004). As slaves, their masters decided their responsibilities and identified their strengths and roles in the plantation and household (Johnson, 2004). Over time, African American women have had to fight societal expectations, and have worked to shatter stereotypes and to make their own decisions about the roles they want to inhabit in the labor force and in society as a whole (Collins, 1990; Griffin, 1991). Historically, African American women have been unrepresented in the women’s movement and civil rights movement, causing them to be voiceless at the hands of their oppressors as well as in relation to their white female and black male counterparts as they fought for equal rights (Steward, 2010; Johnson, 2004).

This study utilized narratology to provide African American women with a platform to share their career decision making experiences. This study amplified the voice of a group that has historically been voiceless. The study elicited the perspectives of African American women in telling their own stories about their process of career choice. By hearing the stories of African American women, others can learn more about African American women’s lives (Collins, 1990; 2000; Griffin, 1999). Collins asserted that personal experiences and cultural biographies are a valid contribution to knowledge (Choo, 2012; Collins, 2000; Elley-Brown, 2011). The researcher sought to allow the voices of African American female pioneers to guide readers through the evolution of African American women as they establish themselves in the workforce and society. Collins (1996) described the “voice” of many notable Black feminists who wrote and spoke out about the experiences of Black women during the Black feminist movement.
Throughout history, Black women have used their careers as platforms to voice the issues plaguing their communities as well as to act to improve those communities (Johnson, 2004; Steward, 2010).

**Voices of Activism through Careers among African American Women**

Ida B. Wells was an African American journalist who co-owned the newspaper *Free Speech* at the turn of the 20th century. The child of slaves who were freed as a result of the Emancipation Proclamation, Wells used her journalistic skills to protest the brutality of lynchings in America. She dedicated her adult life to lecturing and writing about the atrocities of lynching. Wells challenged the explanation that the rape of White women by Black men was the motivation for lynching in the South. She risked her life by implying that White women’s attraction to Black men could be the true impetus for these lynchings (Collins, 2010b; Zackodnick, 2005). “Nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will over-reach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women” (Zackodnick, 2005, p. 262).

Hailed as the “Joan of the race,” Wells courageously lectured about the inhumanity of lynching and its weak premise of rape on the part of African Americans (Collins, 2010b; Zackodnick, 2005). She noted that African Americans were not only the victims of lynching, but also the victims of rape at the hands of their white counterparts, either through wrongful accusations or by directly experiencing rape (Zackodnick, 2005). Collins (2010b) reported that Wells was compelled to highlight the atrocities of lynchings after her friend was lynched. Wells dedicated her work to changing the legal system and social structures that allowed and justified lynching innocent African Americans (Collins, 2010b).
While the lynching of African Americans continued into the 20th century, tough economic times brought attention to the economic disparity between whites and blacks (Johnson, 2004). In the 1920s, Harlem served as a setting for major reform and activism related to these economic differences (Johnson, 2004). This same decade marked the emergence of African American professionals in the workforce (Johnson, 2004). Yet just a decade later, unemployment plagued the city as a result of the Great Depression (Johnson, 2004). Many professionals, including nurses and teachers, lost their jobs, pushing them to domestic work (Johnson, 2004). The standard of living, employment, and education of African Americans suffered greatly (Johnson, 2004). As a result of the deterioration of Harlem, advocacy groups—including the NAACP, the Urban League, Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, and the Socialist and Communist Parties—emerged to protest the new conditions (Johnson, 2004).

In the midst of the advocacy groups’ formation, an act of police brutality took place that involved the near-death beating of a Black Puerto Rican teenager accused of stealing a pen at a department store (Johnson, 2004). This act resulted in the Harlem Riot of 1935, which destroyed stores along the street where the teenager was brutally beaten (Johnson, 2004). The stress of the economic times permeated the African American community in New York City, which was ready to see changes in their homes, work, and schools (Johnson, 2004). School reform became a focal point at this time in the midst of the activism in New York (Johnson, 2004). The teaching force in New York at this time consisted mainly of White Jews (Johnson, 2004). African American teachers primarily taught in Black areas, with a few in racially mixed schools (Johnson, 2004). The Harlem Riots shed light on the discrimination experienced by African
American educators and led some African American women educators to emerge as activists, demanding changes to the education system (Johnson, 2004).

   Lucile Spence emerged as one noteworthy activist for school reform (Johnson, 2004). One of the first African American teachers hired at her school, Spence earned her degree at Hunter College, which was known for its embrace of diversity (Johnson, 2004). Spence was a gifted college student who graduated with honors, then moved on to earn a master’s degree at Columbia University (Johnson, 2004). She was best known for her work with the militant teachers’ union of New York City, which grew exponentially from 600 members in 1916 to 6,500 in 1935 (Johnson, 2004). Through the teachers’ union, Spence spoke often on school reform and issues plaguing the educational system (Johnson, 2004).

   Spence later wrote articles for a journal developed by the Anti-Discrimination Committee of the teachers’ union, Negro History Supplement, which discussed the importance of teaching African American history and promoting integration in schools (Johnson, 2004). Through her work with the committee, Spence focused attention on the poor condition of school buildings and facilities and the overcrowding of schools in Harlem, as well as on the formation of “zones” that tracked African American students to vocational schools during their high school years (Johnson, 2004). Spence asserted:

   Our struggle has been not to get separate courses or to have one Negro History Week, but to get the placing of the history and contributions of the Negro in every level of social studies, literature, and science wherever it naturally comes. We want this written into our courses of study for all the children of our city—to engender pride for the Negro child and appreciation for the white child. (Johnson, 2004, p. 227)
Gertrude Elise McDougald Ayer, the first African American woman to be appointed as a principal in New York City, was also active in school reform in Harlem in 1935 (Johnson, 2004). Ayer grew up in a prominent family; her father was one of the first African American doctors in New York City (Johnson, 2004). As a high school student, Ayer emerged as a leader among the student body and to her principal’s disapproval, wanted to be a speaker for graduation (Johnson, 2004). Although Ayer attended college, she never earned a degree (Johnson, 2004). One of her first positions in education was that of a vocational counselor who encouraged African American girls to stay in school (Johnson, 2004).

Through her work in the National Urban League, Ayer conducted a study on the working conditions of African American women in factories after World War I, which demonstrated the inequalities in the workplace for African American women (Johnson, 2004). As a principal, Ayer was characterized by the students, parents, and teachers in her community as kind, friendly, and encouraging to students (Johnson, 2004). The student population in Ayer’s school was 95% African American (Johnson, 2004). Within a few weeks of her appointment, she began offering financial assistance to unemployed parents (Johnson, 2004). Ayer incorporated a curriculum centered on real-world learning, with a focus on problem solving and utilizing real life scenarios (Johnson, 2004). She invited carpenters, butchers, doctors, and other professionals into the school to engage students in learning (Johnson, 2004). She also created a community-based school environment that welcomed parents and incorporated neighborhood field trips in which students would go out in the community to help others (Johnson, 2004).

One of her most notable students was writer James Baldwin, who recalled of Ayer, [S]he liked me. In a way I guess she proved to me that I didn't have to be entirely defined by my circumstances. . . . every Negro child knows what his circumstances are, but he
cannot articulate them because he is born into a republic which assures him in as many ways as it knows how. . . that he has a certain place and he can never rise above it. [Mrs. Ayer] was a living proof that I was not necessarily what the country said I was. (Johnson, 2004, p. 233)

Harlem’s electric movement and burdened community served as catalysts for the emergence of African American activists who fought for school reform (Johnson, 2004). Spence and Ayer were only two examples of many African American women who rose against the status quo and fearlessly pursued quality education for all students (Johnson, 2004). Their commitment, loyalty, and courage on behalf of the school reform movement depicted the power of the principle that “the personal is political.” Both women continued their activist work throughout their lives (Johnson, 2004). Spence’s and Ayer’s personal connection to education and the rights of their community fueled their incessant pursuit of justice and equity in education (Johnson, 2004).

While Spence and Ayer were pursuing equity in education, many other African American women from various socioeconomic backgrounds and geographical regions were participating in the Communist Party during the 1930s (Harris, 2009). These women were carrying on a legacy that included a focus on race, class, and gender as they relate to racial progress and community development (Harris, 2009). The Communist Party was seen as a mechanism through which the working class could engage in social and political reform to overthrow capitalism (Harris, 2009). Prior to the Great Depression, African American communities were burdened by poverty and unemployment, and denied access to public assistance through Franklin’s Roosevelt’s New Deal programs (Harris, 2009). With the onset of the Great Depression, African Americans
experienced another blow to their already-plagued communities, as the unemployment rate proved catastrophic for African American families (Harris, 2009).

African American women turned to the Communist Party in search of relief from unemployment, economic distress, and a lack of access to assistance and services (Harris, 2009). The Communist Party (CP) was focused on addressing issues plaguing the working class and poor (Harris, 2009). African American women were thus “drawn to the CP's campaign against racism, inadequate relief payments, and unemployment, as well as the communists’ commitment to uniting Black and white workers” (Harris, 2009, p. 24). Maggie Jones, an African American CP organizer in Cleveland, declared, “We unemployed workers stand always ready like soldiers, for the many hard battles ahead, looking to the Communist Party for its leadership and a better equipment to fight our enemy the capitalist class” (Harris, 2009, p. 24). The Communist Party also sponsored groups that worked within African American communities to provide relief (Harris, 2009).

Many African American women activists therefore viewed the Communist Party as an ally in combating racial inequality (Harris, 2009). One such activist, Capitola Tasker, was an Alabama native, wife, and farmer who was invited to lead seminars on Marxist ideology and speak on behalf of Southern workers about the oppression African American women experienced in the South (Harris, 2009). Tasker’s lack of education might have kept her out of the spotlight of activism, but the Communist party encouraged and supported her involvement (Harris, 2009). Tasker participated in a women’s conference protesting the spread of war and fascism (Harris, 2009). Listed under a pseudonym, Tasker spoke about the impact of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and the brutality and oppression of landlords on African Americans in the South (Harris, 2009). Tasker described social and racial inequality as “no individual fight. It’s a world-wide fight.
There’s nothing to lose and there’s everything to gain. But we must organize, we must” (Harris, 2009, p. 29).

African American women emerged as leaders in the Communist party by taking on leadership positions and running for office through the party (Harris, 2009). They were active in the League of Struggles for Negro Rights, the Unemployed Councils, and the International Labor Defense during the 1930s (Harris, 2009). Yet until recently, historians have largely ignored the dynamic role of African American women within the CP (Harris, 2009). As in other activist movements, African American women’s participation has often been discounted, overlooked by both African American men and White women (Harris, 2009). “In much of the history and historiography of the American Left,” historian Robin D. G. Kelley observed, “African American women have largely been invisible, lost in the cracks somewhere between the ‘Negro Question’ and the ‘woman question’” (Harris, 2009, p. 22).

Although more women than men participated in the civil rights movement and their participation was key to the continuation of the movement, they were often assigned to supportive positions and their leadership was overshadowed by that of their male counterparts (Steward, 2010). Organizations such as the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) upheld this gendered hierarchy (Steward, 2010). Ella Baker was one activist who left the SCLC as a result of the sexism within the organization (Steward, 2010). Baker formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960, an organization whose focus on group leadership and group decision making allowed the majority, often women, to make decisions regarding the next steps in the movement (Steward, 2010).
Bertha Bradford, an active participant in CORE, and James Earl Potts became key players in the CORE campaign to push for desegregation in Jonesboro, Louisiana, after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed segregation (Steward, 2010). Potts and Bradford, who both attended Grambling College, decided to apply for admission to Louisiana Polytechnic Institute, knowing they would be rejected on racial grounds (Steward, 2010). Upon their rejection, CORE filed a lawsuit against Louisiana Polytechnic (Steward, 2010). The lawsuit named James Potts but included Bertha Bradford only as a footnote, referencing her as another “Negro student who applied along with Potts” (Steward, 2010, p. 44). Although both Potts and Bradford were civil rights activists, Bradford was assigned a supportive role in the struggle to desegregate Louisiana Polytechnic. Bradford stated, “nobody ever really just sat down and told us why” (Steward, 2010, p. 45). Bradford went on to say that Potts was chosen as the defendant because he was “the guy” (Steward, 2010, p. 45).

Another notable African American female civil rights leader, Shirley Chisholm, led a victorious political career as the first African American woman elected to the United States Congress in 1968. Chisholm declared, “I will fight until I can’t fight anymore. I don’t mind the challenge” (Gallagher, 2007, p. 393). Chisholm, who came from the one of the poorest urban districts in the nation, used her political career to fight against racial, sexual, and class inequality (Gallagher, 2007). While many Black feminists were fighting the system, Chisholm decided to become part of the system to serve as a change agent within it (Gallagher, 2007). Throughout her political career, Chisholm highlighted the significance of sexual discrimination and urged the feminist movement to recognize their disregard of women of color (Gallagher, 2007).

Chisholm came from humble beginnings; during the Great Depression, her parents took on domestic jobs to support the family (Gallagher, 2007). As a child, she listened as her parents
discussed Marcus Garvey (Gallagher, 2007). In college, Chisholm’s activism developed as she fought for a course on “Negro History” to be offered on campus (Gallagher, 2007). Chisholm began a career in education, a common career path for college educated African American women during that time (Gallagher, 2007). In the early 1950s, New York had only one Black politician; when a judgeship became available due to a judge’s death, the politician collaborated with Chisholm and a committee to win the election of the first Black judge in Brooklyn (Gallagher, 2007). Chisholm gained support for her election to the New York State Assembly by focusing on women’s issues, which had largely been overlooked by her male counterparts (Gallagher, 2007).

Throughout her campaign, Chisholm promised to help the poor and fight against racial inequality (Gallagher, 2007). Once elected, Chisholm fought against racial discrimination in banking, investment, and insurance practices (Gallagher, 2007, p. 398). She also pushed for police officers to receive civil rights training, supported an increase in the minimum wage, and sought to provide unemployment insurance to hospital workers and agricultural workers (Gallagher, 2007). She proposed many bills to benefit women and used President Johnson’s War on Poverty declaration to push for programs that supported the poor, including a program that helped low income students attend college (Gallagher, 2007).

Upon reflecting on her campaign for the congressional seat against her male opponent, Chisholm stated, “It was not my original strategy to organize womanpower to elect me. . . . But when someone tries to use my sex against me, I delight in being able to turn the tables on him” (Gallagher, 2007, p. 401). Chisholm noted her disinterest in running an “anti-male” campaign while affirming her intention of supporting women: “We have to help Black men, but not at the
expense of our own personalities as women,” she declared. “The Black man has to step forward, but that doesn't mean the Black woman has to step back” (Gallagher, 2007, p. 401).

Imani Bazzel presents a more contemporary version of the ideals and goals put forth by Chisholm as she addresses various issues plaguing the Black community (Bazzell, 2006). Bazzell, who serves as department director for the Urban League of Champaign County and director of the Center for Civic Engagement and Social Justice with the Urban League of Champaign County, is a successor to Chisholm’s vision for racial equality (Bazzell, 2006). A community educator and organizer who addresses issues of race, gender, health care access, educational reform, and leadership development, Bazzell (2006) published an article entitled, “Is You Da One?: The Making of an Everyday Political Activist.” In the article, Bazzell described her impoverished childhood and her family’s frequent moves as her parents tried to provide for their six children. She described her parents as intelligent, with a father whose IQ classified him as a genius and a mother who completed a Ph.D. at age 65 (Bazzell, 2006). Nevertheless, Bazzell described her mother as a “shell of a woman” who was beaten down by constant rejection, devaluation, abuse, and self-sacrifice on behalf of her family (Bazzell, 2006).

Bazzell noted that her own feminist views emerged when she was still in school and refused to take a typing class that was encouraged and expected for girls (a decision, she notes, that she later regretted as she struggled to type term papers in college) (Bazzell, 2006). Bazzell grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, in an atmosphere in which struggle and activism within the Black community electrified the air (Bazzell, 2006). She described her family as nationalistic and Black power-oriented (Bazzell, 2006). Bazzell explained her development as an activist by noting:
The intersections of race and class were important in my formation. My commitment to erasing racism and economic exploitation runs deep. I am grateful to have grown up in the era I did when racial identity was so affirmed. I do not see this value as present today. Instead, I see much more confusion. I feel bad for young people for that reason and it drives my racial justice organizing. (Bazzell, 2006, p. 13)

These historical accounts of African American women who fought for equality and served as change agents within their career settings illuminate how the focus on life stories contributes to the clear recognition of identity, which leads to a strong self-concept that will persevere despite various role changes and transitions that occur in a dynamic work environment. The African American women activists all appeared to embrace and encourage changes in the work environment in order to positively impact the African American community’s class, gender, and racial issues (Johnson, 2004; Steward, 2010). African American women activists fought for social reorganization in the work setting to allow them to obtain leadership positions, as well as to assume previously inaccessible work roles (Gallagher, 2007). These activists’ identification of problems in the world of work and activism to achieve solutions establishes the crucial role of problem solving as a means of strengthening career adaptability. Given the history of African American women’s utilization of their careers as a means for activism, this study examines whether today’s African American women share the same motivations for their career choices or whether other factors impacted their career decision making.

**Summary**

Social justice and ethics should be discussed as organizations diversify their work environments. African American women, in particular, are members of a marginalized group who experience challenges in the work force as result of gender and racial discrimination.
Studies show that African American women encounter discrimination in higher education institutions and in the work environment. African American women’s experiences at work differ from those of their male and female counterparts. Black feminist theory offers an explanation and description of the experiences of African American women and argues for the importance of acknowledging the challenges they face as a result of their gender and race.

Patricia Hill Collins, a distinguished Black feminist scholar, has contributed to the expansion of Black feminist theory. Collins argued that power differences, biases, stereotypes, and oppression have resulted in African American women receiving unequal treatment in society. Collins argued that African American women should be able to use their life stories to teach others about their lives. Throughout the years, African American women have used their careers as a means to improve their communities by providing services and voicing the issues that plague their communities.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

African American women have struggled against discrimination that occurs at the intersections of race and gender (Bose, 2012; Collins 1990, 2000, 2010a, 2010b; Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Griffin, 1991; Giscombe & Matiss, 2002). African American women encounter unequal treatment as they enter higher education institutions (Alexander 2010; Collins, 1990; Grant, 2012; Nichols & Tanksley, 2004) as well as in the workplace (Alleyne, 2011; Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Giscombe & Matiss, 2002). As a result of negative stereotyping, African American women also face challenges as they seek career advancement and as they seek to build relationships in the workplace (Alleyne, 2011; Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Giscombe & Matiss, 2002).

This chapter examines the processes involved in decision making, in addition to the ways women engage in decision making. More specifically, it explores factors influencing career decision making among women. It briefly describes various career decision making models and identifies Bingham’s and Ward’s multicultural career decision making model as the most appropriate model for equipping practitioners to work with African American women seeking assistance in their career decision making process. The researcher incorporated Black feminist theory and career constructivism theory as the theoretical framework that will contextualize the participants’ stories about their career decision making experiences and experiences in the workplace. The researcher also describes the experiences of African American women in the
labor force as they encounter discrimination, preventing their career development and assimilation into the workplace.

**Decision Making**

Decision making is defined as a cognitive process that involves stages in which individuals assess a particular circumstance and determine an outcome to resolve an issue or identify a new way to manage a situation (Deniz, 2011; Jonassen, 2012; Lizarraga et al., 2007; Van Hooft, Taris, & Van der Flier, 2006). Selecting a particular choice in decision making is a cognitive process that involves assessing the choices (Carr & Steele, 2010; Deniz, 2011). Timing and processing are essential components of effective decision making (Deniz, 2011; Lizarraga et al., 2007). The process by which decision making takes place is universal, although the actual activities involved in it may vary (Deniz, 2011; Jonassen, 2012). Decision making includes stages that involve identifying and assessing alternative ways to resolve a problem until one solution is selected (Deniz, 2011; Jonassen, 2012; Lizarraga et al., 2007). Decision making entails designating a method for solving a problem that will produce the best outcome (Jonassen, 2012; Lizarraga et al., 2007; Sari, 2008).

One’s decision making style involves the way a problem is approached, the individual’s reaction to the problem, and the actions taken during the process (Deniz, 2011). Most decisions are rooted in values and beliefs (Jonassen, 2012; Lizarraga et al., 2007; Van Hooft, Taris, & Van der Flier, 2006). There are multicultural implications for decision making, as people’s values, beliefs, and norms influence the way they make decisions. Cultural values, individual differences, and social constructs may therefore impact decision making (Deniz, 2011; Van Hooft, Taris, & Van der Flier, 2006).
Similarly, gender impacts decision making because it contributes to individual differences, which shape values, beliefs, experiences, and the way people approach problems (Carr & Steele, 2010; Lizarraga et al., 2007). It appears that the decision making process for women is more time consuming than for men since women are more impacted by the environment, seek more information, and take more time to assess the options (Carr & Steele, 2010; Lizarraga et al., 2007). Established sex roles and stereotypes also impact the way women approach decisions, as many have adopted society’s values, traditions, and behavioral expectations (Carr & Steele, 2010; Lizarraga et al., 2007). Women are more concerned than men with time, money, the restrictions of the environment, and restrictions placed on them by the people around them as well as by potential consequences (Lizarraga et al., 2007; Van Hooft, Taris, & Van der Flier, 2006). Women place more focus on their emotions in the decision making process than men (Carr & Steele, 2010; Lizarraga et al., 2007).

Although the literature provides information regarding gender differences in decision making, there is little information dedicated to racial differences in decision making. Much of the literature related to decision making among African American women, in particular, is limited to medical decisions (Banks & Parks, 2004; Bryant et al., 2010; Galavotti & Richter, 2000; Groff et al., 2000; Lewis et al., 2000; Richter et al., 2000; Thompson-Robinson et al., 2005). For example, there are studies regarding African American women’s decisions to agree to certain medical procedures. More studies are needed regarding how African American women make decisions in order to educate practitioners about ways to process major decisions such as career selection. This study examined the decision making process of African American women as they explored career options. Making career decisions is a critical aspect of life, as
one’s career occurs over an individual’s lifespan (Gibbons, Woodside, Hannon, & Sweeney, 2011; Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011).

The way people conceptualize career is dynamic, changing as society evolves. Work instability contributes to people experiencing changes in their professional careers (Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011; Savickas, 2011; Savickas, Esbroeck, & Herr, 2005). Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite (2011) reported external and internal factors that impact career choices, including technology, society’s ideology, global economy, family, organizational expectations, personal needs, values, interests, education, and self-awareness.

Career decision making is multifaceted in that it encompasses all populations and involves various aspects of individuals’ lives and personalities (Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011). Career decision making is not limited to learning about the various careers that exist. Instead, career decision making is defined as self-efficacy in planning for and learning about careers, as well as learning about one’s self (Admundson et al., 2010; Cassie & Chen, 2012; Stringer & Kerpelman, 2010). Considering what appears to be an arduous process involved in career decision making, career counselors, school counselors, and mental health practitioners must be open to discussing personal, emotional, and social issues in addition to providing career information.

Personal, emotional, and social issues are unique to each individual, which may require counselors and practitioners to educate themselves on issues that emerge among different populations (Amundson et al., 2010; Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011). Counselors should be aware of the various factors that impact career decision making, including personal experiences and culture (Amundson et al., 2010; Gibbons et al., 2011; Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011). Parents influence the career decision making of children, particularly prior
to their adolescence, and the mother-daughter relationship impacts career decision making for women (Gibbons et al., 2011).

The relationship between career decision making and personal issues has many implications for professionals working with individuals who are engaged in making career decisions (Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011). Career counselors, school counselors, and mental health practitioners should encourage clients to consider various aspects of their lives in order to make a sound career decision and to help define their career path (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Savickas, 2011; Savickas, Esbroeck, & Herr, 2005). Recognizing the challenges clients face as they consider career decisions may assist them in conquering perceived barriers (Gati & Amir, 2010; Savickas, 2011). Utilizing career counseling strategies that focus on job searching and increasing career knowledge alone is ineffective in that it does not address the numerous other personal factors that influence career decision making.

The literature suggests that career counseling should focus more on relationships, personal experiences, and perception (Admundson et al., 2010; Elley-Brown, 2011; Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011). More recent research on career decision making suggests that reflecting on personal experiences involving interactions with parents, teachers, or other influential people regarding career selection, as well as personal experiences in school and the world of work, is essential and effective within a career counseling session (Greenbank, 2011; Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011). For example, clients may have grown up in an impoverished household, causing them to seek fields that offer financial stability rather than attending to careers that fit their interests. Thus Greenbank (2011) observed that “career advice should be student-centered and focused on the students’ personal circumstances, values and aspirations” (p. 253).
With vast differences in experiences across cultures, career counselors, school counselors, and mental health counselors may find it helpful to facilitate discussions about the connection between personal experiences and career decision making, as personal experiences may shape clients’ motivations for choosing particular fields (Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011; Savickas, 2011; Savickas, Esbroeck, & Herr, 2005). Effective practitioners consider their clients’ experiences and address the challenges they encounter (Sangganjanavanich & Magnuson, 2011; Savickas, 2011). Clients’ experiences and perspectives differ because they hold different characteristics. For example, female clients’ experiences may differ from those of their male counterparts, which may contribute to a particular career decision making process. Women, in particular, deal with gender role expectations and discrimination, which may shape the way they approach career exploration.

**Women and Career Decision Making**

Women encounter discrimination and expected gender roles as they enter male-dominated fields (Alleyne, 2011; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; Grunert & Bodner, 2011). Expected gender roles impact women’s decision making (Carr & Steele, 2010; Cassie & Chen, 2012; Elley-Brown, 2011; Grunert & Bodner, 2011; Van Hooft, Taris, & Van der Flier, 2006). Expected gender roles and encounters with discrimination may influence women’s career paths, as they tend to pursue traditionally “feminine” careers. As a result, women are poorly represented in leadership positions in academia and scientific fields (Alexander, 2010; Bayer Corporation, 2012; Grunert & Bodner, 2011).

Grunert & Bodner (2011) explain that women are less likely to pursue intensive research positions in chemistry as a result of family caretaking obligations that prevent them from committing to the long hours involved in working in scientific research settings. Similarly,
Taniguchi (2002) argued that family caretaking obligations are the primary motivation for women pursuing self-employment. Female students with a desire to pursue motherhood have a more limited career path than their male counterparts (Cassie & Chen, 2012; Giele, 2008). Socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and family all impact career development among women (Gibbons et al., 2011; Grunert & Bodner, 2011; Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011).

Similar to their decision making process, women tend to conceptualize careers differently from men, as they have a holistic perspective including emotional, psychological, spiritual, and physical factors, among others (Elley-Brown, 2011; Lizarraga et al., 2007). Women seek to find meaning and satisfaction in their careers (Betz, 2002; Elley-Brown, 2011). Awareness of careers and education influence the way women conceptualize careers as well as their career development (Constantine & Greer, 2003; Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011).

Studying women’s career decision making experiences is vital given that women comprise nearly half the U.S. workforce (Gibbons et al., 2011; Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011). Moreover, studies should consider the diversity within the female population, as women encounter different experiences in society as a result of the multiple identities they hold based on gender, race, and class, among other characteristics. Members of marginalized groups experience less favorable conditions in the labor market (Alfred, 2001; Alleyne, 2011; Betz, 2002; Combs, 2003; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011). Thus further research is needed on the career development of culturally diverse women (Constantine & Greer, 2003; Gibbons et al., 2011; Taniguchi, 2002; Walsh et al., 2001).

Originally, a review of the literature revealed no clear factors that influenced career decision making among African American women; however, findings from this study indicated that happiness played a significant factor in determining careers among the African American
female participants in this study. As a result of the significant finding that happiness is an influential factor in career decision making among African American women, the researcher revisited the literature to review the components of happiness. Participating in humanitarian acts (Bergsma & Ardelt, 2012; Bonke et al, 2009; Brulde, 2010; Layous et al, 2012; Savino et al, 2011; Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006); engaging in an act where the process is enjoyable and rewarding, also known as flow (Ambriz & Montorio, 2011; Carpentier et al, 2012; Kim-Prieto, 2005; Robinson et al, 2012; Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006); and identifying a purpose and meaning to life (Bauer et al, 2008; Carpentier et al, 2012) are all factors that contribute to happiness. Happy people ultimately are pleased with their decisions (Allison et al, 2003; Bouazzaoui & Mullet, 2002; Layous et al, 2012). Since a review of the literature did not reveal a connection between happiness or any other factors and career decision making among African American women, practitioners may need to identify strategies they can incorporate in counseling sessions with African American female clients in order to equip them in identifying factors that draw African American women to certain fields. A review of the various career decision making models indicates the need to include a multicultural component in career decision making models to equip practitioners to better serve a diverse population (Walsh et al., 2001).

**Career Decision Making Models**

While many career theorists have developed and proposed career models, the applicability of those models to ethnic minorities and women has often been criticized (Alfred, 2001; Arthur & McMahon, 2005; Walsh et al., 2001). Career theories possess the following assumptions: (1) work is prioritized as the most significant aspect of an individual’s life; (2) career decisions should be based on a match between individuals’ traits and the responsibilities
of a career; and (3) career development should include advancing in responsibilities, complication of duties, promotion, and increased financial compensation (Betz, 2002; Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011). Traditional career theorists, such as Donald Super, do not thoroughly address the fact that career advancement may be impeded by barriers ethnic minorities and women encounter in the workplace (Arthur & McMahon, 2005; Betz, 2002; Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002).

There are five career counseling models that encompass the vast number of counseling strategies utilized in working with a multitude of clients (Zunker, 2005). These models offer a framework through which practitioners can understand the career decision making process, identify a model or models that best suits their counseling style, and equip themselves with strategies that will allow them to work with clients from various backgrounds (Zunker, 2005). These models include trait-and-factor and person-environment-fit (PEF), developmental, learning theory, cognitive information processing (CIP), and the multicultural career counseling model for ethnic women (Zunker, 2005).

Trait-and-factor and person-environment-fit models focus on being more aware of the self in order to choose a career that matches one’s interests and skills (Hartung et al., 2002). The developmental model focuses on career decision making throughout life; theorists who subscribe to this model explain that career decision making is shaped throughout life as one develops (Zunker, 2005). Learning theory focuses on learning experiences throughout life (Zunker, 2005). Counselors who utilize strategies within the learning theory model focus on learning opportunities clients have had throughout their lives (Zunker, 2005). The cognitive information processing (CIP) model focuses on “problem solving and decision making and can be used for
individual, group, self-directed, and curricular programs” (Zunker, 2005, p. 112). Each career counseling model has a unique focus.

Donald Super was a well-known career theorist—although he did not regard himself as a theorist—who believed that career development occurred over the life span and evolved as self-concept developed (Super, 1953; Super, 1962; Zunker, 2005). In Super’s view, career development involves making choices continuously throughout one’s life (Super, 1953). Super’s focus on the self represented a significant element in his approach to counseling. Super (1962) acknowledged that counselors have a critical role in determining their clients’ “career maturity” and must provide appropriate guidance based on their maturity level.

Like Super, Gottfredson identified self-concept as a key element in career decision making (Zunker, 2005). In 1981, Gottfredson expanded on Super’s depiction of self-concept by arguing that social class, intelligence, and sex typing all contribute to self-concept (Zunker, 2005). Gottfredson’s model of circumscription and compromise also considered the influence of social justice factors in the process of career decision making, exploring how gender, size, power, and economic status may impact career exploration and development (Cassie & Chen, 2012; Gottfredson, 1981).

While Super and Gottfredson emphasized the importance of self-knowledge in career development, Krumboltz argued that learning is equally significant (Zunker, 2005). Krumboltz viewed individuals’ lives as filled with countless learning experiences, and argued that career counselors should engage their clients in further learning as they explore careers (Feller, Honaker, & Zagzebski, 2001). Krumboltz (2009) believed career counselors should guide clients in exploring careers that will lead to satisfying professional and personal lives.
Counselors may have a significant impact on clients’ knowledge of careers, themselves, and how they approach career decision making.

Peterson, Sampson, Reardon, and Lenz, the developers of the cognitive information processing model, explained that counselors have the task of assessing problems in the clients’ behavior or in their understanding of what careers are actually available (Zunker, 2005). While each career counseling model offers a unique perspective that contributes new dimensions to understanding career counseling, many of these theories do not emphasize or recognize the significance of exploring a multicultural perspective (Alfred, 2001; Sue et al., 1999, Walsh et al., 2001).

It is important for career development studies to recognize the importance of race, identity, and culture, as all of these factors influence the development of careers (Alfred, 2001; Byars-Winston & Fouad; 2006; Flores et al., 2003; Walsh et al., 2001). This study focused on the multicultural career counseling model for ethnic women as a framework within which practitioners can work with African American women throughout the career decision making process. The multicultural career counseling model for ethnic women incorporates the following steps: a) establish rapport and culturally appropriate relationships; b) identify career issues; c) assess impact of cultural variables; d) make culturally appropriate counseling interventions; e) make decision; and f) implement and follow up (Walsh et al., 2001; Zunker, 2005).

Walsh et al. (2001) address the need for counselors to self-reflect and develop their self-awareness to identify any differences in beliefs or values that may impact the client-counselor relationship. Traditional psychology is Eurocentric and must be adjusted to deal with multicultural issues (Byars-Winston & Fouad, 2006; Flores et al., 2003; Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001; Zunker, 2005). Counselors are charged with adopting a multicultural perspective
since the composition of their clientele has diversified (Alfred, 2001; Byars-Winston & Fouad, 2006; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Flores et al., 2003; Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001; Zunker, 2005).

Walsh et al. (2001) described their career model as being culturally sensitive. Through their model, Walsh et al. (2001) addressed the impact both the clients’ and counselors’ cultural background may have on their counseling relationship. Walsh et al. (2001) recognized that the career development process is affected by multiple issues—including cognitive, social-emotional, environmental, and behavioral issues—as well as barriers. Walsh et al. (2001) examined how race, ethnicity, gender, and family, as well as the majority, influence the career development process. Counselors are obligated to consider cultural implications as counseling goals and interventions are set (Constantine & Greer, 2003; Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001; Zunker, 2005).

Counselors have a unique role in helping clients become aware of factors that may impede their career decision making. Zunker (2005) noted, “Although ethnic minority clients can experience a sense of responsibility for career identification, they must also be guided to realize that past and present internal and external barriers have in some way influenced their career decisions” (p. 121). Throughout the process in the multicultural career counseling model for ethnic women, the counselor serves as an ally to help clients acknowledge barriers and validate negative feelings from discriminatory experiences, while also providing resources and support to assist clients in achieving career goals. Walsh et al. (2001) asserted that practitioners must consider cultural influences as they address career development processes among African American female clients.
Finally, the multicultural career counseling model for ethnic women addresses the growing diversity in the workforce. The authors of this model, Bingham and Ward, discussed the factors that impede career development for ethnic women and the impact of racial identity and stereotypes in career decision making (Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001). In this model, counselors are charged to engage in lifelong learning about their clients as it relates to their culture, race, gender, etc. (Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001). Career counselors have the ideal opportunity to practice the components of Bingham and Ward’s model as they work with African American female clients in a higher education setting.

The experiences of African American women in higher education institutions should be considered, as they are often the settings in which students solidify their career goals (Alfred, 2001; Constantine & Greer, 2003). Also, college campuses offer career counseling services to students, which may be the last time students have such services easily accessible to them (Alfred, 2001; Constantine & Greer, 2003). Typically, African American women attend higher education institutions seeking access to vast career opportunities, much like their peers (Alfred, 2001; Constantine & Greer, 2003). However, African American college women must consider other factors as they prepare for career opportunities. African American college women face sexist and racist work environments, which may limit their opportunities for career advancement (Booth & Meyer, 2011; Constantine & Greer, 2003).

Practitioners should address the impact of stereotypes and prejudices against African American women as these women consider pursuing various careers (Alfred, 2001; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001). Alfred (2001) explained that if women of color are associated with negative stereotypes, then it is assumed that the majority hold opposite traits, which affords privileges to the dominant group while denigrating the minority group.
within organizations. It appears that African American women have similar experiences in higher education institutions as they do in the workplace (Alfred, 2001; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Nichols & Tanksley, 2004). As college students and employees, African American women report experiencing inequities in treatment from faculty members and workplace colleagues as well as an expectation to conform to the dominant culture within the higher education institution and work environment (Constantine & Greer, 2003; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; Nichols & Tanksley, 2004).

Like their peers, African American female students may benefit from utilizing counseling services at higher education institutions (Alfred, 2001; Constantine & Greer, 2003). African American female college students seek counseling for concerns such as financial issues, academic transitions, career exploration, and family and social challenges (Constantine & Greer, 2003). Given the barriers African American women encounter at higher education institutions and in the workplace, as a group they would benefit from counseling that enables them to process their experiences and develop a plan of action for self-advocacy (Walsh et al., 2001; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Nichols & Tanksley, 2004).

Despite the apparent need for career counseling among African American women, they often prove to be resistant to pursuing counseling (Alfred, 2001; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Falconer & Hays, 2006). Given the barriers African American women encounter within their higher education institutions, they may view counselors as part of the system that perpetuates their negative experiences (Alfred, 2001; Constantine & Greer, 2003). Since African American female students face systemic discrimination and oppression, they may be resistant to counseling (Constantine & Greer, 2003; Walsh et al., 2001). Practitioners are thus obligated to identify strategies they can use to draw African American female clients to seek their services for career
counseling because of the benefits it offers (Constantine & Greer, 2003; Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001). “African American college students who are not in counseling have been found to have greater concerns than their white counterparts about issues such as discomfort in their academic settings, racial discrimination, and lack of career knowledge” (Constantine & Greer, 2003, p. 43).

Practitioners are ethically obligated to adopt and implement counseling strategies based on a model that offers a multidimensional, multicultural perspective that addresses the challenges and barriers groups face as a result of race, gender, class, or other characteristics at various settings including work and school (Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001). Effective counseling may direct African American women to appropriate fields and equip them with ways to cope with the challenges they face in the workplace (Constantine & Greer, 2003; Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001). Black feminist theory provides a context to describe the challenges and experiences of African American women (Collins, 1990; Griffin, 1991).

**Black Feminist Theory**

Black feminist theory is most applicable as the framework for this study as a means of explaining how race and gender affect the lives of Black women. “Black feminism explains social and historical events that have impacted the experiences of African American women and their families” (Few, 2007, p. 453). Black feminists acknowledge the various oppressions African American women encounter as a result of their race, gender, and class, among other attributes. As Siemen (2004) explained:

Black feminists (a) acknowledge Black women’s historical struggle against multiple oppressions; (b) examine how Black women and their families negotiate the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class; (c) eradicate malignant images of
Black womanhood; and (d) incorporate an activist perspective into their research through the co-creation of knowledge with informants, consciousness raising, and empowerment within the context of Black women’s lives. (p. 84)

Black feminism is a multidimensional epistemology rooted in a relatively long history of developing ideology in response to the inequities Black women experienced in U.S. society (Few, 2007; Siemen, 2004). The feminist movement evolved in three identified waves (Few, 2007; Siemen, 2004). The first wave occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries during the suffrage movement, when women fought for the right to vote and for equal access to education and career opportunities (Few, 2007; Siemen, 2004). In 1920, renowned Black theorist and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois also sought to articulate the experiences of Black women and the challenges they face (Rabaka, 2003). Du Bois contended that women of African descent “have even greater potential as agents of radical social change on account of their simultaneous experience of racism, sexism and economic exploitation, whether under capitalism or colonialism” (Rabaka, 2003, p. 39). Du Bois described how experiences at the intersection of various forms of oppression may serve as a catalyst for restructuring an oppressive society (Rabaka, 2003).

The second wave of feminism occurred in the late 1960s, during the civil rights and anti-war movements, when African American women still felt like second-class citizens and were largely ignored, despite their participation in activism against war and racial discrimination (Few, 2007; Siemen, 2004). Black feminist Angela Davis was an activist and author, as well as a member of the Communist Party, during the 1960s and 1970s (Fregoso, 1999). Fregoso (1999) described how Davis’ book, Women, Race, and Class, “tracks the fault lines of the U.S. women's movement and alerts us to the importance of a historical consciousness, for lacking a
consciousness of history, the women's movement of the late twentieth century was possessed by its racist and classist heritage” (p. 216).

During the 1960s and 1970s, in response to the Black power movement, radical Black feminism formed in opposition to socialist feminism, which was largely comprised of White college educated women (Breines, 2007). While socialist feminists recognized that class and race provided privileges despite the gender inequalities they experienced, those affiliated with Black radical feminism argued that socialist feminism focused on matters related to lives that were easier than those of Black women (Breines, 2007). While socialist feminists addressed abortion, gender politics, and sexuality, Black radical feminists addressed issues of survival like unemployment and poverty (Breines, 2007). The radical Black feminists were also insulted by the socialist feminists’ attempts at community outreach (Breines, 2007). The phrase “the personal is political,” coined by Carole Harnisch, described the second wave of feminism (Few, 2007; Siemen, 2004). The National Black Feminist Organization was formed in 1973 to create a vehicle through which Black women could address their issues (Few, 2007; Siemen, 2004). Alice Walker, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Margaret Sloan-Hunter are notable Black feminists who participated in the Black feminist movement.

The third wave of feminism occurred in the 1980s and marked a continuation of the second wave, with a focus on eradicating discrimination on the basis of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, among other variables of oppression (Few, 2007; Siemen, 2004). During the 1970" , notable women including Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde, among others, “broke silence,” leading to the projection of the “voice” of African American women in the 1980s and 1990s (Collins, 1996). Collins (1996) defined the “voice” as Black women’s perspectives of their lives and experiences as defined by Black women. The “voice” of Black
women has transitioned them from being muted to having a presence in society. While the transition from muted voice to amplified voice conveys progress, however, Collins (1996) argued that Black women’s writings are more accepted than Black women themselves.

Alice Walker, a well-known author and activist, describes herself as a “womanist.” Walker defined this inherently complex term as: “a Black feminist or feminist of color. . . . committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Robinson, 2009, p. 293). Walker addressed Black feminist thought in such writings as her collection of essays entitled In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose, and her novel The Color Purple. As womanists, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, the notable writer of numerous books including The Bluest Eye, argued that the survival of Black women is dependent on self-love, which involves love of the Black race and Black culture and a rejection of adopting White culture or the White ideology of beauty (Kohzadi, Azizmohammadi, & Afrougheh, 2011). Feminism has evolved since the first wave to include an acknowledgment of race, class, and other factors that impact women, and a recognition that women face discrimination at the interconnection of these various identities (Few, 2007; Siemen, 2004).

This study focuses on Black feminism from the perspective of distinguished Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins. Collins’ perspective on Black feminist theory provides the theoretical context for this study. Collins, a well-known contemporary Black feminist, has worked as a university professor and is the author of Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment, among several other notable works. Collins presented an “Afrocentric feminist epistemology” grounded in the experiences of African American women. This epistemology is comprised of meaning developed through experiences, dialogue, caring, and accountability (Collins, 2000; Griffin, 1991). Collins identified four tenets
of Black feminism: a recognition that knowledge can be gained from the life experiences of Black women; the importance of dialogue in forming relationships with Black women as a means of engaging in discussions about oppressive experiences; the belief that expressing emotions and empathy will contribute to a better understanding of Black women’s experiences; and the importance of personal accountability (Collins, 1990; Grant, 2012).

Collins legitimized the experiences of Black women by explaining that they are the experts in describing and defining their experiences, compared to those who merely read about African American women’s lives (Collins, 2000; Griffin, 1991). Collins argued that dialogue is an essential component of the Afrocentric feminist epistemology in that it connects Black female intellectuals and conveys an authentic presentation of their perspective, as the Black female perspective is not interlocked with ideology from members of other groups as it has been historically (Collins, 1990; Griffin, 1991). Such dialogue highlights the Black female experience as expressed by Black women. The caring tenet of Afrocentric feminist epistemology acknowledges that emotions and empathy contribute to validating knowledge. Accountability in Afrocentric feminist epistemology recognizes that people are responsible for their personal accounts (Collins, 1990; Griffin, 1991).

This study utilized the tenets of Afrocentric feminist epistemology as they centralize the career decision making experiences of African American women. The researcher engaged in dialogue with the participants regarding their career decision making processes. The researcher conveyed an ethic of caring by expressing empathy and emotions through reflexive journaling throughout the research process, particularly in the data analysis process. The researcher also acknowledged personal accountability, as the participant accounts were the primary data used to address the research topic.
Collins introduced additional principles in Black feminist epistemology, including the phrase “matrix of domination.” Collins’ theory describes oppression as intertwined and structured into multiple levels, including individual and social levels, that contribute to a larger matrix of domination (Bose, 2012; Collins, 2010a; Griffin, 1991). The matrix of domination dissects the experiences of members of oppressed groups rather than connecting them, as it highlights experiences of oppression and resistance to oppression by individuals (Bose, 2012; Collins, 2010a; Griffin, 1991). Collins (2010a) used the term “resistance” to describe the act of challenging inequities.

The matrix of domination addresses members of a group who are oppressed, those who are oppressors, and those who are oppressed and oppressors concurrently (Bose, 2012; Collins, 2010a; Griffin, 1991). An example of those who are oppressed yet act as oppressors could be Black males, who experience oppression as a result of their race but who oppress women by making sexist comments or trying to dominate them. The matrix of domination’s scope encompasses race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religious belief, and creed, among other traits (Bose, 2012; Collins, 2010a; Griffin, 1991). The matrix of domination traverses multiple levels, including those of the individual, the community, and social institutions (Bose, 2012; Collins, 2010a; Griffin; 1991).

The matrix of domination considers sites of oppression as well as sites of resistance to the matrix (Bose, 2012; Collins, 2010a; Griffin, 1991). For example, an African American woman’s site of oppression could be her workplace, where she experiences discrimination, while her site of resistance to the matrix of domination could be her church, where she has a sense of acceptance and respect. The matrix of domination exhibits the interconnectedness of oppression and resistance to oppression as members of groups interact on multiple levels. Collins described
how African American women may experience oppression in social institutions where they are expected to be passive, yet at the same time they may be provided access to information that empowers them. For example, in Christian churches African American women are called on to be submissive, yet the Bible empowers all Christians to persevere against tribulations. This study utilized aspects of the matrix of domination by addressing African American women’s perceptions of their racial and gender intersections as they pursue various career fields and encounter varying experiences in their work settings. Through the matrix of domination, Collins emphasized the importance of scrutinizing the experiences of African American women as they deal with others’ perceptions of and reactions to their intersecting identities in various settings and interactions (Bose, 2012; Collins, 2010a; Griffin, 1991).

As this study utilized narratives from African American female participants as they described their career decision making experiences, the researcher critically analyzed the prevalent factors the participants identified as shaping their career decisions. Throughout the interviews, the researcher addressed the participants’ perspectives of the ways their racial and gender intersectionality impacted their experiences in choosing a field, as well as their experiences in their current work settings. The concepts of intersectionality and the matrix of domination create a multidimensional approach to analyzing groups, as their scope encompasses various attributes of a person’s identity and the experiences of individuals in various settings (Bose, 2012; Collins, 2000, 2012; Griffin, 1991; Siemen, 2004). For example, the experiences of African American women may be analyzed with regard to of their race, gender, class, and other variables of identity. Additionally, African American women’s experiences are not limited to one context, but occur across various social structures, including the workplace.
Collins (2012) contends that intersectionality focuses on assessing the interdependence among race, class, gender, national origin, age, ethnicity, and sexuality as they portray inequalities in systems of power. Collins (2000) explained that intersectionality not only focuses on Black women’s experiences, but also on the social structures and culture in which they operate. Black feminist epistemology places Black women’s experiences as the central focus of analysis, while intersectionality provides a theoretical context for explaining those experiences (Collins, 2000; Griffin, 1991; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2008; Siemen, 2004).

In studying the career decision making experiences of African American women, the researcher asked participants to reflect on how their intersectionality did or did not impact their career decision making experiences and their experiences in their workplace. Collins (2000) suggested that intersectionality is derived from another concept she called “centering.” Centering utilizes Black women’s experiences to generate awareness, raise new questions, and facilitate the interpretation of other issues (Collins, 2000). Centering is multidimensional, as it requires examining issues from various viewpoints in order to identify new themes, ideas, and approaches (Collins, 2000).

Collins (2000) argued that centering in Black feminist epistemology not only provides new information about Black women, but also offers new ways to interpret the information. This study used participant narratives to provide information regarding factors that motivate African American women to pursue certain career fields. Identifying the factors that influence career decision making among African American women will not only contribute to new knowledge about African American women, but will also provide a new dimension to understanding career decision making by providing a multicultural perspective. Black feminist epistemology is consistent with the focus of this study as it recognizes the significance of examining the
experiences of African American women as conveyed by African American women. Another theory that acknowledges the importance of individual experiences and perceptions is career construction theory. The researcher utilized career construction theory as a framework for this study.

**Career Construction Theory**

Career construction theory relates to the narrative analysis used in this study. Focusing on the various elements that impact career development, career construction theory uses narrative as a means of understanding the various influences on career development. Corso and Rehfuss (2011) explained, “Career construction theory, through the power of narrative, addresses what, how, and why people construct their careers as they translate their storied identity into work roles” (p. 335). Career construction theory categorizes the components involved in career decision making into three domains: vocational personality, career adaptability, and life themes.

Rather than utilizing the traditional person-fit approach to work, career construction theory encourages individuals to reflect on their lives and the various experiences that have influenced their career development as they journey through life. Career construction theory recognizes that career decision making does not involve identifying interests that match job descriptions to reach a single, clear-cut choice (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Savickas, 2011; Trevino et al., 2008; Savickas et al., 2005). Instead, it acknowledges that because career decision making is influenced and formed throughout one’s life, it can therefore be a lifelong process (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Savickas, 2011; Trevino et al., 2008; Savickas et al., 2005).

Career construction uses narratives to empower individuals to engage in reflection and enhance self-awareness in order to make an accurate assessment of career choice (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Savickas, 2011). Narratives also provide a mechanism that equips individuals to
adapt to the dynamic workplace as they learn to understand their values (Savickas, 2011; Trevino et al., 2008). Career construction theory looks at individuals holistically, rather than setting career decision making aside as a separate or isolated process (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Elley-Brown, 2011; Savickas, 2011). Through narratives, individuals learn that their life stories play a significant role not only in career decision making, but also in how one deals with life’s transitions and future circumstances (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Savickas, 2011; Trevino et al., 2008).

The three domains of vocational personality, career adaptability, and life themes work together to build life stories (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011). Narratives—an individual’s self-stories or depictions—allow counselors to understand life themes that guide career decisions and life experiences that develop an individual’s adaptability, which impacts longevity in a career where roles may change (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Peciuliauskiene & Barkauskaite, 2011). As career counselors guide individuals in identifying the life themes that emerge in their stories, they can help individuals determine how these themes may influence their future (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Savickas, 2011). The meta-narratives, which involve clients piecing together various stories from their life experiences to convey an overarching life story, yield themes that emerge through individuals’ behaviors, thoughts, and actions over time (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Elley-Brown, 2011). Individuals are able to form their identities through their stories.

Career construction theory emphasizes the significance of identity in career choice. The experiences that individuals share through their narratives portray their perceptions of the world. Through narratives, individuals seek to form a cohesive sense of self that will strengthen self-concept, allowing them to effectively manage work roles, responsibilities, and various jobs and
tasks (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Elley-Brown, 2011; Savickas, 2011). The term career adaptability addresses how individuals will assimilate into a dynamic work environment (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Savickas, 2011; Savickas et al., 2005). Every new experience leads to more new experiences and more stories that contribute to their already-storied lives (Elley-Brown, 2011; Savickas, 2011). An individual’s ability to problem-solve when confronted with changing circumstances in one’s career shapes career adaptability, which contributes to feelings of competence in and control over one’s career.

Career construction theory also recognizes the impact of culture on life stories, as art, media, and other artistic forms reflect individuals’ struggles, obstacles, and transitions (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Savickas, 2011; Savickas et al., 2005). Career construction theory argues that motivation also impacts career decision making, as motivation is tied both to basic needs and to a spiritual need to feel significant (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Savickas, 2011; Savickas et al., 2005). Career construction theory is effective in equipping people to adapt to an ever-changing work environment. Corso & Rehfuss, (2011) noted that:

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2008), people change jobs about once every five years and on average hold 10.8 jobs from ages 18 to 42. Some have viewed traditional career planning, which involves helping people discover their career, as practically useless given the numerous adaptations and transitions people must make across their careers in response to an ever-changing employment environment. (p. 88) Savickas (2011) asserted that vocational psychology should focus on employability rather than employment, since the work environment demands social reorganization that compels people to adapt to new responsibilities and roles.
Through the lens of the career constructionist paradigm, individuals are viewed as constantly adjusting to the transitions that occur within the work environment (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Savickas, 2011; Savickas et al., 2005). With a career constructivist perspective, vocational psychologists are now looking at identity, adaptability, intentionality, stories, and actions rather than at the elements of maturity, personality, decidedness, scores, and behavior that characterized Donald Super’s developmental stage approach (Savickas, 2011). Career construction theory encourages students to consider future tasks and transitions that can occur within careers and to be organized in their decision making process, taking time to plan and establish a sense of control over their career (Savickas, 2011).

This study implemented narrative analysis to identify themes in career decision making among African American women, using career construction theory to explain how life themes influence women’s career choices and contribute to their career adaptability. Career construction theory encourages individuals to embrace the social reorganization that occurs in the work setting (Elley-Brown, 2011; Savickas, 2011). Career construction also seeks to address adaptability to diversity, to changes in the way the world works, and to changes in organizations as well as in the way people experience careers (Elley-Brown, 2011; Savickas, Esbroek, & Herr, 2005). Career construction theory’s focus on the importance of life stories guiding a counseling session as practitioners work with clients, and its recognition of the need for adaptability to diversity, complement some aspects of Black feminist theory, which also addresses life stories and diversity. While career construction theory and Black feminist theory provide the context for this study, identifying an appropriate career decision making model provides practitioners with strategies that can be used in counseling sessions with Black female clients.
African American Women in the Workplace

African American women encounter barriers as they seek to pursue prominent positions. African American women are significantly underrepresented in leadership positions, as only 5 percent hold presidency positions in higher education institutions, 1.7 percent hold positions as corporate officers in Fortune 500 companies, and 2.6 percent hold corporate board positions at Fortune 100 companies (Alexander, 2010). There is thus a deficiency of women leaders in higher education leadership positions in the United States, with an even greater underrepresentation of African American women leaders in higher education (Alexander, 2010; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Grant, 2012; Nichols & Tanksley, 2004). The American Council on Education and the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources reported that while women comprise 38 percent of chief academic officers in higher education, African American women hold only 5 percent of these positions (Alexander, 2010).

Although reports show that women have progressed in obtaining lucrative positions in management, African American women still struggle to achieve the same level of career advancement (Alexander, 2010; Combs, 2003; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). Alleyne (2011) reported data from a study conducted by the Corporate Counsel of Color, a support group with 2500 members who work in large corporations. The study included 1300 attorneys who were women of color (Alleyne, 2011). Researchers asked the attorneys to discuss their professional experiences, opportunities for promotion, perceived barriers to advancement, and comparisons between law firms and various corporate settings (Alleyne, 2011). Seventy-five percent of the attorneys in the study agreed that there was little room for growth in their legal departments (Alleyne, 2011).
The participants reported that reasons for leaving their law firms included lack of support (22.1%), lack of mentorship (21.3%), feeling excluded and isolated (15.6%), and encountering stereotypes and discrimination (11.4%) (Alleyne, 2011). The participants reported that the following factors contributed to their job satisfaction: being valued (approximately 60%), compensation (approximately 35%), challenging work assignments (approximately 34%), flexible work arrangements (approximately 32%), and upward mobility (approximately 21%) (Alleyne, 2011).

African American women encounter barriers to earning leadership positions in higher education institutions (Alexander, 2010; Collins, 1990; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Grant, 2012). Although both White and Black women are underrepresented in leadership positions in academia (Alexander, 2010; Bayer Corporation, 2012; Grunert & Bodner, 2011), studies report that White women are choosing not to pursue leadership positions in academia as a result of family obligations (Cassie & Chen, 2012; Evans & Cokley, 2008; Grunert & Bodner, 2011; Taniguchi, 2002), while African American women are inhibited from leadership positions in academia as a result of discrimination (Alexander, 2010; Collins, 1990; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Evans & Cokley, 2008; Grant, 2012). Further research is needed to identify the factors that influence African American women’s career decision making to determine whether discrimination, oppression, and negative stereotyping play a role as they consider career options.

African American women have different encounters in the workplace than majority women (Carr & Steele, 2010; Combs, 2003). The intersections of race and gender mold both workplace relations and opportunities for career development (Combs, 2003; Giscombe & Matiss, 2002). For African American women, the work environment not only offers the typical stresses associated with job duties, but also includes the stress of working in an environment
where they remain unrecognized as efficient employees who may be valued and promoted. The duality in race and gender may cause African American women to be the last to be considered for promotion and raises (Combs, 2003).

During the career decision making process, African American women may consider the extent of their acceptance and value in potential work settings. African American women struggle significantly in the work environment as they attempt to assimilate into a sexist and racist setting (Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). Upon entering the work environment, African American women tend to observe their White female counterparts exceed them as they achieve upward mobility. African American women are less likely to be promoted than their White female counterparts and receive different predictors for career advancement than their White female counterparts (Combs, 2003). Networking is often viewed as critical to achieving career success; however, prejudice often prevents African American women from building relationships with White colleagues. The dyad of gender and race even appears to impact networking with colleagues in informal work settings for African American women, inhibiting their access to professional and social support (Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003). Practitioners are obligated to process the barriers African American women may encounter as they enter different work environments.

**Summary**

Black feminist theory contextualizes the experiences of African American women as it addresses the biases and prejudices they encounter as a result of the intersections of race and gender. Black feminist theory also provides an explanation of the importance of studying Black women’s issues, since they contribute to a multicultural perspective of different phenomena. For example, by learning about the stereotypes and power struggles African American women
encounter in the workplace, we not only learn more about African American women, but also gain new knowledge about how career experiences differ among different groups.

Black feminist theory also argues for the importance of learning about African American women directly from African American women, rather than solely from individuals who have studied African American women. The tenets of Black feminist theory are consistent with the purpose of this study, which is to explore the factors that influence career decision making as the Black female participants describe them. Career construction theory is another theoretical component of this study, as it explains that the way people have approached experiences throughout their lives will contribute to the careers they choose and how they cope with a dynamic work environment. Savickas, a career construction theorist, argued that listening to the life stories of individuals is vital to understanding their career decision making. The tenets of career construction theory are consistent with this study, which draws on the life stories of the participants to answer the research question. African American women continue to confront discrimination in the workplace as they encounter barriers that inhibit their career development.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

This chapter will introduce the purpose of the study and the methodology utilized to explore the motivation and intent behind career decision making among African American women. Additionally, this chapter will describe the methodological framework of this study, the theoretical framework, the data collection and analysis process, and the participant sampling procedures. The trustworthiness of this study will be addressed as ethics and methods are discussed.

Theoretical Framework

The researcher incorporated Black feminist theory and career construction theory in this study as the tenets of both theories are consistent with the qualitative approach. Qualitative research is naturalistic in that the researcher gathers data on the subject in the natural setting (Creswell, 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). The qualitative researcher spends time collecting and analyzing data for the purpose of accurately conveying the perspective and dimensions of the subject being studied, as well as bringing meaning to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

In this study, the researcher interviewed African American women to collect data about the factors that influenced their career decision making. The researcher met with the participants in their homes and engaged them in a dialogue regarding their career decision making experiences in order to accurately identify the factors that influenced their career decision making from the perspective of the participants. Black feminist theory acknowledges that the lives of Black women are best conveyed through Black women’s stories as they share their
experiences (Choo, 2012; Collins, 1990). Like Black feminist theory, career construction recognizes the significance of life experiences in accurately conveying a particular phenomenon.

Career construction theory asserts that the meaning people associate with their personal experiences, as well as the way they approach various experiences throughout their lives, are manifested in their career decision making as well as the way they operate in their work environments (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Elley-Brown, 2011; Savickas, 2011). Career construction theory also emphasizes the significance of individuals’ life stories in exposing and explaining how they make career decisions and how they cope with working in a dynamic work environment (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Savickas, 2011; Trevino et al., 2008).

**Researcher Bias**

In qualitative research, a significant role of the researcher is to convey the participants’ perspectives precisely and holistically (Creswell, 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). Diefenbach (2009) contended that the validity and reliability of qualitative research may be jeopardized, as oftentimes the phenomenon being studied is close to the researcher’s personal experiences. As a self-identified African American, college educated career woman, I am closely related to this study. I have experienced many of the issues the participants shared regarding race, gender, and class. Thus, my personal experiences may impact my professionalism as I establish a research relationship with my participants (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Throughout the interviews I had to reflect on my identification with the participants, since relating to participants may cause bias while not relating to participants may evoke feelings of disappointment and confusion. Upon reflecting on my own career decision making process, I recognized that my parents’ desire for financial stability and class security were factors that influenced my career decision making. I am a first-generation American; my parents came from
Haiti, an island with an illiteracy rate over 80 percent. Much of the island is impoverished, although my parents grew up in upper-middle-class homes in Haiti. Despite their privileged upbringing, my parents moved to the United States in pursuit of better opportunities to improve their quality of life and that of their future children.

Despite Haiti’s high illiteracy rate and economic devastation, the culture values education. Growing up in a Haitian household meant constantly hearing phrases like, “You must study”; “Focus on your books”; “All you need is a good education”; and “The more education you get, the more opportunities you have for making money and living well.” I was not allowed to work as a teenager because my parents wanted to ensure that I was not distracted from my studies. I grew up watching my parents struggle financially to achieve economic stability in a new country. They worked very hard and experienced many hardships. As I watched them working to exhaustion, crying, and agonizing over finances, I vowed that I would not experience such hardships.

Throughout college and graduate school, and as I worked in various jobs and entered a career in education, I remained focused on my goal of achieving financial comfort and stability. I continued to pursue education, as I recalled my parents reminding me that I would make more money with more education—which happened to be true in my field. I decided that I wanted to be qualified to assume any role in my field, and to be able to earn the highest income my field could offer. My motivation for wanting to earn a doctorate and eventually teach at the college level is that I view this as a leadership position in my field of counseling, one that offers financial security and a higher income than if I remained in my current profession as a school counselor.
Since I was a child, I knew I wanted to work with children. Initially, I wanted to be a pediatrician, but I allowed myself to be intimidated by the education in middle school, when I decided I was not smart enough. Then, in high school, I decided I could go into psychology, since I thought this would require fewer years of education and would not be as challenging as medicine—a view I no longer hold. In college, I found that I enjoyed psychology and wanted to continue pursuing a career in child psychology. After numerous jobs out of college, I decided to earn a graduate degree in school counseling because it offered financial stability and an opportunity to work with children. My advice to younger African American girls is that they should do a lot of research in different fields. They should choose a career with which they would be satisfied, one that offers financial security and provides potential for growth. As I interviewed each participant, I noted my reactions to their responses as they shared their stories. I revisited my notes and reflected on the causes of my reactions. My reflections allowed me to recognize that my ideology influences my interpretation of each participant’s interview.

Hays and Singh (2012) defined reflexive journaling “including thoughts about how the research process is impacting the researcher” (p. 205). Reflexive journaling allowed me to address my biases as I embarked on this study, as well as recognize the role I play in impacting the research process (Hays & Singh, 2012; Medved, 2011; Vandenberg, 2011). I started my reflexive journal as I considered a topic to study. I wanted to find a topic that was personal and of interest. I knew I would be spending a lot of time on the study and I did not want to find myself unhappy or bored with the process because I was not invested in the study. Reflexive journaling allowed me to engage in metacognition as I assessed my thoughts on conducting the study, selecting a topic and research design, developing the research process, and executing the
study. Many times my journaling was cathartic as I conveyed my frustration, disappointment, or excitement with the research process.

I did not decide to include the contents of my journal in the study until I began analyzing my data. As I began reporting my interpretation of the data, I realized I wanted readers to understand my perspective. I felt that the trustworthiness of my study would be strengthened if I opened up to readers about my own thoughts as I conducted the study. Hays and Singh (2012) contend that “reflexive journaling becomes a strategy of accountability, honesty, and trust, which allows [researchers] to document [their] internal processes as researchers and understand [their] influence on the research process itself” (p. 140).

My experience with reflexivity throughout this study was that it allowed me to remain focused on my goal for the study throughout its various stages. There were many moments where I felt I had hit a wall in my efforts to identify an appropriate research design or in reacting to advice from my committee members and/or research team. When I felt stuck during these times, I pulled out my journal and began jotting down my thoughts and feelings. Most of the time, I was able to journal my way out of a corner. Medved (2011) argues, “Through reflexivity we come to moments of self-discovery, indispensable scholarly insights, as well as new hypotheses and research questions. We grow personally and intellectually when we are willing to make ourselves vulnerable in order to work through the unsettling moments that fieldwork almost undeniably and habitually raises” (p. 109). While reflexivity is a tool to combat threats to the trustworthiness of qualitative research at the hands of the researcher, other threats may also emerge, including that of biases from the research team.
Research Team Bias

Hays and Singh (2012) advised that researchers consider identifying people who have an interest in the study, who are available to meet and collaborate throughout the research process, and who would be suitable in assisting with the research process. Initially, I debated the homogeneity of my research team. I saw the benefit in having a male on my team to offer another perspective, but I felt it would be most appropriate due to the nature of my study to have an all-female research team. Since my study involves all women and incorporates a feminist epistemology, I felt that an all-female research team would more accurately interpret the sensitive nature of certain topics that might emerge, including sexism.

My other concern was whether my research team should be comprised entirely of African Americans. I decided that having one African American woman and one White woman would be most appropriate, as the White team member might be able to raise some questions or share interpretations that may reflect those of other non-African American prospective readers of this study. I chose an African American woman because I felt she would be more comfortable in challenging my interpretations without feeling as if she was ill equipped to question me.

Despite my intentionality in selecting members of my research team, I must recognize their biases as individuals and as a team. As individuals, each team member had their own values and beliefs that impacted their interpretation of the data. As a team, they had the role of checking my interpretation and assessing my organization of the data and identification of the themes. The African American team member was most concerned with my wording of the themes and collapsing the themes into more succinct parts. The White team member was most concerned with having fewer themes that were broader. After discussions with each team member, I realized that the African American team member wanted to ensure that the
participants’ voices were portrayed in a manner that legitimized every aspect of their responses, while the White team member was most concerned with the readability of the findings. The African American team member was participant-focused while the White team member was reader-focused. In my opinion, the African American team member connected more with the participants while the White team member connected more with the research process.

**Participant Selection**

Participants for this study were selected through criterion sampling. Criterion sampling occurs when researchers sample participants who meet their predetermined characteristics for eligibility to participate in the study (Creswell, 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). All participants were required to fit the following criteria: identify as Black/African American in race/ethnicity; be college educated; identify as working in their career. Criterion sampling contributed to the credibility of the study as it created a homogenous group of participants with regard to race, education, and employment status. Creswell (1998) explained that criterion sampling is most effective when all participants share the same condition. Although the participants all identified as African American, college educated career women, their ages ranged from 29 to 60, with an average age of 33 years. The participants grew up in various regions of the country, including the North, Midwest, and South. They also grew up in households of varying socioeconomic levels with a variety of family structures.

Participants were recruited through the Internet. Hays and Singh (2012) argue that qualitative interviewers can use the Internet for participant recruitment and interviewing, and as a tool to reach members of marginalized groups who otherwise would not be accessible to the researcher. The researcher posted a recruitment message including a brief description of the study, the criteria for participant eligibility, and the researcher’s contact information. The
A recruitment message was posted on the researcher’s Facebook page and sent to members of two organizations through the organizations’ listservs. The organizations were Image Ministry, a coed singles’ ministry at an Atlanta-based church, and Delta Omicron Gamma, Inc, a coed national service fraternity. After individuals contacted the researcher to express an interest in participating in the study, the researcher conducted a phone interview to determine their eligibility.

Once the researcher determined that individuals were eligible to participate in the study, a time and location was set for the interview. The researcher reviewed the informed consent over the phone and offered to either send the consent form prior to the interview or bring the form to the interview, based on the participant’s preference. All participants were required to review and sign the consent form prior to participating in the interviews.

**Procedure**

**Institutional Review Board (IRB) process**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is a committee that assesses prospective studies for potential harm against human subjects. The IRB is comprised of five members from an institution (Hays & Singh, 2012). The IRB determines whether a researcher is permitted to conduct a study. Upon receiving approval from the dissertation committee, an IRB application was completed and submitted for approval. A notification of approval to conduct the study was e-mailed to the researcher, allowing the researcher to commence conducting the study.

**Interview Protocol**

In an effort to present the stories of African American women as they described their career decision making processes, various data collection methods were adopted in this study. Creswell (1998) explained that there are multiple phases to data collection within qualitative
studies that go beyond interviewing. Since the purpose of this study was to explore the factors influencing career decision making among African American women, conducting a face-to-face interview was the primary method of data collection. Hays and Singh (2012) explain that interviewing “allows participants to describe what is meaningful or important using his or her own words” (p. 238). Because this study employed Black feminist theory and career construction theory as its epistemology, semi-structured interviews were most effective in ensuring that the participants’ voices were accurately conveying their experiences as they engaged in career exploration. As O’Shaunessy and Krogman (2012) explain, “since the early 1980s, feminist standpoint epistemologies have deeply influenced feminist research and have been strongly aligned with feminist qualitative methods, particularly semi-structured interviews and ethnography” (p. 494).

Given the historical accounts of African American women who were unrecognized in society and in the social movements in which they participated, the semi-structured interviews allowed the participants in this study to voice their stories. Hays and Singh (2012) observe that the semi-structured interview is culturally sensitive. Semi-structured interviews use the participants’ accounts to highlight the subject being explored (Hays & Singh, 2012; Rabionet, 2011). In this study, a semi-structured interview protocol was useful in allowing the researcher and participants to thoroughly explore the participants’ career exploration process as well as address any aspects of the process that were unique to each participant.

The semi-structured interviews brought to surface factors that the interviewer might not otherwise have considered. Semi-structured interviews are useful in that they provide direction during the interview; the pre-existing questions allow the researcher to remain grounded in the topic being studied, while the flexibility to ask probing questions allows the researcher to explore
the topic in depth (Rabionet, 2011). During the interview, participants were able to reflect further on their career decision making process as well as address perceptions of being an African American woman entering the workforce.

The interview protocol is developed from the topics that must be covered in the study’s research design (Creswell, 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). Two major components to consider when creating an interview protocol include establishing introductions between the interviewer and interviewee and composing the actual questions to be used (Rabionet, 2011). The interview for this study began with a review of the components of the consent form. Participants had the opportunity to withdraw from the interview at any point or to reject any questions. The interview questions were designed to explore the decision making process while participants were first attempting to identify their careers. For example, participants were asked to “Describe how you chose your career.”

Additionally, questions were constructed to allow participants to reflect on the degree to which certain factors impacted their career decision making. For example, they were asked, “What do you believe most impacted your career decision?” Some research questions were derived from Savickas’ career construction inventory in order to address the study’s constructivist theoretical framework. An example of a question from Savickas’ career construction inventory was, “Who would you like to pattern your life after?”

Other questions were created to encourage participants to reflect on the experiences of African American career women. For example, the researcher asked the participants to share their reactions to the words, “Black career woman.” Interview questions were designed to address the intersections of gender, race, and other factors in order to incorporate components of Black feminism, the theoretical framework of this study. For example, the researcher asked the
participants to share their experiences as Black women in their field. The interview’s focus on participants sharing their stories and exploring the impact of their intersectionality conveys the Black feminist conceptualization. The researcher used a semi-structured interview protocol in order to ask questions for clarification and to accurately capture the essence of each participant’s experiences. For example, the researcher asked one participant to clarify why she refused to follow her family’s legacy of working in education.

Interviews were recorded using digital recorders in order to ensure accuracy of the participants’ accounts.

Data Collection Methods

In step one of the data collection, the researcher met with participants at their homes at a scheduled day and time. In step two, the researcher provided each participant with a copy of the informed consent. The researcher read the informed consent aloud to the participant and offered the opportunity to ask any questions or voice any concerns about the study. The researcher confirmed participation in the study by having the participant sign the informed consent, and the researcher collected the signed form for her records. During the researcher’s review of the informed consent, the researcher explained confidentiality. In step three, the researcher placed an audio recorder in plain sight and began the interview. In step four, after leaving each participant’s home, the researcher went to her car to record reactions and thoughts in a reflexive journal. In step five, the researcher transcribed the first two interviews and hired an outside agency to transcribe the remaining interviews.

Data Analysis

In step one, the researcher identified a data analysis plan to implement with this study. The researcher selected the narrative analysis coding system. Narrative analysis is a data
analysis process used with narratology (Creswell, 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). The narrative analysis coding system entails three analytical techniques including identifying events, participants’ thoughts and emotions, and analyzing the meaning behind participants’ career decision making stories (Hays & Singh, 2012). The researcher felt that the narrative analysis coding system was appropriate for this study given that participants were sharing their entire career decision making process, including events leading up to their decision as well as their personal decision to select certain fields.

In step two, the researcher reviewed the transcripts and the reflexive journal. The researcher reflected on the responses and revisited her initial reactions to the interviews by reading her reflexive journal. The researcher wrote down any additional reflections not already indicated in the reflexive journal. In step three, the researcher reviewed the transcripts and noted the events each participant indicated impacted her career decision making. The researcher wrote the events in the left margin of the transcripts in red ink.

In step four, the researcher organized the events into themed groups. For example, a couple of themes the researcher identified for the events were “parental advice” and “working at a job in field.” In step five, the researcher revisited her reflexive journal and wrote a critical analysis of the events indicated by the participants. The researcher also wrote her reaction to the events shared by the participants. In step six, the researcher reviewed the transcripts and indicated the thoughts and emotions each participant indicated she experienced as she engaged in the career decision making process. The researcher wrote the thoughts and emotions in the right margin of the transcripts in blue ink.

In step seven, the researcher organized the thoughts and emotions into themed groups. For example, a couple of the themes the researcher identified for thoughts and emotions were
“desire to pursue happiness,” and “desire to pursue passion.” In step eight, the researcher revisited the reflexive journal and wrote a critical analysis of thoughts and emotions indicated by participants. The researcher also wrote her reaction to the thoughts and emotions conveyed by the participants. In step nine, the researcher reviewed her reflexive journal and highlighted any personal biases that could impact her analysis of the data.

In step ten, the researcher organized all of themes she had identified into a codebook and reviewed the transcripts. The researcher indicated any participant responses that fit into the themes under each theme in the codebook. The researcher tallied the frequency that each theme appeared in the transcripts. In step eleven, the researcher contacted the research team and provided them with a preliminary codebook. The researcher asked them to assess the accuracy of the themes and to assist with organizing the themes. In step twelve, the researcher had a discussion with the research team regarding the feedback from the codebook.

In step thirteen, the researcher reorganized the themes based on the research team’s feedback. In step fourteen, the researcher revisited the reflexive journal and indicated reactions to the research team’s feedback. In step fifteen, the researcher resent the finalized codebook to the research team. In step sixteen, after receiving approval from the research team, the researcher reviewed the literature for studies addressing the themes relating to African American women. In step seventeen, the researcher revisited the reflexive journal and documented interpretation of the literature related to the themes in the codebook.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is defined as the believability of a study’s findings (Hays & Singh, 2012). The trustworthiness of a qualitative study accurately conveys the voices of the participants (Hays & Singh, 2012). Validity and reliability contribute to the trustworthiness of
qualitative research. Historically, qualitative researchers have addressed the threats to validity and reliability in qualitative research in a variety of ways. Lewis (2009) noted that instrumentation played a role in strengthening reliability in quantitative studies; however, qualitative researchers face challenges with reliability as they often serve as the data collection instrument. Reliability in qualitative research is based on the studies’ findings being replicated by another researcher (Lewis, 2009). This study incorporated constructivism as an epistemological stance. Lewis (2009) explained that constructivists address internal reliability prior to and throughout the course of a qualitative study.

Credibility, which also focuses on internal validity, emphasizes the truthfulness of what the researcher reports (Creswell, 2007). The researcher is responsible for explaining to the reader not only what was being observed, but also why what was being observed would have occurred naturally. Unlike traditional qualitative researchers, who emphasized internal validity in the initial design, constructivists and naturalists emphasized internal validity prior to and during the research. To ensure internal validity, the researcher employed numerous validity checks throughout the course of the research (Lewis, 2009, p. 4).

As a strategy to strengthen the trustworthiness of this study, the researcher engaged in recursivity by repeatedly reflecting on researcher bias, research team bias, and personal values and beliefs that might threaten the authenticity of the study. The researcher documented these reflections in a reflexive journal. Components of the reflexive journal are shared with the readers through inclusion in the data analysis section of this study. The researcher’s intent is to be transparent, allowing readers to understand the researcher’s perspective as the data in the study was critically analyzed.
Other considerations related to trustworthiness in qualitative research, and specifically in this study, involve the credibility of the interpretation of data. Schwandt (2007) described arguments regarding justifying interpretation. Firstly, interpretation and evidence have a symbiotic relationship. Interpretation and evidence are not independent variables, in that identifying evidence involves some form of interpretation. While the researcher used the responses to the interviews as evidence to answer the research question, the researcher also utilized interpretation to extract the factors affecting career decision making from all the information the participants shared.

Secondly, Schwandt (2007) contended that interpretation includes intersubjectivity. It is impossible to make an interpretation that is not influenced by social values as well as an individual’s background, beliefs, and practices. Thirdly, interpretation occurs within the context of social beliefs and practices, which have political and ethical implications. African American women entering the workforce originated as a political and social statement, where African American women demanded the same opportunities as their White male and White female counterparts as they pursued education, training, and employment. This study addressed issues of race, gender, and class, all of which have political implications.

The use of the semi-structured interview has ethical implications as well. As the interviewer, the researcher decided which questions to ask to generate information that would answer the research question. The researcher directed the interview by asking questions that would lead the interviewee toward the focus of the study. The codebook in this study, which included the themes that were derived from the interviews as well as the transcriptions of the interviews, was reviewed by members of the research team, which included two women, one identifying as White and the other as Black. Given the exclusion of a male perspective from the
research team and from the interpretation of the data, there may be one-sided interpretations that result from including only female perspectives.

In 1985, Lincoln and Guba offered criteria for trustworthiness and authenticity to justify interpretation in qualitative research. They employed the following criteria for trustworthiness: “internal validity (credibility), external validity (transferability), reliability (dependability), and objectivity (neutrality)” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 12). Authenticity criteria include “fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, and catalytic authenticity” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 13).

Hays and Singh (2012) further described the components of Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria for trustworthiness. *Credibility* addresses the believability of the study, where a determination is made as to whether the conclusion of the study adds up. *Transferability* addresses the ability of the study to be replicated in order to ensure that the findings would be the same if another researcher conducted the study. *Dependability* addresses the consistency of the study, meaning that similar findings would be generated from similar studies. *Confirmability* addresses whether the researcher interfered with the representation of the data collected. *Authenticity* addresses whether the participants’ perspectives were presented within a theoretical framework that would authenticate their responses. *Coherence* addresses whether the epistemological stance and research design were appropriate to the study. *Sampling adequacy* addresses the suitability of the sample size and composition of participants selected for the study. *Ethical validation* evaluates all aspects of the study related to practicability, relevance, and ethical practices. *Substantive validation* relates to the significance of the study and the quality of the content. Finally, *creativity* involves incorporating innovative and imaginative aspects of the study (Hays & Singh, 2012).
Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria for trustworthiness are illustrated through the evaluation of this study. This study is grounded in theory and in a thorough review of the literature regarding career decision making, African American women, Black feminism, constructivism, and narrative analysis. The researcher conducted interviews of 10 African American, college educated career women and critically analyzed the transcripts of the interviews by organizing the data into themes to employ persistent observation and prolonged engagement in the study. The researcher engaged in triangulation by consulting with members of the research team as they reviewed transcripts and the codebook to assess the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretation of the data. The researcher also provided a thorough description of the research design and the research process, including participant recruitment; a description of the interview protocol; and a description of the theoretical framework to strengthen the replicability and transferability of the study.

A thorough review of the literature on African American women and careers indicated a need for more information regarding the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that contribute to career decision making among African American women to strengthen the dependability of the study. The researcher utilized a research team to confirm the authenticity of the researcher’s interpretation of the data and to strengthen the confirmability of the study. This study was grounded in theory, as the researcher incorporated Black feminist theory and career construction theory as the framework to interpret the data to strengthen the authenticity of the study.

Recognizing the potential threat to the authenticity of the data analysis, the researcher utilized a reflexive journal to self-reflect and maintain awareness of any personal biases throughout the research process, strengthening the fairness of the study. The researcher consulted with a research team consisting of fellow researchers and scholars interested in the
components of the study to contribute to the educative authenticity of the study. At the
completion of the study, the researcher engaged in recursivity to identify new knowledge
obtained from research findings and to contribute to the catalytic and tactical authenticity of the
study.

The research process involved procedures and theoretical analysis that were consistent
with answering the research question. The researcher consulted with her major professor and
members of the dissertation committee to determine the sample size and criteria needed for
eligibility to participate in the study, which contributed to the sampling adequacy of the study.
The researcher submitted an application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval to
conduct the study, withheld describing the data collection sites, assigned aliases to each
participant, and provided informed consent to abide by appropriate ethical guidelines for the
study, contributing to the ethical validation of the study. The researcher’s inclusion of
participants’ accounts of their career decision making process, a description of the theoretical
framework, and examples of reflexive journaling contributed to the substantive validation of the
study. The researcher included poetry to add creativity to the study.

Given the career construction and Black feminist epistemological stance of this study, the
researcher had to consider her reality as she conveyed the reality of the participants. The
participants shared their perspectives of the career decision making process as they recounted
their own experiences in career decision making. The advice participants had for a younger
generation of African American women was inspired by their own experiences. The
participants’ reality was the reality they attributed to younger Black females, whether it dealt
with finances, parental involvement, education, career changes, the pursuit of happiness and
satisfaction, or self-awareness.
The researcher could not ignore how her reality might influence her interpretation of the participants’ responses. By acknowledging personal values, biases, and beliefs and sharing them with the reader, the researcher can become aware that her interpretation of the data may be different from that of others reading the transcripts. Including a research team addresses any researcher bias, as the researcher analyzed the data (Hays and Singh, 2012). Participants’ responses as viewed within the context of their realities, and the researcher’s interpretation of participants’ responses within the context of the researcher’s reality, work interdependently as the factors influencing career decision making among African American college educated career women were identified:

The axiom concerned with the nature of reality asserts that there is no single reality on which inquiry may converge, but rather there are multiple realities that are socially constructed, and that, when known more fully, tend to produce diverging inquiry. These multiple and constructed realities cannot be studied in pieces (as variables, for example), but only holistically, since the pieces are interrelated in such a way as to influence all other pieces. Moreover, the pieces are themselves sharply influenced by the nature of the immediate context. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

**Summary**

The methodology implemented for this study is consistent with a theoretical framework based on Black feminist theory and career construction theory, as both theories highlight the importance of narrative in bringing meaning to issues presented by clients. As a result of the qualitative tradition of this study, the researcher utilized qualitative methodologies to recruit participants, develop an interview protocol, and conduct data analysis.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Participant Narratives and Findings

Using Black feminist theory as a methodology, this qualitative study utilized personal narratives and storytelling to identify the factors impacting career decision making among African American women. Its intent was to reveal the meaning behind career exploration among African American women, thus determining if their intersectionality played a role in their career decisions. Considering the purpose of this study, the following research question was used to guide the qualitative exploration of this subject.

RQ: What factors impact career decision making among African American women?

Based upon individual interviews of 10 participants, this chapter portrays each participant’s story as it relates to this topic. Before reviewing each participant’s story, it is important to understand how the findings were organized and managed as a framework to portray participants’ stories. Additionally, a description of the data collection sites will be provided so that readers will better comprehend the context in which the stories were collected.

Organizational Findings

As outlined in Chapter Three, participants’ interviews were transcribed. The transcription of the interviews allowed for the researcher to vigorously analyze each participant’s story in an attempt to identify the factors they indicated impacted their career decision making. The data collected from the interviews also provided a thorough explanation of the participants’ career decision making process. These data were used to answer the research question. Each
The participant’s transcript was read several times to identify themes related to career decision making. The following themes emerged as the factors that impacted career decision making with the participants: financial gain, parental direction, pursuit of happiness, fulfillment of interest, and exposure through work experience. The researcher developed a codebook that highlighted the factors influencing career decision making as shared by the participants.

Throughout this chapter, the participants are presented using journal notes and reflections developed from the researcher. The researcher engaged in journaling of personal reflections after each participant’s interview. In addition to the life stories collected from the interviews, the journaling notes will be used to contextualize each participant’s experiences as they were shared during the interviews. The researcher will provide an in-depth presentation of the participants’ experiences followed by a description of the meaning made from the career decision making process. A description of the participants’ meaning was developed from the information shared during the interviews. The researcher will share personal reflections in order to authenticate the findings and strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. Once the participants’ narratives were shared, their perceptions of career decision making among African American women were provided. Each participant’s interview concluded with the researcher’s explanation of significant themes, trends, and factors that emerged from the data.

**Description of the Data Collection Sites**

Because data collection was conducted at the homes of the participants, details of the data collection sites will be presented broadly and inconspicuously. The researcher recognizes that providing detailed descriptions of the participants’ homes would jeopardize their anonymity and violate one of the components of confidentiality indicated in the formal consent for participating in the study. Researcher ethics influenced the decision to withhold descriptors, references, or
statistics for the area that would potentially reveal the identities of the participants. Throughout the interviews, participants shared locations and job sites that could potentially reveal their identity. In an effort to maintain confidentiality, the researcher used aliases instead of participants’ names as the participants’ stories were shared.

At the time of the study, all 10 participants identified as being employed in their careers. All participants resided in and were employed in the state of Georgia. In December 2011, the Georgia Department of Labor reported that 4,291,532 were employed in the labor force in the state of Georgia (GA Dept. of Labor, 2011). Georgia has a 9.4 percent unemployment rate (GA Dept. of Labor, 2011). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “In 2010, Georgia women who were full-time wage and salary workers had median weekly earnings of $637 or 77.5 percent of the $822 median weekly earnings for their male counterparts” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011).

The remainder of this chapter will provide detailed accounts of the career decision making experiences of the 10 participants within this study. This chapter was designed to present readers with a holistic look at the career decision making process of the participants in this study and construct meaning from their experiences in relation to gender, race, and other elements of identity, as well as intersectionality. Additionally, participants’ stories and perceptions shared about African American women in labor will allow the readers to conceptualize the impact, if any, that race, gender, and other factors play in the career decision making process. Throughout this study, the researcher shares thoughts and opinions as she reflects on each participant’s responses. Through this access to the researcher’s perspective, the reader will be able to understand the lens the researcher used to analyze the data.
Table 2

Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Alias</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birdie</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazel</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Systems Analyst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Counseling Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radiance</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Psychotherapist</td>
</tr>
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<td>Gwyneth</td>
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<td>Wellness Consultant/Health Coach</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>IT Project Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Project Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katrina</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josephine</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>High School Assistant Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Clinical Social Worker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Birdie

The vastness of Birdie’s work experience is unimaginable. As a 60-year-old high school business teacher with a master’s in education, Birdie is a powerful force. In my opinion, her life exemplifies social justice and self-advocacy. Birdie describes herself as being a “product of a single parent” although her mother remarried when she was 10 years old. Birdie shared that her mother divorced her biological father when she was 11 months old; Birdie reunited with him at the age of 20. When I asked about her mother’s education and work experience, Birdie shared:

My mother was a maid until after marrying her second husband. Again, I think I was around ten. She went back to LPN school and she became a licensed practical nurse and
she worked at a psychiatric hospital for 25 years and she retired. She dropped out of high school because she got pregnant with my sister so she went back and got her GED too.

After asking about her stepdad, Birdie appeared to stumble a bit in her response, “He worked in . . . he was a person who, it was a butcher.” It struck me that Birdie described her mom as a single parent even though she had a stepfather for most of her childhood and that she stumbled to describe his field. I surmised that he was not very present in her life especially after she shared that although her mom remarried, she was still the sole disciplinarian in her life and that of her sister.

Birdie described herself as being an active student in high school involved in multiple activities. She also explained that she made her career decision in high school as result of choosing a track that provided an opportunity to work outside of school.

I chose my career in high school. I took business classes. I was in the National Honors Society, I was in the French club, I was in all of those different clubs. What they had was called the cooperative education. It was either cooperative or distributive education where you got a job and you left after and that was through the business and so I took shorthand and typing and all of that so when I went to college, I just stayed with business. I was a long distance operator in high school. I left school early and went to Southern Bell.

I was still unclear about what attracted Birdie to cooperative education. Although she explained that it gave her the opportunity to work, I wanted to know why she was even drawn to working during high school. Despite my probing, she still could not pinpoint why she chose her particular track as she explained:
I don’t know. I don’t know whether my friends went that route. I don’t know whether there wasn’t that much other. I do remember home economics and I didn’t want to do that. . . . I was not a person that liked; I didn’t ever think I’d be married. That was not of my interest. I didn’t want to cook and I didn’t want to sew and those are the only things that I remember in high school that was available. I was at an African American high school until my senior year and maybe the choices were limited.

Birdie appeared to have a pioneering outlook on her life. She rejected the image that society had for women during that time period. Perhaps having an absentee biological father and then what appears to be an absentee stepfather, who was nevertheless physically present in the home, caused her to look unfavorably at marriage or to choose a more independent lifestyle. I asked Birdie if there were other fields she was drawn to, and she responded that if she could go back, she would be a dancer. For some reason, I did not further explore that response with Birdie. I did not even journal it. I picked up on that response during my data analysis. I am not sure why it did not make an impression on me during the interview because it struck me as I was reading the transcript of her interview.

Birdie shared that she did not have any formal guidance during her career decision making. She does remember having an educated aunt, but she shared that her close friends were the main influencers for her career decision making:

I don’t remember being that in tune. I don’t recall anyone giving me guidance. I didn’t have a real role model in the home. I had an aunt and she was not educated so I think I ran with a group, there was a group of us, there was about five or six of us and I think we formulated our ideas from that cohesive group that we were in. I just don’t remember much
Birdie’s accounts of her work experience had political, economic, racial, and gender based undertones. Her stories were dynamic, shocking, funny, and informative. She truly captured the idea of how hard work and opportunity, and self-advocacy can meet to cause promotion. She shared a story about her job hunting experience, which I thought truly highlighted her tenacity and what appeared to be a strong sense of self:

I came and I’ve just had so many different jobs. I came to Atlanta, I got a job in the library at Georgia State and they fired me after three months. They said I didn’t follow the rules, that I was a little militant coming from AT&T and I was in an environment where I was quiet and so they fired me. So I go looking for a job and I end up at Coca-Cola and I’m on my last interview and I’ve got an interview with the Fairmont Hotel as the PBX operator and when I went on that last interview with Coca-Cola and I went up to show me where I’d be, I had to sit outside of the White manager’s office and there were lines of White girls being secretaries and I couldn’t do that.

I asked Birdie why she rejected the job. She said, “Again, I was from a very militant school. I was very aware of myself as an African American and aware of myself as an African American woman and what I wanted and I knew that wouldn’t be what I wanted.”

Throughout Birdie’s career, she worked in several jobs and played many roles as she sought and gained promotion. All of her promotions were a result of her going to her superiors and demanding an increase in pay or a higher position. She even confronted superiors and accused them of using racial or gender discrimination as means to keep her from being promoted. Birdie was fearless in her pursuit of positions and roles she knew she was capable of doing and felt was entitled to receive.
I mean, Ben Vereen was here and it just really taught me how to work. It taught me how to interact with people. I just learned so much there as an employee. I was in the PBX department because I’ve always had a voice. You know, I was a long distance operator and everybody would tell me how my voice was and so as a PBX operator, the manager of the hotel took a liking to me and so it was at this time, they promoted me after five months to the supervisor and it was such an uproar. I’m telling you, I’m 22 years old and everybody is mad at me because I’ve been promoted to the supervisor.

There was one African American and she was 40 years old and every day I had to walk down this narrow staircase and every day she would be talking about me. I don’t know why they hired that girl – because everybody was mad. The hotel had been open for five months and they had not promoted any of them so one day I came down the steps and I said, I’d like you to get off the phone. She said why and I said, because I’m your supervisor and I would like you to get off the phone and she got off the phone and I said, now I want you to say to me exactly what you’ve been saying to these people every day I come to work. And she said I don’t like it one damn bit that you are a supervisor and I said, but I am and I’m qualified and I understand my job and I am the supervisor.

So by this time, I can really tell you stories, but by this time, we had African American women on all three shifts and I was working the 3-11 shift, that was what I managed and so it came time that the director of communications that was over us, she was leaving and they interviewed and there was one White girl that had graduated from college, I think I was pretty much the only one that was a college graduate and then her and they gave her the position. She was a little mousy . . . I was just pissed and so one day the general manager calls and says you don’t sound perky today and I said, I have no
reason to be and I’m working sir. He said, could you get off of the phone and talk to me. So I got off of the phone and I said, do you understand that you all have outright discriminated. We had three qualified African Americans on each of these three shifts and you all promoted a White girl to the communications position. Well, in two weeks, they had promoted me down to the executive office. I was the first African American in the hotel, in the executive office and I was a catering assistant.

As the catering assistant in the executive office, Birdie’s pay went from $2.75 an hour to $6.50. Despite Birdie’s recognition of discrimination in the workplace, she did not allow it to impede her progress. She shared some fundamental lessons she learned about working. She knew her race and gender played a role in serving as barriers when consideration for promotion took place from upper management, but she did not accept it.

Birdie shared another story where she did not accept being undervalued as an employee:

So we’re there and I’m working really hard now because I’m actually considered management. I’m the catering assistant or something like that and I’m doing an excellent job because I learned, when I got fired from Georgia State, they wrote up two pages on me on what I didn’t do but what they said was I had outstanding production so I learned very early, if you do your job well, above average, that’s going to carry you so I worked very hard there and then one day I opened up – the supervisor opened, I was the assistant and I opened the supervisors and she was getting 2% of all of the banquet checks and I wasn’t getting anything and of course, I went to her. I used to be a brazen little thing, and I went to them and I said you know, this is unfair. I am in management, why is she getting that. Of course, I didn’t know any better so I quit and they let me get
unemployment and all of that and I just moved through all kinds. I ended up next in architecture.

Birdie’s drive and ambition caused her to be a pioneer in the various organizations in which she was employed. On many occasions, she was the first African American or woman to obtain her position.

When they built the airport, they had to have an African American part of architects working on it and so I got hired and I got in with all of these guys and it was just a wonderful learning. I was down in the Equitable building. This was maybe ’77 because I came out of school in ’74 and I bonded with these guys. Somebody was looking for a little African American, he was down from New York, big shot guy, he was looking for somebody to do some typing for him because he had a little side business so I said, I can do that because that’s what I had to rely on was my business skills.

I didn’t fall into business administration where I could be in management training at that time because I was in business education and was more of a secretary. My skills were secretarial and I fought against that all of my career being called a secretary. I just never liked that name because I always knew I did so much more but I was there, I was with the guys, I started a typing service from my home, a home business service. They promoted me within six months to the field and I had to put on a hard hat and jeans and cowboy boots and I was on the job site. I was the only woman and there were 256 men.

I remember this clearly. I was in the trailer. Now, these were my friends out there because we were the African Americans that they were sending out on the job site because the MARTA station, that’s what I got promoted to. I remember then saying that
I could not be classified as nothing but a woman that can do her job out here. This is why I’m standing here.

Birdie was eventually introduced to a woman’s advocacy organization where she had the opportunity to promote gender equality on a larger scale. Just as history reflected, Birdie found that she was still set apart in an organization that sought advocacy for women’s rights. Much like the women’s movement, she found that Blacks were not represented. She noted:

I’m not going to be looked upon as anyone thinking that they can hit on me or anything like that and so I went, I found out about this organization called the National Organization of Women in Construction and I had met this White friend and we went there and there was no African Americans in the group and I said to myself, I’m going to join this group. So, I joined it and within eighteen months I was part of the executive team.

Upon further discussion about Birdie’s career, I asked about her motivation for the decisions she made. She reluctantly expressed that it may have been her mother.

I don’t know, I think my mother, my mother always told us that we were going to college and I don’t think, to this day I don’t feel like my mother, felt like I was doing what she has sent me to college to do. I don’t remember her chastising me or even saying anything, it was just I don’t know I just kind new my mother, she always wanted to be the big wheeler. I guess that was her dream that she never reached and so when I told her I was this or that. I guess didn’t feel like she felt that I had really aspired to, and I am only saying this because I think this is what I felt. I don’t know I just know that one day I decided that I wanted professional woman.
Throughout the interview, Birdie referred to her college education at a “militant” school as contributing to her confronting discrimination as she saw it in her work environment. I wanted to revisit this experience she had in college. I felt that there was more information there that could further explain how she was fearless and bold in her questioning and challenging the status quo in her work environment.

ANT is with Jessie Jackson, you know ANT had the bullet holes on the side of the build, at where we clashed with the, ANT were the four guys that integrated the lunch room. You know I participated in marches, I don’t know marching on Rally. Here come ANT and we walking down the street, we shall overcome, hand in hand.

Birdie explained that her confidence and self-advocacy was a product of her activism in college as well as values she inherited from her mother.

I was in college, so when we left there, I just had self-confidence about myself and when I got into the business world and saw how, because I went from being in a small town, where the unit was the family and the community. Then going to college that was African-American and the coming out the business world and Whiter and they act like they could treat me and they couldn’t. My mother raised us, me and my sister us like that also. She said self-preservations are first law of life and she raised us on that, you can be whatever you want to be.

It appeared that race and gender played major roles as Birdie sought promotion within her career. It also appeared that the journey through her career decision making was a political statement as she broke down gender and racial barriers. As I listened to Birdie’s accounts of her career development, I wondered about intentionality and pre-planning. It appeared as though Birdie progressed in her career as a result of opportunity and self-advocacy. As she became
aware of monetary raises and promotion, she sought them, but there was still the missing piece of having an overall goal to accomplish. This missing piece was highlighted when I asked about her thoughts on her career decision making process. She stated:

I am unclear at 60, I’m unclear at the process, if I was counseling someone, I would tell to find what it is that you like. I have never found what it is that I like. I only did well at all of it, if I got a job I excelled at it, I don’t know whether I like it or not, because if I had to do it over again I would be more creative. I started teaching; here we go let me take you back.

Birdie explained that she decided to change careers and pursue education because she married and had a son. She said that her career in corporate America took a lot of “quality” time away from them and she knew her husband hated it. She decided to pursue teaching so that more of her time could be spent at home with her family. At this point, she identified her spirituality as playing a role in her career decision making.

I like my career decision at this point in my life, because I gifted, when I decided to become a teacher and knew that I didn’t decided to be a teacher, I was having this very spiritual with all this that I have been telling you about, I found my spirituality very early out of college. Everything that I did was related to my belief, higher being and my being in the world and what I can do for the world.

I asked God to lead me where I am supposed to be. In my prayers I said I don’t know what it is that I want to do; everything I do I do well. So I don’t know what it is that I want to do and I heard a voice, and I got this written down and documented, he said I want you to teach the boys, so I have a very special connect with teaching the boys. When I come into the classroom, I feel that I am in here touching lives and you know I
teach and turned out to be a very good teacher. The real thing is touch the lives in everyone in my classroom. That is how I feel about what I am doing, it is a gift that I was given and every day I take an opportunity to touch someone’s life. Rather be through a birthday song, or talking or just whatever I need to do. I am really lead to the people that who students that really need that personal. I got this like real mom kind aura about me.

**Birdie’s words of wisdom to young African American women engaging in career decision making.** As I constructed the interview protocol for this study, I decided that I wanted to include an opportunity for the participants to impart words of wisdom to young African American women engaging in career exploration. The fact that these participants completed college and successfully entered into a career indicated that there could be lessons that they could teach their younger counterparts. A facet of Black feminism involves using stories as a means of empowering others. This interview question where participants have the opportunity to advise others served as a means of empowering them and empowering those coming up behind them. I greatly anticipated hearing what Birdie had to say to young African American women given her rich experiences.

**Words of wisdom to the younger generation from Birdie.** Well the same thing that I have done with my son, what I would do tell them that you must know who you are and must I call it personal development. You must look at yourself and identify your weakness and strength and learn about who you are, and then you are going to have to add into your life. You have got to learn how to negotiate so get you a negotiating book. You got to learn how to act like a lady, so take you etiquette, it is the total package that you are looking for and when an African American woman has the total package, I can use Condoleezza Rice, she had the total packages, there
wasn’t a part of her that could be infiltrated, that could be exploited by others. If you are confident and you know how to make decisions, than nobody can sway you, so having this armor around you, is the armor of how you are as a multi-facet individual, then seeking out your spirituality so that you can have that higher power in you. The universe guides you and it will put in back to where you are supposed to be.

**Hazel**

Hazel took approximately 15 minutes to get comfortable for our interview. She apologized for making me wait. I assured her that it was not a problem and thanked her for allowing me to change our meeting time. I wanted to be sure she felt at ease and did not feel the need to appease me by answering her interview questions in a way that she felt I wanted. After a brief discussion about Whitney Houston, we decided to turn off the TV and begin the interview. Hazel is a 33-year-old systems analyst with a bachelor of science in computer information systems. Hazel’s mom is a registered nurse and her dad is a journalist. Her mother remarried a man who is a mechanic. Hazel’s decision to pursue a career in technology appeared to be a matter of convenience. When asked how she chose her career, Hazel described:

I always knew I wanted to, I went out of state for college and I always knew I wanted to do something business related I guess. Then when I got to college, I kind of waived out a couple of majors, and then I got interested in computer, because I guess at that time everyone was using their computers for everything. So I just figured I would pursue that career.

Looking back, I wish I had asked Hazel to share what majors she waived out of and why. Hazel seemed to be matter-of-fact in her explanation of her career decision process, as if she did what made sense. Hazel explained that she was drawn to teaching, which she still feels is an
interest. As she talked about teaching, I observed that she appeared to be a bit discouraged because she sighed often and waved her hand a manner that looked like she was dismissing teaching as a career option. Hazel said,

I think I want to pursue it but just to find out what I want to teach and I don’t know if I want to stay within an IT arena just because I have so many years of experience, like I have almost twelve years of experience in it so I figured that would be the route to go.

I felt the need to process her reasoning for not pursuing teaching. As I was probing her in this topic, I wondered if I had switched roles from researcher to counselor. I quickly decided that this discussion was relevant to this study because it allowed Hazel and I to explore her thought process as she evaluated potentially changing careers. As Hazel and I explored changing careers, she conveyed a disinterest in the process,

Probably college kids. I’ve tried teaching. I did something called Junior Achievement for seventh to eighth graders and I just wasn’t feeling that level of teaching. Hopefully something more on a college level. I know that requires a Masters and that’s a whole other thing. . . . Just because I don’t know if I really want to go back to school. Like, I don’t feel like taking out loans and I’m kind of at that point in my life where I’m like facthing, I’m newly married, I want to have kids so I’m like is going back to school and doing all of that . . . I don’t know so I’m like at that crossroad.

After Hazel expressed her confusion about changing careers, I felt I had to make a decision about where I wanted to take the interview. As a counselor, I wanted to process what would actually be involved in pursuing a master’s degree and how she can adjust her life; however, as a researcher, I had to remain focused on my research conference. Since, I felt the urge to stray, I decided to revisit my interview protocol and ask the next question. I felt and still
do feel that I acted insensitively. She did not appear to have a problem with moving on to the next question, I felt that she was just sharing her current situation without the expectation of my input. I went on to ask Hazel to explain the career decision process for which she decided to pursue computers. She described her process as being a difficult one:

When I initially started out or when I initially left college it was in 2001 and I had an offer that was rescinded because of the economy slow when I first started out, it wasn’t what I thought it would be because I started out at a smaller company and I literally had to fight my way, keep applying for jobs, keep applying for jobs until I could get a business analyst or systems analyst position because in the position I started out with, I don’t even remember the title. It was just at a smaller company and there wasn’t any room to grow. It wasn’t really a systems analyst position so to me it was a little bit difficult but once I got my feet in the door and I proved my work, then it went from there.

I wondered if the challenge to infiltrate her field also contributed to her being discouraged in leaving in to pursue something else. After having worked hard to prove herself as an effective employee in her field and investing several years, it appeared to be impractical to change fields. Hazel appeared to be a practical person. She seemed to think analytically and to make decisions based on what is convenient and what makes sense to her life. As a systems analyst, she spends her days determining efficiency of different programs and systems as they operate in her organization. Her solution focused role appeared to be emerging as she evaluated changing careers. I wanted to spend more time with her reflecting on her thinking as she made career decisions. I wanted to know if there was a pattern. Hazel described her thought process in college:
The school I went to was mainly a business college so I’m really good with grooming so you have career services, I had people who were already in the field, in the IT field, so I would pretty much ask them what they do and what their job was like and so I knew that whatever they were doing, say they were a systems analyst or project managers, mainly those two fields, so I would ask questions and I guess in that school they kind of already had an idea of what you wanted to do so if you were in accounting, you wanted to be an accountant in whatever company. If you’re in IT, you wanted to stay within certain fields so it was kind of almost like very in front of you. You had your peers who had already graduated and were in specific fields and so then we had a Black united body which was a club or organization at our college and they were pretty good with bringing back former students to come talk to you and you’d hear what they were doing and so it was kind of like in front of us as far as what we wanted to select.

I think I missed an opportunity to ask Hazel about her choosing to attend a college that was mainly geared towards business. My assumption is that her practical thinking probably caused her to pick a school that would not only educate her, but also train her so that she would be skilled enough to obtain a job out of college. Fortunately, she later shared that she had a desire to pursue business in high school, which led her to choosing a business college. Since I still felt unsure about the factors that influenced her to pursue her career, I asked her to describe those factors, of which Hazel clarified:

Initially probably the fact that I think I just said it, I know what I’m doing, but I think number one is probably, it was money. Actually money and just the expectation that that’s what I should be doing. It’s kind of like when you graduate from college. I remember thinking back that people didn’t do it. Say you went from my major, computer
information systems and you didn’t do anything with computers, this is like man, you just wasted all of that money and you didn’t go into the field so I think it was just my environment. I was in a business school but they were very competitive and so that’s kind of like, after you graduate, this is the job that you are supposed to look for, this is what you do and they better be paying me. So, those two things. The expectations and then along the way, money.

Hazel’s practical thinking and analytical mind made me question what part of her is drawn to teaching. Upon reflection, I wish I asked her about why she felt drawn to teach. Half way through the interview, I realized that race and gender did not come up as a factor while Hazel discussed her career decision making process. I had an internal debate on whether asking her about race and gender would taint the remainder of the interview. I decided that since I had asked questions about her career decision making already and since she was aware of the topic of my study, I felt that introducing race and gender to our discussion would not taint our interview. Before asking about race and gender, I made a final attempt at drawing race and gender out of her to describe her experiences working in her field. Hazel described:

It’s actually really good. I like what I do. Because of the company that I’m in, its mostly female dominated whereas a lot of companies within the IT field, IT software field, is more men but because of the company that I’m in, health insurance, there’s a lot of women so I like it. I like what I do and I like the flexibility, or learning about new systems, which is what I probably do almost every day so it’s pretty good.

Looking back, I wish I found out more about her experiences working with women. However, I found Hazel’s response to be a great natural transition to asking her about any impact she believe race and gender had on working in her field. Hazel explicated:
I think it helps because even though the company I work in now is like female dominated, in the male dominated and prior positions that I had where there were a lot of males, I think just being a female helps balance it out. A lot of times they have to deal with customers and I don’t know if men are as good at dealing with customers, especially if their emotions are involved but a woman can kind of rope them in and get pretty much what they want as far as the requirements for what they are doing for their job.

After reviewing the transcript of our interview, I realized Hazel did not address race even though I asked her thoughts on race and gender. I think this oversight from her may be indicative of her not recognizing race as a factor in her career at this point in her life. I still wanted to know what her perspective was on being a Black woman in the labor market. I decided to use a free association style question where I said the words Black woman and career and I asked her about thoughts and/or feelings that came to mind, she replied, “Powerful, no family.” I asked her to elaborate. She responded,

Maybe more Black executives, right. Most of the time it, I guess I’m thinking more my field, so, in my field, a lot of times when people are in management or high level positions, their families suffer because they have to juggle between the two and they travel. I don’t do as much traveling but speaking from what I see around me in my field. Now, from other fields, I’m hearing the same thing, like it’s hard to juggle both and when I say no family, a lot of times the executives don’t have family. Not like someone on my level or whatever. So you see that a lot but there’s always the juggle between family and career. Like my cousin and my sister, for instance, my cousin, she now has three kids but I remember when she first had her first or second child, she was telling me how rough it was to beat Atlanta traffic to go pick them up from daycare and to do all of this and she
was doing a little bit of traveling, sacrifice is probably what I should have said. Sacrifice, Powerful, because it’s really good and enlightening. It’s like on both spectrums.

While Hazel’s life exuded success in that she lives in a gorgeous home and is employed in a lucrative field, she appeared to feel comfortable, but not fulfilled. Things in her life were in order based on her practical plan of pursuing a degree and field that would meet her needs, but she shared that she still had a desire for more. Her practical thinking is still keeping her from pursuing what appears to be a strong desire. Throughout our interview, I found that she appeared to be settling for what made sense, but she still longed to pursue something to make her happy. She appeared content, but not joyful. When I asked Hazel how she felt about her career decision, surprisingly she replied, “I actually wouldn’t change it because I learned so much so I actually feel good about it.” I wanted to know what advice she would give her younger self about career decision making. She stated:

I was a bright kid in high school. College, that’s another story but yeah, I was full of life, full of passion so the same thing. I definitely, I would tell myself the same thing, to pursue what it is that I love to do and at that time, I just knew that I wanted to be in business, like I know what I loved and everything so I think I would definitely just tell them to pursue what they’re interested in because sometimes, like me, they might not know. So, it’s whatever they are interested in doing.

I asked Hazel to share words of wisdom to young African American women who are just beginning to embark on making career decisions.

*Words of wisdom to the younger generation from Hazel.* I would definitely, C’s going to get me on this one, I would definitely say what is it that you want to do? Do what you want to do. Don’t care about what anybody else thinks or says and don’t think about the money because
all of that is going to come so whatever it is you want to do. If you want to travel, go travel, whatever it is you want to do because I definitely believe that just learning, and a lot of times they might not know because I know kids, when they go into college, I had a tiny bit of friends who were undecided but just to pursue what it is you really want to do deep down inside and I know that’s hard because a lot of times you have the parents preparing you for college and all of that, but do what you want to do.

Ruth

Ruth is a participant whom I respect greatly. She held a leadership position and was the first woman to be ordained as a minister at her church. Her meekness and mild manner masked a strong and courageous woman. I truly admire her humility. She nonchalantly shared her experiences. My only concern is that I felt that her modesty kept her from sharing more. I wanted to know more about her triumphs and challenges. I suspected she must have had some, but she chose to live her life focusing on her present situation. Ruth is a 52-year-old African American woman who grew up in a privileged African American household. Interestingly, neither of her parents was high school graduates, but her father retired from the Army and became an entrepreneur owning a gas station. Her mother worked in the hospital as an x ray technician. Ruth’s career decision making process included natural transitions and she was able to balance fulfilling her desire for a family as a well as to be a career women. Now that her children are grown and she is a grandmother, it appears that she is now ready to develop her career. During Ruth’s interview, she described her career plans as being a “dream.” Her use of the word “dream” resonated in me. Ruth’s story made an impression on me that I never expected.
Ruth is a counseling director at a church. She shared that, since high school, she knew that she enjoyed serving people, which led to her working in human resources out of high school and then working in the counseling field. When I asked Ruth about her feelings regarding working in her field she explained, “It’s enjoyable, it has direct contact with people, it can sometimes be challenging helping people with their hurting issues, issues that come up in life that cause pain but most importantly its rewarding to me and being able to help others.” Ruth described her career decision making process as a “natural progression.” I asked her to elaborate on why she describes her career decision making as “natural progression.” Ruth explained,

When employed, I would apply for a job, get that job, find that I liked it and progress in that area so I started out like a teller in banking but then applied for an entry level position in human resources and that’s where it began to progress so applying for a job, getting it, which caused growth as far as the role or the job at a point since I did not continue college immediately after school, I enrolled after high school but then stopped once I got married and had children but I then later returned to college at a late age and it was then in college doing some assessments and so forth that then allowed me to see what my education and prior work experience, the opportunities that were then available to me in the area of counseling. It so happens that my spiritual service in church also had a lay counseling department so it was like the merging of the two.

Ruth explained her journey through her career with ease, but I could not help but think that stopping to raise a family would have thwarted what began as a seamless process. I wanted to learn more about the process by which Ruth went back to school after stopping to take care of her family. I asked to explain why she went back and describe the process. Ruth replied,
It was something I wanted to do earlier in life but again, just the situation as far as being at home with my little kids initially and having to work so there were a lot of things to juggle so I think it was always a dream. I have an older sister and older brother who both attended college and graduated so I always had them as an influence so it was always a dream of wanting to complete school and then when a program that was more geared towards working adults became available, after researching and seeing that there were programs such as that, that’s what made me decide it was time.

While Ruth was explaining her return to school, she used the word “dream” to describe how she viewed her career plans. I imagined her caring for her children and husband day after day, observing her siblings’ accomplishments and yearning to accomplish her own goals.

“Dream” is an interesting word to me because I think of “dream” as being a desire that can be unreachable. A “dream” is far-reaching and awesome. A dream never leaves your heart and when you see someone living your dream, you feel excited to know that it if it happened for that person, it can happen for you, but you also feel hurt that you are not accomplishing the same. A “dream” is personal. A “dream” can be a desire that only you know about. A dream gives you hope in times of discouragement, and further pain in times of despair. My summation was that Ruth’s career was more than just a means to meet her family’s basic needs. Ruth’s career was a statement to those around her that she can do it all. She can be a mother to her children, a wife to her husband, and still fulfill her desires. Ruth’s career journey was the pursuit of a dream. At this point, I understood Ruth’s tranquil state. I can imagine how peaceful it is to look back and see that she took care of those who needed her and now she was taking care of herself. Now, she was fulfilling the dream she deferred for many years.
Ruth shared the process by which she pursued her career as, “It worked for me. It may not be a process that I would suggest to someone. I feel it could have been a lot more streamline and there could have been maybe a little less time wasted. Not that – It could be more streamlined rather than taking the detours that mine took.” Upon reflection, Ruth identified “time wasted” and “detours” as she pursued her career decision. I found her statements regarding her career process to be strong and critical for someone who appeared so gentle. I wondered if she had any anger, regret, or felt slighted by the sacrifices she made.

I then wondered what she felt about me. Ruth was aware that I am a doctoral student who is a mother of two young children and a wife. She could see that I was younger than she was and here I was completing a Ph.D. in her field. It appears I had no detours. I wondered if that made her look back on her own life thinking that she could have done what she is doing now as a 52-year-old grandmother while she was a young mother. I wondered if my presence was a reminder to Ruth of what she could have done or better yet, what she should have done.

Consequently, I asked Ruth how she felt about her decision to which she stated, “I feel good and to the degree that I am in school now, have returned to school to continue my education in the field.” In response to my probing, Ruth explained that she was pursuing a master’s degree in professional counseling and would be pursuing a Ph.D. in counseling thereafter. I wanted to know Ruth’s motivation for pursuing another graduate degree and then a doctorate degree given that she was the director of counseling and had already completed a Master’s degree. Ruth shared, “My motivation is to always be the best at what I do or to strive to be the most effective helper that I can be to people and so to stay abreast of new developments that are available through education helps in that regard.” Ruth further said she expected that she would have completed her Ph.D. by now, but it was evident that she did not allow that to keep
her from continuing to pursue her goal. With the focus of this study in mind, I asked Ruth to convey what it is like to be a Black woman in her field. Ruth shared,

It has been an enjoyable experience. I have not, there have not been major challenges. I am an African American female in a church setting so I’ve seen challenges with gender in that regard, maybe across the board but not for me specifically so I’m thankful that it has not been a challenge for me both in corporate life before coming to service in a Christian setting in the church setting.

Given Ruth’s age and her background, I knew that she grew up during a high periods of racial and gender tensions. I was surprised that she had not mentioned race as she described her journey. I asked her to share her reaction to the words Black, woman, and career. Ruth responded, “You know, I want to say open, like broad, that there are opportunities and it’s kind of like you can be what you want to be and do what you want to do. There may be variations of how you have to do it. You may have to start your own company to do so but it’s just that opportunities exist.” I am not certain if it is a result of maturity or growing up in a household with two accomplished parents or seeing herself complete her goals, but it appeared that Ruth did not see race or gender in the perspective as being barriers. Rather, Ruth saw being an African American career woman as being someone who experiences detours, but still accomplishes her goals. Perhaps her perspective is influenced by her own experience of detours. Ruth had the most optimistic view of Black career women than all of my participants. Her tone was matter-of-fact and confident as she spoke. It appeared she had no doubt that an African American woman can fulfill any career decisions as long as she is ready to confront the barriers by taking detours. My summation of career decision making among African American women based on Ruth’s account was rather than looking at gender, race, intersectionality as being barriers in the
career journey, look at an African American women’s career journey as being one potentially filled with detours. The idea of detours versus barriers is optimistic, positive, and encouraging.

Although Ruth had an acceptance of detours, she recognized that minimizing barriers is ideal. Ruth had inspiring words for African American women.

**Words of wisdom to the younger generation from Ruth.** I’d say if it were one thing that my mother gave me a card that said to pursue your passion, not a pension and so that whatever she is finding at a very early age, as I was mentioning, that she might be drawn to or that is noted that she is very effective in, to start exploring and kind of pursue those avenues very early in life to be able to be in the environment where those things are taking place so from cooking to drawing, building a building or creating things, whatever, to allow herself to be in those environments so that she can begin learning at an early age so that she can start the process of pursuit of those desires early and be on a path that is leading that way early rather than kind of a detour or zigzag way of ultimately ending there.

**Radiance**

Radiance is a 30-year-old psychotherapist. Her path to her career counseling was one filled with many positions in various arenas. In an attempt to maintain her anonymity, I will not share the various positions in which she worked. Radiance’s father was retired military who later worked in a civilian position with the military as an electronic technician. Her mother was an accountant who teaches accounting at a community college. Radiance provided the most unique response when I asked her who headed the household. She said, “my dad primarily; my mom worked and she had a validated perspective that was weighed, but my dad had the final say.” “A validated perspective that was weighed” was an interesting phrase to use to describe Radiance’s mother’s role in her family. I wondered why Radiance used that terminology and
why she felt the need to convey her parents’ role in such a manner. I tabled my thought on this matter and waited to see if validation became a theme throughout Radiance’s career decision making process.

Radiance described her career decision making process as one of “trial and error.” She said she would try one field, realize she did not like it and move on to another. While Radiance’s trial and error process for career decision making appeared impractical in that she could have taken a career inventory or participate in career counseling to identify her interests and pursue a path towards that interest, I think her willingness to start new. I realized that rather than looking at the many failed attempts at identifying her career interest, I wanted to focus on Radiance’s tenacity in continuing her pursuit for the career that fit her best. I asked Radiance to share her thoughts on her career decision making process, she stated,

How what I think about it, I guess I think it took me too long to come to the conclusion, I think it would have been helpful to have a little more exposure to different kind of careers, you know in your high school and under graduate program, some sort of internship or better choice of electives, not so that you can kind of get your feet wet in basic level in the different kind of industries. Then I probably could have weeded out some of these, because I tried. When I was an undergrad, I thought I wanted to be on television, so I tried that whole television broadcasting and I hated it and I spend or wasted two years on that, when I could have done something else.

Radiance illustrates the necessity for career counseling. She spent time and energy seeking to identify a career she might have found if she would have done more research or met with a professional who would have helped her to think through her interests and skills. When I
asked Radiance to express her thoughts on career exploration, she made an interesting point. She said,

> Exploration in general, I don’t think there is anything wrong with it, I don’t know if this is a new kind of value system, that we have in this generation where we want to be passionate and satisfied in our work and that tends to be more important than you now having job security. I think it is important to explore and until you find something that you enjoy doing and can make a living off. I don’t think that we offer very many avenues to explore at a younger age, I think a lot of it ends up being trial and error for a lot of people, where they find something that is interesting enough, they think they might enjoy it and they get in there and it is not what they thought it was, then they are miserable and they tweak it and try something else.

I believe that Radiance may have highlighted the experiences of many who are stumbling through identifying a career. While most of her statement was a reflection of her own experience, I found it most interesting that she prioritized having job satisfaction over job security. I interpreted that as meaning that her motivation for her career decision was seeking happiness rather than seeking a means to stabilize her life. Radiance had worked so many fields; I wondered what her perspective on how gender and race impacted her career. To my surprise, she said, “No, not me and not my field, I guess because and it could have to do with the city that we live in there is a lot of Black women here not uncommon to see a lot of Black women advancing in their careers. The lady who is the CEO of the agency I work for is a Black woman.” Perhaps seeing so many Black women in positions of leadership and accomplishing their goals played a motivational factor for Radiance’s incessant pursuit for her place in the
workforce. When I asked Radiance to share her reaction to the words Black, woman, and career, she named a person. She replied,

Ok, I don’t know why, but Oprah . . . I think it is just because for me she is the epitome of a Black woman who found her way in her desired career and advanced to the fullest potential, she started off as a news anchor, hated that. Then got a basic daytime show in Chicago and that grew to a syndicated network show and now she has her own network. To me that is the epitome of a Black woman in a career.

Radiance later stated that she would want to pattern her life after Oprah in the “dedication that she has to her passion.” I thought of how Radiance appeared dedicated in her pursuit of her passion. She tried various fields and remained steadfast in seeking the field that best fit her. Despite her disappointments and failed attempts, she says she is now at a point where she is in a field that best suits her and that she believes will make her happy. I wondered if Radiance was satisfied in her current position given that she is now in her field of choice. Radiance conveyed, “Overall I am satisfied, because I know that I have a plan to work on myself and it is coming together, slowly but surely, so I am confident that I will be where I want to be, if it wasn’t for that I would be extremely dissatisfied.” I thought it was profound that Radiance said she had a plan to work on herself rather than saying a plan to work on her career. I assumed she meant that there was more growth she needed to experience and aspects of herself that needed to be improved in order for her career to fall into place. I wondered how she was working on herself. At that point, I felt I had to make a decision on whether I would change my role from interviewer to counselor and make some suggestions. I decided that it was best for me to keep my interviewer role because I did not want to risk offending her or having her look at me differently, which could influence her responses for the remainder of the interview. Since I was not
concerned for her safety nor did I feel that she was harming herself in anyway, I decided I did not have to intervene. I continued my interview.

Although she has identified counseling as the best field for her, she is still in pursuit of fulfilling a desire to have her own practice. It did not surprise me that Radiance sought to manage her own practice. During the interview, she shared that she was not motivated to be productive and to even get up for the jobs she felt did not fulfill her. My belief is that Radiance was seeking a way she could make her own rules in an environment she can adjust to fit her lifestyle. When I reflect on the Oprah Show, I realized that Oprah seemed to address topics that interested her. She interviewed people she wanted to meet and discussed issues she felt were relevant. The show bore her name and it reflected who she was as a person. I could see Radiance’s practice being one that offers various services and is eclectic in the techniques used in counseling. Radiance gave the impression of being that of a free spirit. She appeared to be disinterested in boundaries and structure. However, at some point during the interview, Radiance shared her realization that she needs to conform by working in a capacity that will meet her needs. Her realization of balance between structure and living freely was expressed through her advice to younger African American women seeking careers.

Words of wisdom for the younger generation from Radiance. I probably would encourage her to utilize some the resources that is on line like a career assessment of some sort of skill assessment of some sort and then from there I would strongly encourage them to get some experience as an intern or you know an entry level position, but to get some experience before you kind of settle on a decision, especial if this is a high school student or a young college student, get an internship or get a job in the field and see if you really like it before you spend tens of thousands of dollars or require tens of thousands of dollars student loan debt only to find
out that the job that you thought would love, you not love or it doesn’t pay well or doesn’t pay
enough for you to sustain a standard of living that you would like to of maintain, you could get
some experience.

Gwyneth

Gwyneth is a 33-year-old wellness consultant and health coach. I asked her to elaborate
on what she does for a living. She replied,

As a wellness consultant, I work with a wellness facility and we help people with medical
weight loss and allergy testing and food sensitivity testing and things of that nature, anti-
aging. In my practice as a health coach, I coach people through proper ways of eating,
helping them feel better about themselves, mentally, physically, emotionally, all through
nutrition, pretty much.

Gwyneth has a master’s degree in professional counseling and is currently working on
her doctorate in nutrition. When describing her career decision making process, she often
referred to prayer as being a guiding force. She reminisced,

I started in education and I taught for six years and I was miserable therefore I left that
profession in December of 2010 and I did not have any idea what I was going to do next.
All I knew was I wasn’t supposed to be this unhappy so I left education and I spent a lot
of time praying, January through March, I spent a lot of time just figuring out what I was
supposed to be doing while I was at home on my couch, didn’t have any money coming
in, no clue what was next but it was later revealed to me that I was supposed to help
people with nutrition, something that I always struggled with in my life and finally got it
to a point where I’m happy with myself and wanted to be able to help other people do
that something and figuring out and doing soul searching for what would I do for free.
What I’ve always done for free was help people with exercising and eating better and it just seemed to fit so I ended up coming across health coaching and then a couple of months later I got the opportunity to work in this wellness facility so everything just laid itself out to me and its worked out.

Gwyneth’s career exploration experience gave the impression of being very personal, spiritual, and thoughtful. Gwyneth shared that her career decision was derived from a struggle she had battled for many years. As someone who dealt with weight issues, Gwyneth said that she finally figured out a system that works for her and she realized she can do the same for others. It seems that Gwyneth had to remove herself from distractions including work to spend time figuring out the best career for her. As she explained her field, I could sense that she was at peace with her decision and that she was confident that she found the career that best suited her. Gwyneth summed up her feelings about her career in three words, “I love it.” She went on to say, “There are so many people that need help with nutrition and eating properly and just taking better care of themselves and so those things go hand in hand a lot of times with women and our appearance and the way we feel about ourselves so I love what I’m doing now.” Gwyneth used “we” as she described the population she serves. By personalizing her career, I believe that Gwyneth is motivated to be dedicated to the services she provides. The issue of nutrition is one that is important in her own life and she identifies nutrition as being related to self-care. Based on Gwyneth’s decision to leave education because she was unhappy and eventually take an extended period of time off to identify her career, it appears that self-care is important to Gwyneth and her career in nutrition affords her the opportunity to encourage and direct other clients in self-care. Although Gwyneth did not say that her clientele is solely women, she only mentioned women when she talked about her career. I think that Gwyneth’s career decision is a
personal statement saying “Hey ladies! WE have to take care of ourselves and I am going to help you do it.” I pictured her to be caring, dedicated, hardworking, and encouraging as a health coach. Gwyneth described her career exploration as being one of personal development where she had to engage in self-discovery. Gwyneth explained,

I appreciate it. I have a new found respect – I guess I can’t say respect – appreciation for faith, having faith, trusting that everything will work out. I’ve grown as an individual over the process for me of developing what I wanted to do with my life because it wasn’t while being a teacher was such an honorable and is such an honorable profession, it wasn’t for me and so having to step away from that and find my own way, what would make me happy, this whole process was eye opening.

Out of all of the participants I interviewed, I believe that Gwyneth conveyed a more holistic perspective to her career decision making process. Her journey to choosing her career appeared to have changed her perspective on many aspects of her personality. It appears that Gwyneth used her career exploration as a means to develop spiritually, emotionally, and mentally. As she described her career exploration, she seemed to be satisfied and showed that she had a sense that she accomplished something big. Gwyneth shared,

I don’t know. I guess overall it was great. I think it was necessary for me because now I have something to look back on, to reflect on. I’ve come a long way so nothing was given or handed to me. I’m working very hard for everything that I have right now. It’s been a huge growing process and I’m continuing to grow and learn. I’m very thankful for it despite how difficult it has been. Without it, I don’t think I would be where I am having not gone through everything I did to get here.
Gwyneth’s reflections reveal that her career decision making process was one that taught her life lessons. She was not only pursuing a career of interest, but a place where she could be happy. When I asked about the factors that influenced her career decision, Gwyneth spoke in depth about her spirituality.

Definitely God and praying and being prayerful and trying to figure out what it was that I was supposed to do, my life experiences, be it that I always struggled with my weight and my self-esteem and all of those issues from being a child and now as an adult woman. They definitely shaped how I was able to arrive to this decision but first and foremost being prayerful because I had no idea what my next move was going to be just jumping up and leaving education sought God first and foremost and my life experiences.

Gwyneth’s career journey was spiritual and self-reflective. She used her experiences and her faith to guide her as she waited to be led to a decision. Based on her responses, this process worked best for her because it not only led to career she says she loved, but it taught her about a lot of other things like faith and relying on God. I think Gwyneth’s career decision making was a journey rather than a process. In my opinion, a process is strategic and planned with timelines and benchmarks. I feel that a journey is a string of experiences that happens to a person rather than the person making the journey. I think a person can create steps to complete a process, but a journey is less manipulated by the person. Gwyneth embarked on a journey. She started out with a process that led her to education, but she let go and allowed herself to experience the journey. Throughout Gwyneth’s spiritual explanation, I thought of the scripture Psalm 37:4-5 which says, “Delight thyself also in the Lord; and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and He shall bring it to pass.” Gwyneth’s career journey taught me that sometimes you have to stop, let go, self-reflect and allow for time
having faith that things will work out. Gwyneth provided an insightful response to my question of whether she was where she thought she would be in her career. She said,

Lord no. At thirty, I decided to just up and leave my job not having another one and no idea what my next step was going to be, where my next paycheck was going to come from, that’s not typically what they say happens at thirty so no, but although I’m not where I thought I would be, I’m where I’m supposed to be and happy and so if I still could be where the world says I should be which is in the classroom, at least I have a job and it’s an honorable job and you know, from the outside looking in it looks great but I’m miserable. I’ll take this even though it’s not where I thought I would be, but I’m going to get it there.

At some point during the interview, the spiritual tone turned to focus more on racial and gender issues. As Gwyneth described her current experience at her job, she shared some experiences that she identified as occurring as a result of her race. Gwyneth reported,

With my job right now, I’m finding that I’m in a position where they don’t appreciate my skill level, my knowledge, the knowledge that I possess and a White female counterpart, she’s actually being given more respect and appreciation with clearly less knowledge but the only thing I could come up with is that she looks to par being that she can go to certain places and she’ll represent something totally different than I will being African American with natural hair and just – it’s funny that you say that because I’ve been experiencing a lot of different things with this situation, more so over the past two or three weeks than I have been initially but she did come in and although I had been with the business since it opened, she was brought in and given this high ranking position
despite my already being there and its very apparent that she doesn’t know as much as I know but for whatever reason they feel like she’s a better person for that position.

Gwyneth walked me through her thought process on how she tried to identify if the issues she experienced at her workplace were a result of race or gender differences. She elucidated,

And that’s why for a minute I thought that it was because I was a female. Some of the issues that I would come in contact with, but now I see that it’s maybe not just me being a female but also being Black. Although, the majority that work there – I haven’t quite figured it out, but it’s interesting.

Gwyneth perceived that the intersections of her race and gender played a role in her being overlooked when it came to promotion. She talked about what she represents to certain clients as opposed to what her White counterpart represents. I wish I had Gwyneth elaborate on what she felt she represented as opposed to her coworker. My summation is that she felt her clients would not recognize her as the image of a wellness consultant as a result of her hair and race. I had Gwyneth share her reaction to the words Black, woman, and career. She replied,

Hard-working, dedicated, and driven. We work hard. We have to. I can – coming from the world of education where it’s dominated by women and leaving that field and going to one that’s more – it’s more along the lines of corporate even though it’s not completely corporate, I have a different appreciation for what we do and what we have to do. One as women, and then you add the element of being Black woman into it and it changes things and so we have to work hard. I would always hear about having to work harder and it’s just not the same and again, coming from education where we’re all women, you don’t really understand that as much but now being in a different arena, I can see we do work hard and we have to work harder.
Gwyneth verbalized the impact gender and race had on the work place. She also viewed Black career women in terms of the barriers they have to fight. Her comparison of being a Black woman in a female dominated field as opposed to a male dominated field provided another layer to the experiences of Black women as they enter different fields. I found Gwyneth’s interview to be multidimensional. She addressed image, spirituality, race, gender, intersections, relationships, and family. I was impressed by her insightful responses. To her credit, Gwyneth took time to reflect on her interests and experiences before making a career decision. Her time of reflection contributed to an analytical and holistic perspective on what her career means to her and the impact on her life. Gwyneth shared her frustration with being single and how her focus on her career may have contributed to her being “very single,” as she described. She also said that her career path impacts the mate who attracts her. She explained,

The flip side of that is also the person I end up with, I need them to have as much drive as I do. I need them to be that example that I had growing up with my father. So, it sort of puts me in a different category and that really limits the already small pool of men that are available to me.

Gwyneth was candid in saying that she struggled with hearing her peers getting married and building a family. She even noted that her White counterparts, in particular, appear to have no challenges with starting a family. Gwyneth retorted,

It doesn’t look like it. You look at every…I swear the friends from high school and of course, social networking is huge. You look on Facebook and it’s I’m married with kids and I’m thinking about my White friends growing up. It just seems like it happens so easily for them and it may be an unfair assumption that it happened easily but they’re all
– like honestly the majority of them are married with children, two or three children at this point in their life and so it doesn’t seem to be as difficult for them.

As a result of Gwyneth’s introspection and extended time of reflection, I expected that she would have words of wisdom for the next generation that would direct them to take the time to focus on various aspects of their lives rather than just their career choice. I believe that Gwyneth met my expectations.

**Words of wisdom to the younger generation from Gwyneth.** I would definitely say what is it that you want to do? Do what you want to do. Don’t care about what anybody else thinks or says and don’t think about the money because all of that is going to come so whatever it is you want to do. If you want to travel, go travel, whatever it is you want to do because I definitely believe that just learning, and a lot of times they might not know because I know kids, when they go into college, I had a tiny bit of friends who were undecided but just to pursue what it is you really want to do deep down inside and I know that’s hard because a lot of times you have the parents preparing you for college and all of that, but do what you want to do.

**Jennifer**

My impression of Jennifer was that of a person who is very organized, concise much like one of my previous interviewees. Interestingly, both women had similar positions. I concluded that working in the field of technology required objectivity and succinctness, and precision which, more than likely, drew people who held those traits. Unlike the interview I had with Hazel who had a similar career to Jennifer, Jennifer appeared to still be committed to a practical career life where she viewed her career not in terms of a dream, but as a means to take care of herself, something that she is skilled at accomplishing, and something that required little education and time. It did not appear that her career defined her. Jennifer talked about her
career as if it were a mere tool that could maintain her financial needs or a required aspect of adult life. I believe Jennifer’s contribution to this study provided a completely different perspective from the other participants; one that could speak to more practical thinkers.

Jennifer is a 29-year-old IT project manager. She has a Bachelor’s of Science in Computer Engineering technology. Jennifer explained that money was her primary motivation for her career selection:

I chose my career, I wanted to pick a career that I knew I was going to have to go to school for something and I wanted to choose a career where I didn’t have to be in school forever and when I got out I would make a lot of money so technology was the best choice, so that’s what I chose.

Although Jennifer believes she chose the correct career that fit her initial criteria of being paid well and requiring little education, she reflects on how it may have been better if she pursued a passion. Jennifer stated,

I think that I went into something that maybe I didn’t have an initial passion for only because I was more money driven and time driven more than maybe passion driven so I wish sometimes I really had went into something that I had more of a passion for and just put the time into it versus what I did but I still enjoy what I do so the decision didn’t turn out too bad.

I observed throughout the interview that Jennifer did not allow herself to dwell on what she should have or could have done. She mentioned a different approach she could have taken, but often reverted to her feeling that her career is suitable for her life at this time. I was curious about her passion, which led me to asking her if she identified a career that she felt was her passion. To my surprise, Jennifer shared that she had a passion for psychology. I was surprised
by the polarity of her current field and her career interest. When I questioned her about pursuing psychology at this point, she responded, “Because I don’t want to go to school for eight years and do it. I’ve already invested so much in what I do now and I just feel like it would be too much to go backwards.” Jennifer’s statement was almost verbatim what Hazel, the other IT professional indicated about changing careers. While my previous participants seeking careers in the helping professions and education changed careers multiple times in pursuit of their passion, my two participants who were in technology fields saw the process of changing fields to pursue their passion as one that would set them back and require more from them than they were willing to give. My summation was that the logical and objective thinking that is required from people who are in technology fields is used as they make decisions in other aspects of their lives. The idea of taking extra time that could be used for other things and investing more money in order to change a career when one is comfortable at the current position was illogical based on Jennifer’s and Hazel’s analysis. In my opinion, Jennifer and Hazel have chosen convenience over passion.

Despite Jennifer’s decision to remain in her field even though her passion is elsewhere, she had a different perspective on career exploration. Jennifer’s reaction to career exploration was,

I don’t know. I think you should look to find something that you enjoy and have a passion for. I wouldn’t say, even like when I tell my brother when he was looking to pick something for school, I was urging him to pick something that he liked and had a passion for versus what I did because on those days when it’s irritating and you don’t feel like doing it, the fact that you don’t have a passion for it really stands out. I think as far as
decision making you should pick something that you really love to do so that when those
days come, it makes it a lot easier.

Despite Jennifer’s realization on the consequences of her career decision, she explained
that she is content with her decision. Jennifer said, “I mean, it may not have been the number
one passion I had, but I’m happy with it. I don’t hate what I do. I do enjoy it. It has its tough
times like any job but I’m pretty satisfied with the decision that I ended up making.” I noticed
that Jennifer used the word “job.” Although she planned on remaining in her field and she
earned a degree in order to be qualified, she still viewed her position as a job. Her nonchalant
demeanor and concise responses suggested to me that Jennifer viewed her work as a means to
maintain her lifestyle rather than a reflection of herself or means to contribute to an issue or a
statement to her family or the people around her. I further understood the extent Jennifer
minimized her career as she talked about promotion at her workplace. Jennifer elucidated,

I don’t think I look at my career so much as I have this plan set out because I don’t know
if I’m going to always be in corporate America. That’s not really where my passion is so
I think I’m happy where I am but I don’t have any goals to say I want to be a manager in
five years because I don’t really. . . . I don’t really look at my job like that. I do what I do
and if I’m never a manager, I’m completely okay with it. I’m not trying to really climb
up the corporate ladder. It’s happening and I’m seeing myself being promoted as I go but
I don’t know if I really have a set plan in place for where I’m going right now.

I found it interesting that Jennifer did not have long-term goals in her field, but she was
still unwilling to take steps to change her career. I wanted to challenge her on the incongruence
in her response and her decision not to change careers; however, I chose not to because I felt that
would transform our interview into a counseling session rather than data collection for my study.
My hope was that this interview forced her to evaluate her career and potentially seek her passion. Although, I realized that my encouraging Jennifer to pursue her passion could be imposing my values onto her. I believe we are both right. Yes, it makes sense to choose a career that will provide income to sustain basic needs and even some luxuries and it makes sense to choose a career in which you have a passion in order to add meaning to your life. Upon reflection, Jennifer implies that pursuing passion is more important than money.

When I asked Jennifer to elaborate on her daily experiences working as a project manager, she introduced the impact of race and the difference she observed working in different states. Jennifer shared,

It’s nice, I think, as far as being a female. I don’t feel any different way being a female in what I do or even being African American in what I do. It’s definitely a lot different when I lived in Ohio versus being here in Georgia because there’s not a lot of women or African Americans in the field in Ohio so it is actually more comfortable here in Georgia than it is in Ohio because I didn’t see a lot of people that looked like me so here it’s a lot better.

I asked Jennifer to share more about her experiences working in Ohio to which she explained,

Probably outright, you probably couldn’t see it just on the surface but you kind of knew, not a lot of folks were promoted that were African Americans. Not a lot of supervisors or managers versus what I see here in Georgia but I don’t feel any different as far as being a female African American here in Georgia in what I do.

Although Jennifer explained that she had no desire for promotion in her work, she still implied that she felt uncomfortable working in an environment where she saw little African
Americans or women receiving promotions. I believe that Jennifer’s response to the words Black, woman, and career reflected some of her personality traits.

Minority. That comes to mind. Independent woman, that terms comes to mind because most women that are very successful in their career, they’re like movers and shakers and they are like really type A type of personalities and normally you see a lot of them that don’t have a lot of time. Usually they’re single sometimes and are putting their career first and it’s the majority of what they’re doing so.

Jennifer conveyed a balance between work and personal life. It does not appear that she allows her work to define her. Jennifer appears to view her work as a function in her life rather than a way of life. Jennifer clarified how her work fits into her lifestyle.

I try to keep a balance. With me being single with no kids, it would be easy for me to be completely engulfed in my work and so what I try to do, even now, is keep a balance where I’m not really working after hours, even when I go home. Even when I’m not doing something particular, I don’t want to be working because I look at all of my other co-workers that are married and have kids and they’re spending time at work still when they are at home with their family or they’re on the computer and I don’t want to do that as much as I can help it so what I try to do is try not to let it impact me personally. I try to keep work at work, when I leave work, leave it there, and not get back on my laptop if I don’t have to. That’s how I try to keep the separation.

I think that Jennifer working in a field that she is not passionate about helps her to separate it from other aspects of her life. She is able to go home and leave the work behind because it does not provide meaning in her life. To me, Jennifer’s career life portrays the importance of balance and not allowing the changes and cycles that occur in the workplace to
impact to the extent that you cannot enjoy other aspects of your life. Perhaps, people who are in fields they are passionate about have that difficulty since they may over identify with their career positions. Jennifer highlights the importance of balancing personal life, career, and self-care. I admired Jennifer’s nonchalant outlook on her career because it portrayed someone who was confident in herself and who recognizes that quality of life and comfort is most important.

Jennifer’s advice to the younger generation did not totally reflect the steps she took in her own career path.

**Words of wisdom to the younger generation from Jennifer.** I would say to pick something that you love and not be as concerned about money. I think there should be kind of a combination because one thing I kind of ran into with my brother, when he was deciding what he wanted to do, I was pushing him more towards the things that he would make money versus the things that he had passion for because that’s what I did, even knowing that if I were to do it over again, I would go into psychology but I think my issue with him is that he was going into things that were more like the arts that are so... it just depends on how the dice rolls versus psychology, that’s a hardcore path. So, I would say look at it from both perspectives. I would say look for something that you love to do but also that you can get paid for what you do only because you want to be able to support yourself and I think going into things that are non-profit that are helping people are great but also think about how you are going to support yourself while you do that so I think I would say look into what you have a passion for versus also what would be able to support you.

**Alice**

Unlike my other participants, Alice’s degree did not match her career. Alice explained that she earned a bachelor’s degree in sciences. Alice’s decision for pursuing the degree was not
her own, it was under the advisement of her teacher and guidance counselor. After failed attempts at medical school, Alice made a career change. Alice conveyed regret and frustration with her lack of guidance in high school as she chose a career path.

I think that if I had actually done some internships, looked more about what I wanted to do, I don’t think I would have had such a hard time getting into medical school and actually deciding. That was decided for me because I had good grades in science so my teachers, when they had a conference with my parents, oh she should be a doctor so back in the day, you either went to college or you went to the work force and so they had decided they put me on the track to go to college and to tell you the truth, I didn’t have a lot of decision making because my parents hadn’t gone through that so they were really listening to what the teacher said and sort of influenced me that was not the best way to do it.

While encouraging a student showing strong science skills to pursue a college education is commendable and accurate, it appears that the school system fell short of allowing Alice to explore the different careers available in sciences and other fields. According to Alice, her guidance counselor provided limited information to her career exploration.

I would have preferred to, even if they thought that, let me work or be an intern or shadow a doctor just to see if that’s what I wanted to do. Just give me some other options instead of this is what you’re good at, let’s go this way because it could have been something else that I could have been good at so I wish that the counselor had kind of focused more on making sure that I had explored everything that I was interested in or could probably do well in as opposed to saying you get As in science, you should be a doctor and also given me other options for a science degree, not just saying you don’t
have to be a doctor. I could have gone and worked at the CDC, I could have done some lab research, just so many things I could have done with that.

Unfortunately, the lack of guidance Alice received in exploring careers impacted her life’s course as she entered the workforce. Even at the age of 48 with over 25 years of work experience, Alice still reminisces on her high school years and the post-secondary decisions that were made without her input and with limited information provided to her. Alice later shared that her career decision making was initially influenced by a desire to please her parents.

I think some of the failures that came along with it. To see that other people had a plan and their plan just went and there were some people that didn’t have a plan. Like, I had a friend of mine that attended Spellman with me. We had chemistry class together and I would study, study, study, study and get a C and she would sleep, sleep, sleep and get an A and I’m saying why this is, but now I can see that that was just her natural flow. That was just the way it was supposed to go for her so I think my hiccups and my grades and everything was trying to tell me ahead of time but I was just so determined and I didn’t want to disappoint my parents because they were like we’re going to have this college graduate and this doctor in the family because as far as my immediate family, I was the first one to finish college.

Alice’s career path began with disappointment as she did not fulfill what believed was her parents’ desire for her to become the only doctor in the family. I agree with Alice’s conclusion that if she had been able to explore other career options, she may have pursued a field that best fit her and had a more positive and successful educational experience. Alice also shared that her career decision was impacted by being a single parent. She shared, “I was thrust into single parenthood so I had to provide for my son so money did come into it and benefits.”
After being rejected from medical school, Alice’s current career path began.

It was actually by default. As I said, I had a BA in Science and was going to go to medical school. Did not get into medical school so I started to work at Southern Bell after college and was just going to stay there for a moment until I got back into trying to get into medical school and I just stayed there and started liking it and started managing projects and I’ve been there for twenty-three years.

Alice is a project manager for AT&T. Although Alice explained that she began to like her position, it appeared that she settled for her career in telecommunications as a result of lack of career information. Alice’s definition for career exploration was more of a warning. She perceived career exploration as being difficult and challenging rather than an opportunity or solution.

I think that it’s a very complex; it’s very hard because you want your career to support the lifestyle you want to live and sometimes that doesn’t happen. Just for example, I have a friend of mine whose daughter wants to be a teacher and her mother told her teachers don’t make a lot of money and she said that’s what I want to do and I think you don’t have enough of that, when people really love what they want to do, they go to work instead of having careers and I think that’s disconnect that a lot of people make.

It appeared that Alice’s perception of career exploration if influenced by her own experience. Alice’s career exploration was complex because she did not have the opportunity to spend time identifying her skills and interests. She was denied the opportunity to explore careers that fit her perception rather; the decision was made on her behalf. While Alice chose to remain in telecommunications, once again, it appeared that decision was made for her as a result of her circumstances. Alice discussed how telecommunications became her career. She stated, “I
needed to stay employed because while I was there, I got divorced and then I became a single parent so the money was good, benefits were good so that did play a part in it too.”

Alice also described a feeling of empowerment as she emerged as a leader in her company. As she gained more responsibility, her desire to remain in her field grew.

Once I got in that game and was able to see how they actually telephone company and telecommunications worked and how I could be a part of that, I really enjoyed doing that. I really enjoyed managing those projects and coordinating dates and all of that so I think just being able to work in that environment and help me to just choose that as a career.

Sadly, that sense of leadership has been challenged. Once I asked Alice to share her experience working in her field, the many challenges she encounters became the primary focus of the interview.

It’s very tough because it’s very male-dominated. It’s usually a White male-dominated field, so to be an African American woman managing million-dollar projects, it’s very tough. You have to have lots of certifications. A lot of my peers have more advanced degrees than I do so it’s very competitive.

Perhaps my values were influencing my perception of Alice’s situation, but I wondered why she should not attempt to level the playing field at work by earning an advanced degree. It was evident that she needed to arm herself with increased education since she already had many years of work experience in order to be more competitive. I asked Alice about pursuing an advanced degree, to which she replied,

Again, just now I’m thinking I’m too old because I’ll be fifty three next month and now I’ve got to do the certifications so I’m like well, I’ll do that and then I’m not going to do anything else so again, the same excuses that held me up the last time, but now they are
different excuses now but they’re just excuses and I don’t know why I don’t have the confidence to think that I can complete it. I don’t know what that is.

I wondered if the idea that Alice did not end up in a career in which she had a passion shaped her reasons for not pursuing advanced degrees. I also wondered if her academic challenges in college and failure to be accepted to graduate school caused her apprehension with returning into academia. As a counselor, I felt a need to challenge her in this area, but I chose to refrain in order to gain more information about her experiences at work. As she explained her excuses for not pursuing advanced degrees, I thought about information she shared during the interview about her son who is a recent college graduate. Alice mentioned that she believed her son would be great as a lawyer and had shared an interest in that field, but he has yet to apply to law school. She said he has been out of college for a couple of years and still has not pursued law school because he said he does not want to spend more time in school.

I found it interesting that both Alice and her son acknowledged that they needed more education for their fields, but both make excuses not to continue their education. I decided to challenge Alice by saying, “Can I make an observation? I’m noticing interestingly enough, it’s the same thing you say your son is going through.” Alice became more pensive and responded, “So you think maybe he is seeing that and just picking up on that or I know we’ve talked about it because he’s asked why didn’t I ever go because he talked about what I pursued. We had a number of conversations about that, what I was going to pursue.” I did not want to blame Alice for her son’s not continuing his education nor did I want Alice to feel guilty, but I did want Alice to consider that her decision to continue her education could potentially impact her life as well as her son’s. I continued, “I’m wondering how powerful it would be for both of you if you did pursue your education, your advanced degree, how that would motivate him to do the same.”
She raised her eyebrows and tilted head to the side and replied, “It might.” At that point, I felt that I planted a seed and I felt that she would be reflecting on this part of our interview. I did not want to pressure her; I just wanted her to consider the power education could have on her life and that of her son.

I wanted to learn more about the difficulty of working in her field, Alice mentioned earlier. I asked if race or gender played a role in her workplace. Alice shared,

At sometimes I felt that they had to have some African Americans in there so I was a choice but then again, on certain standards, it depends on my manager really. Like I had a female manager and when she came in and noticed that my White counterparts were making more money than me but I had experience and they had degrees so it was hard for her to try to raise me to that standard but she was able to.

I found it interesting that it took a White female manager, who was also a single mother and concerned with the women in the workplace, to advocate for Alice so that she could earn higher pay comparable to that of her colleagues. I wondered why Alice did not advocate for herself. Was it fear? Was she accustomed to having people or circumstances determine her career path? I asked Alice to elaborate on her feelings towards the awareness of race and gender impacting her work experiences. Alice conveyed her frustrations.

It was discouraging at one point and it also causes a bit of animosity within the group because you know we sit side by side doing the same job you’re doing sometimes better but because they have advanced degrees, they are making more money and because they are a White male, they are making more money and it just didn’t seem fair so it did cause a lot of animosity but she just said always do your best, work hard, don’t worry about what the person next to you is doing and I did find out that is why they don’t want to tell
you what folks salaries are. It’s a big secret because it does cause animosity and questions, people start to question why is this person making more when they don’t have a legitimate reason, the there’s a lawsuit on their hands.

I wanted to know more about how she feels working in such an environment daily. I asked Alice to share more of her perception of her experience at work. Alice continued, Especially when I see new hires and young men that are like on this fast track. They come in at just a level one and in eighteen months they’re at a level three and all they’ve done is played with the cards and then they use the company to get advanced degrees and everything and then the next thing you know, they’re a level three manager. Whereas I worked from being a service rep, worked my way up, they come in and they are just thrust to the top. I just think that’s the culture of business. I think that the majority of people in the positions that make the decisions are White male and I think they do have a couple in there for diversity sake to say we are a diverse company but when you get down to it, it’s all White, especially in corporate America. It’s all White male run.

I wondered if Alice accepted what I felt were injustices in her field. I did not want to judge Alice based on her tolerance for what she described as the company’s culture. I had to remind myself that while male domination in the corporate world is a reality and if a non-White, non-male person wanted to earn a living in this field, some tolerance and conformity had to occur in order to cope with going to work every day. If Alice allowed anger and animosity to take over her as she worked, she may not have lasted in her field for over 20 years. She had her son to consider in making sure that she could take care of him. I wanted to know how Alice coped. She replied,
My basic thing is to do my best every day and also just not worry about that. I’ve been blessed so I can’t worry about what somebody else is doing. My job is to come in and do my best every day so it was hard at first to have to try to fight those demons that were trying to say well you need to do this or you need to file a lawsuit but then that was too much wasted energy so I had to find a way to channel that and one of the ways was to just throw myself into my work, doing my best and leaving it there. When I leave, I don’t take it home with me and I don’t’ do it over the weekends but I do the best job I can every day.

Alice’s conformity and dedication to hard work proved to not pay off in the end. Alice said, “Last year I experienced a lay off. I’ve never been laid off from AT&T, never been laid off before.” Given the challenges Alice faced and her being laid off after working hard at a company for many years, I wanted to know if Alice was happy with her decision to remain in telecommunications. Her response was consistent with her conformity to her work environment.

I feel good about it now. I think about it and I was, then I probably would not have been a great doctor at this point but I do kind of regret not exploring some of the other avenues that I could have taken with the scientific knowledge that I have or whatever but like I said, I do enjoy project managing cell towers and I go by a place and know that is something that I managed and its up and its working and it gives me a since of gratification and even to explain to people like what do you do and I show them a tower and help them understand it and they are like ah, I didn’t really know how that worked. I really feel good about it now because I really enjoy doing it but it was not in my sights in the beginning. It just started out as a job.
I was reminded that as a project manager, Alice would have to lead her assignments. I wanted to know how Alice felt about being a leader in a company that did not appear to value Black women. Alice reported, “It was a little sense of gloating and especially when the project comes out successful and they look back to you, it gives you a sense of pride to say hey, I’m in charge of this and I’m leading this and it’s successful and they are having to ask me and look up to me about it.” Alice implies that leading successful projects is her vindication and way of validating her role. I wondered how her leadership was received by her colleagues, whom she described as being White males. Alice described the response she received from her colleagues when she led a project.

Yes, they respected me and yes, because in meetings they want to challenge your decisions, they want to challenge …you sometimes have to explain more why you made that decision and then on whose authority and you just have to go the extra mile to help them understand but once it’s all successful and everybody is okay, then you get the respect but it’s a hard road to get that respect from them.

Alice’s career decision making process and career path depicted that of a person who has not had a voice. Another perspective is to look at Alice’s strength; she has survived over 40 years of having her voice suppressed. Despite years of being overlooked and facing challenges and failures, she is still in her field. Alice is truly a survivor. I wondered what Alice would tell the younger generation.

Words of wisdom to the younger generation from Alice. I would tell a Black female, first of all, know who she is. You’ve got to be confident in who you are in yourself, in your look, you’ve got to be comfortable in yourself. You’ve got to love God. You’ve got to because you are going to be tried every day and you’re going to be challenged so know yourself, know
God, love your family and know that there are things that you don’t quite agree on but you can agree to disagree and as always, be respectful and be confident. Those are some things. If you can do those things and stay focused, you will probably be successful.

**Katrina**

Katrina’s career path portrayed the seasons that occur in people’s lives. I was impressed by her embracing the changes that came with the seasons in her life. I found Katrina to be brave. Katrina worked as an elementary school teacher for approximately 10 years. Over the years, Katrina was recognized for her excellence in teaching when she was recognized as teacher for her school system. She was provided the opportunity to mentor teachers new to the profession. Also, most would say that Katrina had job security. She was in a government job with great benefits and a retirement plan. She had summers off among other holidays. Many would say that Katrina was in a great position in her career. Katrina earned a graduate degree in elementary education. Katrina must be thrilled! She must be eager to continue her career in education!

Wrong! Katrina shared that she decided not to renew her contract last school year. During this economy, where people remain unemployed for extended periods of time tirelessly seeking positions with benefits and security, Katrina walked away from her profession. Katrina’s career in education appeared to be predestined. Her mother and three aunts were all teachers.

[My mom] She taught middle school so most of her time she taught fifth and sixth grade so taught six grade social studies since, because I had her as a teacher in sixth grade so that was like late 80’s so probably since the late 80’s until she retired she taught sixth grade social studies. . . . my mom and three of her sisters are all educators or retired from it.
Katrina shared that she initially rejected education. “That’s just who I am. That’s just my personality. I was just like I want to be different. Not that I thought teaching was a bad profession but I was like, that’s so whack to fall into your mother’s footsteps and then what did I do?” Despite, Katrina’s desire to be different, she eventually ended up in education.

I chose education, well, I kind of ran from it for a while. Because my mom was in education, I didn’t really want to be a teacher but after doing hands on with AmeriCorps when I first graduated from college, I kind of got bit by the bug of education so even though I left for a year, I still wanted to come back and be a teacher so that led to me applying to Teach for America.

While it appeared that Katrina would sustain a lifelong career as an elementary school educator, she decided to walk away from it. Katrina now works as an adjunct professor in elementary education at a university and teaches for a nonprofit organization. Both jobs are part time and I doubt that they offer neither benefits nor a retirement plan. I was bewildered by how Katrina could walk away from the security of a government job where she had worked for almost half of her adult life for positions that did not provide guarantees. I asked Katrina about her career transition. Katrina described,

A couple of things. My goal when I was in college was to teach college. I wanted to do that full time. I actually have a history of sociology degree so I wanted to go to graduate school for African American studies and so I wanted to do that, get my doctorate and do full time college but that’s not how life worked so I ended up deciding, especially after I did AmeriCorps, that I liked working with the younger children and so, because during AmeriCorps I worked with middle school students and so when I got accepted to Teach for America, they put me with elementary school students so that’s kind of how I got into
that field. But now, so since that had always been a passion of mine, I had looked into ways to get back into it, especially after I got my Masters so it was a way for me to fulfill my first dream of working on the college level.

I was not satisfied with Katrina’s response because I could not imagine leaving her secure position for a couple of temporary positions. She could have been an adjunct professor while teaching elementary school. I probed further by asking her to explain at what point during her career she decided she was ready to transition to college teaching. In an attempt to maintain Katrina’s anonymity, I removed some details from her response including the county in which she worked. Katrina shared,

Several things made me decide it. I always thought I would be in the classroom ten years so last year I didn’t sign my contract last spring so I left after my ninth year.

Basically, the main reason that I left was because my school was involved in a scandal and they removed my principal, my administrator at the time, who I loved, was a pleasure to work for her and when you don’t have a very supportive administrator so they replaced her with two people that I didn’t feel supported me or the work that I did, just made my life a living hell to teach because I’m already dealing with an urban population that comes with their own set of issues and then on top of that you’re not respecting me as a professional, you’re not treating me as a professional, don’t respect my decision making as a teacher, I just was like this was not what I signed up for. I can’t, I was basically just depressed to go to work every day so I just said I had to do what was best for me and just leave.
I could understand how Katrina would want to leave her school site after losing administrative support, but I did not understand why she did not change schools. I asked Katrina about transferring schools. She replied,

I was burned out on teaching. I just like, you know what, I just think it’s time for me to move on to something else so sometimes I feel like I think the warning signs were there before that I was coming to the end and I ignored them and so I just feel like maybe this was God saying let’s make this the most uncomfortable experience ever and then maybe you will get up and leave here and so I just really thought that this time away, maybe take a year off and go back but I don’t see myself going back. I think that door is just closed and I think it’s just time for me to go to another place.

She appeared confident in her decision and not concerned with the possibility of not accomplishing her goal of being a full time professor. I think I was allowing my values to impede my acceptance or understanding of Katrina’s decision. I asked Katrina to describe her experiences as an educator.

I was burned out on teaching. I just like, you know what, I just think it’s time for me to move on to something else so sometimes I feel like I think the warning signs were there before that I was coming to the end and I ignored them and so I just feel like maybe this was God saying let’s make this the most uncomfortable experience ever and then maybe you will get up and leave here and so I just really thought that this time away, maybe take a year off and go back but I don’t see myself going back. I think that door is just closed and I think it’s just time for me to go to another place.

Katrina did not mention any concerns with the opinions of her families, friends, or colleagues. She did not share any concerns with financial security. She simply stated that she
was feeling burned out and unhappy so she walked away. Despite Katrina saying that she walked away from education, she really did not leave education. She is currently educating mainly young adults in college and children through a non-profit organization. It appears that Katrina does not desire to walk away from education all together. Although, Katrina stated that she would not return to education, I was not convinced. Early in her career, she talked about having an “itch” to pursue education, I think there is a chance, she may experience that “itch” again in some capacity.

I did not expect race or gender to have an impact on Katrina’s experience given that she worked in an area where the teachers were predominately female and African American. Katrina’s response to my question about race and gender in her work environment, proved me wrong.

I think my experience is I believe, very interesting. I was very, just to be very candid; I was very disappointed when I started working in the school system in my area. I was excited because I was like oh my gosh, all of these Black women and they’re principals and Superintendents and all of these high power positions, but what I realized was that it was like they didn’t – it was very bitchy. It was very not supportive for the most part. My one principal, she was very supportive, like I had her for seven of my nine years but she was the exception. Even back when I was doing AmeriCorps and working in school systems, the first principal I had, she did not like me from the jump and I had no idea why. I don’t know what I did but from what I heard was the person before me was a White girl and she loved her and I have found that Black women seem to like White teachers better, they treat them differently than they treat Black teachers.
I asked Katrina to elaborate on the differences in treatment she observed between White teachers and Black teachers. Katrina explained,

I was like this is reverse discrimination. It was very interesting. Now, I have seen it over and over again, just White people period, whether they’re male or female seem to get a more – they do not get on to them as much about their classrooms, dress code, tardies. Just their whole overall professionalism and I was like I don’t know if they’re afraid that the White man is going to get me. I don’t know but I have found that to be true with several people. It’s very interesting. It seemed to me that because education is a field where Black women can excel, it’s like they forget who they are and so now they’ve got this power, sometimes power that they’ve never had in their lives so I’ve heard several stories about principals who when they were in high school, they weren’t anybody. A lot of them, I feel, like they were nobodies and so when they get their degrees, it’s all this prestige for them and that now they are just Queen Bee. I mean, I’ve even … for example, I saw a lady that I was in Wal-Mart. We worked together at the second middle school that I was with in my AmeriCorps year and she was like do I know you and I was like yeah, you do know me and I was like I used to work at blank middle school and she was like yeah, then she said I’m Dr. whoever she was and I was like okay, why do I care. It was just so… people they get mad if you call them Ms. So and so and not doctor and I’m like no one is trying to disrespect or take away from your degree but it’s really kind of a power trip sometimes.

I was curious about Katrina’s perspective on Black career women after having had such negative experiences with Black female leaders. Katrina stated,
I think very hard working. I think Black women work very hard, I think they are more driving sometimes with careers than Black men. I think we try to do whatever we can to improve our circumstances, whatever it takes, a lot of times that requires us to put our social, personal lives on hold sometimes just in order to be successful because most of the career women that I know unfortunately are not married because sometimes that’s intimidating to people that you date when you say I have a Master’s degree or a Bachelor’s degree or I have a Doctorate – that just kind of cuts down your dating pool at times and because you’re so driven on your career, and you’re used to making choices and not answering to people, that sometimes can be kind of intimidating as well. I think that all of those factors are things that I think of when I think of Black women and career.

I wanted to revisit the future of Katrina’s career in education. Although she mentioned earlier that she believed she closed the door in education, I was not convinced so I asked a trick question. I felt if she was serious about not returning to education, then she would reiterate her desire to be professor and close the door on teaching younger children. Rather, Katrina’s response confirmed my suspicion that she would return to education. I asked Katrina to describe what role she would like to have in education. She replied,

I wouldn’t mind being like an instructional coach, curriculum specialist, those type of roles. I used to want to be a principal. I don’t know so much now or I probably could be an assistant principal. Some of the private schools have like deans of certain subjects. I wouldn’t mind doing some of those things but I don’t know if it’s because there’s so much competition. Now the way they have kind of put the leadership certificates, the requirements, you have to really get the position to get the provisional and then you only can go into school to finish your education in leadership once you get the provisional so
it’s kind of like I’m kind of stuck until I find something that somebody to hire me to do the position. So, it’s interesting.

I wanted to know more about Katrina’s thoughts about her career decision making process given that she has decided to leave her profession, but still desires to return to the field in another capacity. Katrina described,

I mean, I think I had, for the most part; it was totally in my control. It wasn’t. It’s been harder for me now that I’m out of the classroom to find jobs that it’s like people keep wanting to put me in a teacher role even though I’m trying to look into leadership and things like that because I passed my leadership gates last summer so I was trying to look for a different role and it’s a lot of basically who do you know and the person probably would give me the best recommendation, she is now at home because she was caught in this scandal. I would never in my life ask my previous principal, the one that I left, I would never ask her for a recommendation because I’ve seen how she’s Black balled other people just keeping them from stuff so if I don’t want to get a job, I would ask her for a recommendation. She wouldn’t have probably two things positive to say about me which is fascinating so I’m kind of in a bit of a…. I don’t know what to say about how to get passed or move up into education once you make that decision that you want to leave the classroom. Like, it’s really hard to just find those opportunities outside of the classroom but I love being in education so I want to stay in education but it’s just been very difficult.

In the beginning, it appeared that Katrina’s entering education was a natural transition. Katrina was carrying on a family legacy in education and she happened to come across opportunities in education that prepared her for teaching. Currently, Katrina is facing difficulty
in finding a place in education. She knows what she desires to do in education and she appears to have the education and experience, but she does not have enough of the network to lead her in the direction she wants to go. Despite all the African American women she worked for, Katrina did not have any she could turn to in order to assist her in pursuing her next step in education? It appears that Katrina has hit a wall.

I had the opportunity to interview Katrina at a pivotal point in her career. She had become burned out as a teacher and decided to take some time off to pursue other avenues. While she is still working in education, she decided to stop working as an elementary school teacher and is teaching elementary education in a college setting.

Katrina’s advice to young Black females confirmed my conclusion that Katrina could serve as a mentor to new teachers. Katrina’s advice was detailed and practical. I could tell that she genuinely wanted to see the people coming behind her to succeed and she wanted them to benefit from her wisdom.

Words of wisdom from Katrina to the younger generation. I would tell people one of the things just I’ve had an opportunity this year to work with Teach for America on their phone interview process and that has been enlightening as well because most of the students who come from HBCU do horrible on the phone interview. It’s crazy and they don’t know how to sell themselves. Their conversations can be very informal at times. Their resumes do not have the leadership skills or the quality of involvement that compared to other people who are just trying to get into Teach for America and so that’s one of the things that I would tell people is that you are really going to have to work on your interviewing skills. Look into ways to make your resume seem more appealing, good format and then especially if you’re college age, really do research into the field that you want to go in and really look long term what do you want to do. I
should have been planning more for my exit out of teaching, years ago instead of me kind of making a semi abrupt decision. It might have been an easier transition and I would have known some of the things that I needed to do along the way in order to make sure that I would have been able to just go straight into the field rather than having to do this waiting process.

Josephine

Josephine wore a starched button down shirt with the school logo embroidered on the front; freshly ironed khaki pants, closed toed walking shoes, and her hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her demeanor reminded me that of a soldier. She sat quietly and looked in anticipation of my orders. Although I began with small talk about the day and working with kids in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere, I could not break her wall. She seemed guarded like she was ready to answer my questions and complete this task. My impression was that she was probably an excellent task manager. I realized that the best way to approach this interview was to remain on task and be respectful of her time. I started by thanking her for volunteering to participate and I explained that I would respect her time to which she abruptly replied, “It’s fine! I have time!” Although her tone was a bit stern, I could tell that she was intrigued and invested in the interview. My summation of her, at that point, was that she portrayed an austere person, but was probably warm and relaxed on the inside. To my surprise, Josephine’s interview was the most emotional interview I conducted. She and I shared a powerful and moving moment that I will never forget. Our moment was so personal that I feel like I have debated whether I should include this moment in my study. I am uncertain if I can truly convey the magnitude to which we connected.

Josephine is a 38-year-old high school assistant principal. Josephine has a bachelor’s degree in Spanish, masters of education in English as a second language, and an educational
specialist degree in curriculum and instruction. Both of her parents hold bachelor’s degrees although her mom experienced a brief interruption in her undergraduate years as she became pregnant with Josephine. Josephine comes from an economically privileged background as her father has retired from the assistant vice president of Allstate insurance, while her mother worked as a jazzercise instructor and eventually an underwriter for an insurance company. Some interesting information that Josephine shared was that her mother pursued her education in healthcare as a result of growing up with Josephine’s grandmother who was deaf/mute requiring her to learn sign language and Josephine’s grandfather, incidentally, was placed in a deaf/mute school after being born with closed ears; although his hearing was fine. When I asked Josephine about her career decision, she shared that a positive experience with a math teacher caused her to pursue a career in education.

I had a teacher named Jane Doe and this was junior year of high school and I went to an all White high school with about sixteen Black people total out of 1800 and she made math fun and I told her one day, I had been struggling the previous year, just barely getting a C and junior year I got a 100 A and she made math fun and I had cousins and stuff that just were down on education and I said if you had my math teacher you’d be able to do it and so that made me want to go into math. I actually was going to be a math teacher and then I went to Argentina on an exchange program because I was going to do math as my major and Spanish as my minor. I went to Argentina on that exchange program, taught math to little kids and decided that I actually enjoyed teaching Spanish more because I was having to translate stuff. I actually enjoyed teaching Spanish more so I ended up being a Spanish teacher.
I asked Josephine about the race of her math teacher to which she replied, "White". It was an all White big school, all White everything”. I asked her to elaborate on why she enjoyed Jane Doe’s class. Josephine explained,

She let us bring in music during math when we were working on problems and she really wanted to know about Big Daddy Kane and she was all into it and so she was just a very nice White woman that you wouldn’t even expect to…she is a straight laced White woman and she heard Big Daddy Kane Ain’t No Half Stepping and she was like bring that in, we’re going to use that for cosigns and tangents. We’re going to talk about the half steps. She said bring that in, we’re going to play it.

Although Josephine described growing up in a predominately White community and attending predominately White schools, she still connected to Black culture. Her White teacher’s openness to incorporating Black music into her classroom lesson caused an instant connection with Josephine. That one action by Jane Doe set the course for Josephine’s outlook on math, which was a course in which she previously struggled, and led to her earning strongly considering becoming a math teacher.

Josephine described a positive experience in her education which impacted her view on educators to the extent she sought to become an educator. Given the career defining experience Josephine experienced from her teacher, I wondered how she would describe her current experiences in education. Josephine described her experience working in education as,

There are days when I really leave here with a headache and then there are days when I really enjoy what I do, especially when I have a good interaction with a student or I like to reward students for stuff. You took my $20, I didn’t think you could do it and you got my $20. That I enjoy. Rewarding students but the days when you have to do a search
and we find drugs or something else that you don’t want to find, and I have found something else, I’ve found weapons before and it was on a sixth grade student, it’s hard because you wonder what – is there anything that you can do to help that person because they made that decision before they even got to you and there have been days where I’ve questioned the parents and their parenting skills. When I was at XYZ Middle there was a lady that came up with a bed post because her daughter had texted her on the bus that a girl slapped her. What she failed to tell her mother on the bus was that she was all in that girl’s face, cursing her out and yada yada and kicked her so all the lady heard was she slapped my daughter, came up there, pushed passed the security, not the security because we have teachers at different points. She pushed past a teacher, she came down a hall. She hit Mr. Perry who was an administrator; she got him in the arm. She ended up getting towards the little girl because we had just brought them off of the bus and had them in the front office and she busted in the front office and hit the little girl on the leg. She had to be wrestled down to the ground. I had to end up sitting on her until the police officer could get there. I literally sat on her and to me that was all completely unnecessary until you find out the facts and a lot of people don’t find out the facts before they react and that’s what happens.

I surmised that Josephine’s good days versus bad days were dictated by her interaction with her students. I checked my observation by asking Josephine if my summation was correct to which she clarified,

Or if it’s a testing day, sometimes that’s a bad day. I feel very good going into the test and I’ve organized everything and everyone is in the right place but then somewhere some counselors do something and something comes out of nowhere. He’s supposed to
test, he’s not on our list, I don’t like it when …I have OCD, I don’t like it when things are not on my list and then you all throw a wrench in there.

I found it interesting that Josephine pursued a career in education given that her father retired from corporate America. I was curious if her dad had any opinions about her pursuing education. In response to my question about factors that influenced her career decision making, Josephine stated,

Me. Just me, because my dad surely tried to talk me out of it. He said you’re not going to be good at teaching. I don’t know why you want to go into teaching. You’re not going to make any money teaching. My dad is very money driven which is odd because he was the oldest of eleven and he grew up with absolutely nothing and food stamps and all of that stuff and welfare and he was the only one of those eleven that actually made it out of Newark, New Jersey so he seems very money driven, at least at that time. Now he’s more family driven, he’s retired, so I don’t know if something happens once you hit a certain age. Maybe it’s the focus of how you see your children doing and you obviously want your children to out do you or at least have as good or more I don’t want you to be a teacher, I don’t understand why you want to be a teacher. Teaching is no money. That’s all he kept saying is there’s no money and I said I have you and mom. When you guys die, I’ll get your money. You ain’t getting my money, I’ll spend it.

Josephine described her mother’s career advice, which differed from her father’s, “My mom said you follow your passion, do what you want to do. You’re not…if that’s what your dad likes to do, that’s what he likes to do, you do what you want to do. If you know you’re good at it and you’re going to be the best at it, then do it”.
Although Josephine made her career decision in spite of her dad’s opposition, she shared that her dad did have an impact on her educational path as she worked in her field.

The fact that he didn’t want me to go into it so I went into it. But the fact that I’m actually glad that he kept on me about getting the Masters and getting the specialist and he’s probably going to continue to harp on getting the doctorate thing because I don’t know how much money I’d be making right now if I didn’t have those.

Based on Josephine’s current position as assistant principal and education record, it appeared to me that she probably wanted to become a principal eventually. I wanted to know if she is where she thought she would be in her career to which she shared,

Yes, I thought I would be in administration eventually. I didn’t see it at first because I thought I was going to retire from classroom teaching and then as people began to sub for me and these were fellow teachers that would come in and sub for me, they would say you need to go into administration because your classroom is run in such a way that even if you’re not there, it continues and you have good rapport with the kids. And then when I got into administration, I thought maybe I’ll just be a career AP and now that I’m seven years as an AP, I’m where I want to be but I still want to be a principal. We don’t know because I think about that and I think am I going to do a good job, can I handle everything that a principal has to deal with.

Josephine’s self-reflection indicates a genuine desire to be effective in her position. She has an awareness of the scope of responsibilities a principal has to manage and she is not afraid to take a personal audit to ensure that she can carry out the duties that come with being a principal. Later in the interview, Josephine mentioned another educator, a principal, who
inspired her to become a principal. Interestingly, this principal was also White. She described why she admired him.

I like his people skills. He’s got it and he’s that person that writes you that note. You know I like to send an email thank you for whatever. He was that person that started that for me and we never got anything when I was at ABC high school, the five years I was teaching at ABC. You never got that’s a good job. You never got anything from that particular principal. He was old school and then to switch over to DEF High school and him sending you a personal hand written note. He has me thanked in his book for helping him do part of his dissertation because I gathered all of the data for him because we did a study between sixth grade students who had senior mentors and his personality doesn’t let anything go to his head. He’s just that guy. He’s cool and I like him. That’s who I pattern myself after professionally. And he went through the normal things. He did teaching and he was in it for a while versus there are some people that are in it for three years and then all of a sudden they are an administrator and I don’t understand how you say that you know children. I taught for twelve years and I’ve seen several cycles of children go through. I think that’s important as well. He had taught for fifteen years.

Personally I admire my father for getting out of his situation.

The two educators who have influenced Josephine to pursue education were both White. She emulated her teaching and leading after what she observed from these two role models. As an African American female educator, I wondered if she felt her race and/or gender impacted her experiences in the school system. Josephine explained,

I’m not a White male. I have to work differently to earn the respect. . . . I think sometimes, depending on the demographics and I mean the economic part of it. I have to
work a little bit harder than my White counterparts as far as showing that yes I am intelligent and yes I do know what I’m talking about and just because you live in a $200,000 home and guess what, I was raised in a $200,000 home. I may not live in one now because I’m on my salary but my parents have three homes so I’m no different from you social or economically, I’m just different from you race wise and stop talking down to me as though you think I don’t understand what you’re saying. I do understand.

Josephine expressed frustration as it relates to the intersections of race, gender, and class. Although she grew up in a high socioeconomic environment, people assume she is from a lower SES background because of her race and gender. I wanted clarification from Josephine on what she perceived that her White counterparts thought she did not understand. Josephine elaborated,

These kind of kids, I don’t want my child in gym and hot. Well you know what, neither did my parents. That’s why we moved out to Lincoln, Illinois and I went to an all White high school. You do what you can afford to do and I can’t say that to somebody but I think that was part of my parents’ decision to get me from general population. They wanted to make sure that I went to school with a certain type of population. And when you can’t afford to do that and you have to be in a mixed population such as ABC High or XYZ Middle or DEF High school, you want to further separate your kids. It’s almost racial to a certain extent. The few kids that were in advanced content at XYZ, the sixty or so kids, they were all White. There might have been an handful of Black babies and then you have at DEF High School, the International Baccalaureate Program, the majority of those kids are White. But then it’s a school that’s 50% Black and Hispanic and so you’re questioning why doesn’t everything mirror what our population is. Same thing I was questioning at XYZ Middle. Same thing I question at ABC High. We should have
at least 16% or 20% Black in these AP classes but for whatever reason we don’t and when you’re placed into a situation where the regular is the majority, parents who think that their kids or parents start thinking you don’t understand because I don’t really want my kids there and I really don’t want my kids to go to DEF High but I can’t afford for my kids to go anywhere else. Well, I do understand. I understand what you’re saying. You want your kids in AP. You want your kids in that but this is what we are looking at. This is the reality of what your child has scored.

Josephine was referring to parents who wanted a higher quality educational environment for their students, but were in schools that did not offer such an environment as a result of socioeconomic status. I interpreted Josephine’s response to those parents wanting their kids to be in a better educational environment as, “You have to pay for it. If you can’t afford it, deal with what you have.” Josephine expressed frustration with race, gender, and class as she works in education. I asked her if any one of the aforementioned attributes had more of an impact on her experience as an educator. Josephine explained,

I think its race. I don’t think its gender. It might hurt to be a Black woman. I don’t know because I’ve always been a Black woman. I can’t speak on a Black man, I can’t speak on a White man. I think it would be different. I think people hear message differently if you’re a Black man versus a Black woman, if you’re a White man versus a Black woman. I think people hear your message differently. You can be saying the exact same thing and they are seeing something else. It’s not inherently racial, but it’s certain stereotypes. It might be inherently racial, I don’t know. Its certain things that they think we’re going to do, like they expect me to go off. I’m not going off unless you give me a reason to go off and I think the kids are like I can walk in and be just as friendly in the
rooms to a social studies room and they are like oh she scares me and I’m like why, I haven’t said anything to any of you in here. I don’t even know anyone in this room and I’ve heard them say she scares me. Where are you getting that from? This is an AP class. I’ve never come in here to say anything to anybody….. I’ve been told that the kids fear my mouth versus they fear the punishment.

I found Josephine’s last statement to be intriguing. Her words have more of an impact on students than having to serve suspension or detention. I interpreted that perception to be powerful for Josephine to know that kids have so much respect for her words. It appears that Josephine affiliated this perception with her race and gender.

Earlier, I mentioned that Josephine and I shared a powerful moment. To be honest, I do not believe that this experience has anything to do with her career exploration process, but it did shape her advice to the younger generation of African American women. I asked Josephine share her earliest recollections between the ages of three and six. Suddenly, the atmosphere changed. There was this salient tension in the air. I could not describe it, but it paralyzed me. Josephine and I locked eyes. I noticed her body tense up and her eyes watered. I said nothing. I just stared at her. I knew that I hit a nerve. She seemed taken aback by my question and I could tell that she was in a different mindset. I waited for her to respond. She replied,

I really don’t have that many other than what happened to me. I can’t go that far back.

I’m sorry, I do remember falling off of my bike. I fell off of my bike and hit my chin in the same place both times and then when I was Argentina, I fell off a porch and hit my chin in the same spot. It’s got a huge scar.

I have no confirmation of what happened to Josephine. Regardless of what happened in Josephine’s childhood, I am still profoundly impacted by our interaction at that point. My
counselor role wanted to kick into gear and I wanted to know more about this event. I could tell that she was clearly still impacted by it. Even though this happened 30 plus years ago, she still had a significant reaction to the thought of this unspoken event. I wanted to help. I still wonder if I should have done more. I wonder if I should reach out to her. I still have not ruled out contacting her.

I borrowed the questions regarding earliest recollections, favorite subjects, hobbies, people admired from Savickas’ career constructivism questionnaire. Savickas argued that practitioners should guide clients in building their life stories because it is through these life stories that clients learn how they problem solve and how events in their lives contributed to their career decisions. Savickas also argues that the clients’ life stories helps serve as a basis for them to process how they can cope with changing work roles and changing work environments. Honestly, I did not expect much to come from asking these questions. Josephine’s response to the earliest recollection question showed me how impactful asking such questions can be. Although I am not convinced that Josephine’s childhood experience impacted her career decision, I do believe it may have and could impact her interaction with her students, parents, and colleagues. At the end of our interview, I asked Josephine to provide some advice to younger Black females to which I was surprised she revisited her traumatic event.

Words of Wisdom to the younger generation from Josephine. You don’t need a man to take care of you even though you are seeing your dad take care of your mother; you don’t need a man to take care of you. You’re going to be fine. Learn how to fix stuff and I don’t mean just cars I mean fix stuff within your life so that you don’t dwell on it forever. I keep saying something happened to me when I was a kid. I need to work that out for myself and not rely on others and you have really got to like children. If you do not like kids, you shouldn’t do it. Just
because you like math and just because you like Spanish, don’t’ do it if you don’t’ enjoy kids and learning how to make the connection and the hardest things that going to happen to you is that when one of the kids that you’ve worked your hardest with lets you down and how can you forgive that person.

Eve

Eve is a clinical social worker at the Veteran’s hospital in her area. She earned an undergraduate and master’s degree in social work. Eve’s connection to the helping profession was instilled from childhood as she watched her mother and grandmother offer their homes to people in need. Despite her childhood, Eve shared that she initially wanted to pursue dentistry until she began working as an undergrad. Her undergraduate job revealed her desire to help others within a social work context.

It was pretty interesting because I felt for the longest that I wanted to be a dentist but I took a job when I was in undergrad at this Pre-K for at risk kids and we did a lot of like social work with them. We had interns from Florida State to come in and organize like Christmas give aways and different things for the kids and I just kind of latched on to the fact that I really liked helping people who were less fortunate, then I looked back and my mom and my grandma always took in people who did not have, that had been kicked out of their homes or needed a boost to get to the next level. We always had some friend or some relative living with us and then I looked back and I said really, I guess it rubbed off on me and I really didn’t realize it so it was a combination of mom, grandma and the work experience that I had.
Interestingly, Eve encountered negative feedback on pursuing social work as a field from her social work professor. Despite her professor’s criticism of social work, she still embraced the field.

It was pretty interesting because I honestly thought that I was going to go a different route and I had it all mapped out and it went a totally different route and I’m not disappointed at all because I don’t think I would have been happy doing anything else and you know, I remember one of my professors at Florida State in graduate school saying you guys are going to be so broke as social workers, you’re going to rethink this, don’t do it, probably about seven or eight of my classmates dropped out. Yes. I will never forget him saying that. We were devastated but it was a passion and he could not change my mind and I said where there’s a will, there’s a way and it has not – I’m still living as a result so I’m excited about my choice.

Eve was confident in her decision to pursue social work because she says it made her happy. She chose happiness over financial wealth. Interestingly, several of the other participants also indicated that pursuing a career that causes satisfaction was most important. She recognized that helping others and contributing to society brought meaning to her life and caused her joy.

Eve described her working in social work as a calling. ‘Calling’ is a powerful word in that it surpasses accomplishing a set of responsibilities associated with a position. In my opinion, ‘calling’ is supernatural. A ‘calling’ is when career encounters innate abilities and personal desires. A ‘calling’ adds meaning to one’s life. Fulfilling a ‘calling’ brings hope to people as they find a purpose to their existence. People who are in their ‘callings’ do what they do exceptionally. Eve continued to describe her calling.
I love it. It’s definitely my calling. It’s my career. I don’t call it a job, it’s my career.
The population that I work with now is tough. It’s a lot of men that are coming back. Vietnam Vets are in a lot of groups and I really, really enjoy that. I hold a weight loss group for the vets because a lot of them are overweight. Diabetes support group and anger management group, a hypertension group, smoking cessation and we’re just starting a pain management group so I really, really like my population. I work with a group of physicians and nurses and it’s just a really, really great environment for me.

I suspect that Eve’s colleagues and clients would agree that she is an asset to the hospital. As she spoke about her groups and colleagues, I noticed a spark in her eyes. She was excited about what she was doing and how she was expanding her population. I could see her in meetings and in her office planning ways to target various needs. Oftentimes, my concern with people who are in helping professions is that they risk experiencing burn out. My impression of Eve was that her work was enhancing her life rather than depleting from it. My observation of her was that she looked great. Her hair and nails looked professionally done, her attire was stylish and trendy, and she appeared well rested. I could be wrong, but she exuded a balance of self-care with selflessness.

Eve recognized her mother and grandmother among others has being the people who influenced her career decision making as she observed their philanthropy. Eve described the people who influenced her career decision making.

Definitely the people that I was surrounded by. My friends that were social workers, my mom and my grandmother, they probably didn’t realize that they were in that helping field by taking people in, so I would say it was definitely the women in my life, my grandmother, mom and my girlfriends. My stepdad definitely encouraged me to follow
my dreams. My mom did too. Her whole thing was definitely wanting me to go to college because she didn’t have the opportunity to take that route. She was very, very busy working and she just didn’t have the opportunity so she made way for me and my sister so whatever choice we made, she wanted us to make certain that it was something that we would be happy with, not just – my thing was I want to be a dentist and she was like are you certain about that, you need to do some more research. At the time she didn’t really know a whole lot about the path, which is why I think I’m so involved with helping others research their careers beforehand but she encouraged me and my sister more than anything so they were both involved in that process.

Eve’s life’s work appears to be continuing a legacy left by her mother and grandmother. Eve’s decision to work in a helping profession originated from a value that was set in her through her upbringing. When Eve started working with the at risk youth as a college student, the path for fulfilling her calling was set as her career encountered her innate abilities. Eve described her experience as she worked with at risk youth as a college student.

I think working with those at risk students. It was just heart tugging because I think I had lived a sheltered life. I thought everybody had all of their basic needs met. We would go to homes where they didn’t have running water… This was ’86-’87. They did not have running water. It was a large family, single parent families and they just did not have their basic needs and a lot of them were running away and I said okay, what more can we do and did some research on social work. Never wanted to go into that career but after, it just tugged at me and I figured this was where I was being led to. I proceeded on with my career in social work after working with those children and they were all four. It was
a school of 200 students of four year olds at risk and the majority of those, I would say 95% of them were at risk and underprivileged so I just really liked the population.

Eve appeared to easily abandon the prestige that came with telling people she was pursuing dentistry to making a decision to choose a field that made her happy. As a result of her decision to pursue what pleases her, she reflects on being satisfied with her decision.

I do love my decision. I’m excited that I am a social worker. People look down on social workers but we are very versatile, very, very. We are looked up upon at the VA hospital, they can’t do anything without us so they really recognize our profession and respect it within the hospital setting and independent practices as well so I’m must really excited about my career path.

Not only does Eve explain being happy with her career decision, but she is also content with her current position. Although she shared that she is currently not where she thought she would be in her career since she is not in a leadership position, she said that she is better suited for the responsibilities that are associated with her current position.

Definitely not. I thought I would have been – I don’t know. When I first started I thought maybe I wanted to be a supervisor and work more with pushing papers, per se, but I really like the hands on experience. I don’t like the administrative part so I’ve been asked several times, constantly, if I want to go to the next level and I’m okay with where I am. I actually work in clinics and I’m really independent so I like tailor social work to meet the needs of the clients that I work with so I do a lot of individual therapy group therapy, family therapy, assisting with resources inside and outside the home community. I actually build rapports with different resources and agencies. I visit them and attend different seminars and give them information on the VA so I totally love my current
position so saying if I’m comfortable with where I am now. I’m very comfortable. I just thought I would be somewhere else.

I wanted to know more about Eve’s life outside of being a social worker. The helping role appeared to be so much a part of her identity, I wondered if there was another side to her.

I do like to give back a lot, I volunteer a lot. I’m a foster parent. I’ve been a foster parent to teenage girls for years so I work a lot with teens who are less fortunate, underprivileged, homeless, whatever may be going on. At the church, through the fostering program and with my sorority as well so I’m constantly on the go, helping others. That’s kind of where my life revolves around helping other people.

Eve personifies giving. She gives as a social worker, as a parent, and mentor. I think that her energy is replenished spiritually as she continues to fulfill her calling. I wondered how many lives she has touched and how many people depend on her. She does not focus on the needs around her, but harbors on the ways she can help. Eve’s strength and generosity seems unparalleled as she manages a life of giving. I asked her to explain who she patterns her life after. Eve said,

Definitely, I have to go back to my mom and my grandma because it was unconditional love that they gave to these family members and friend that did not have and I see myself doing that. I work non-stop. I try and make things happen when it looks like there’s no way to happen and I treat them with love. These guys, they went and put their lives on the line for us and the least that we could do is take care of them. Give them a smile, give them a hug, tell them thank you for serving our country and I just think that genuine love and kindness and respect that my grandma and my mom showed people who were less fortunate or people that they were helping has definitely rubbed off on me and I
know that they’re not here now but I still model my actions and my behaviors as a result of what I saw them giving.

Eve’s focus on giving and satisfaction with her career almost cause me to forget any impact her race and/or gender would have as she worked. Eve reframed her experiences of being a minority in a predominately White college as an opportunity to educate. Eve explained,

I definitely got along with my classmates but it was just being at an institution that I was the minority. It was just a little bit different. Once I got used to the environment, it was okay and I got the opportunity to educate others on not just who I was but how the different African Americans related. They were basically stereotyping the race and the classes and we got the opportunity to give a different side of the African American race, if that makes any sense.

When I asked if race or gender impacted her career, Eve answered differently than the other participants. She focused on the composition of the population in which she has worked.

Yes, it did because the majority, my decision, because the majority of underprivileged kids, the at risk kids, they were African American so I wanted to somehow get myself involved with in some aspect of their life because at their point of age four, all they were seeing was things that were not helpful. It was where do I go from here and the parents had no idea so if I could get in there and encourage one of those students out of 200 and encourage them that they could make it to the next level, that was like my thought and their parents just seemed like most of them were single mothers, they just seemed like we’re stuck here. They were living in like housing projects with families and it was just not a good situation and I thought, with me, being African American, what can I do more to pick them up and help them get to the next level.
Eve did not look at her race and gender as a barrier or challenge; rather she used her intersections as a way to connect with people and to help others in need.

Eve mentioned that she has a daughter in college pursuing a degree in medicine. I asked her how she guides her and if she discusses race and gender. Eve shared,

Yes, I have and I’ve explained to her that she has to go above and beyond. You can’t do mediocre work. You can’t be last minute and we have these conversations all of the time because she’s pretty relaxed sometimes and I call her a procrastinator and it’s not true but she gets really hurt and upset when I say that but I encourage her all of the time because she has to lift the bar somewhat because she’s going into an area where it’s really dominated by non-African Americans and she’s got to stand out. She’s got to be different so I think she totally understand that now.

Eve does not appear to allow her race or gender to direct her position or her life. She appears to be confident and comfortable with her identity. Perhaps the satisfaction she has with pursuing her calling permeates to other aspects of her life. Eve talked about not allowing race and gender to impede goals.

I just think that we’ve come a long way and that’s why I really like encouraging young women to attend college, attend local schools, whatever it may be. My mom and my grandmom did not have that opportunity. They did encourage all of the female members of my family, every one, to attend college and I was just extremely glad that I did take the opportunity and that’s why I’m really dedicated and committed to helping and encouraging young African Americans to seek their careers, don’t be complacent, challenge yourself, don’t give in to you come from a single parent family, it’s not going to happen or you’re the first in your family to attend college. Where there’s a will,
there’s a way. There are a lot of opportunities so I just like to encourage them to attend college or find a career that they are comfortable with.

When I asked Eve to provide some insight to the younger generation of African American women, she gave an illustration of how she guides her daughter.

**Words of wisdom for the younger generation from Eve.** Definitely follow their dreams and research careers before they jump into them. Don’t do something because your parents want you to do it. Like with my daughter, she’s twenty one and she’s a senior in college and I never once forced her, she’s a pre-med major, to go into pre-med. That was her choice. My mom died when she was three of breast cancer and Morgan and I moved back in with my mother to help out because my dad was a chemist and he worked all of the time. She was going through chemo and radiation and she started calling Morgan Dr. Morgan and my whole family was calling her that because she was helping, she would go get things for my mom and she would be like you’re going to be a doctor and find a cure for cancer when you grow up. She said that and I was like hmm – the whole family started saying that. At eight, Morgan said mom, why does everybody in our family call me Dr. Morgan and she’s riding in the back seat and I’m looking in the mirror at her and I tell her the story and she started crying. She said mom, you know what, I’m going to be a doctor to find a cure for cancer so the other young kids can have their grandparents and I was like oh my goodness. To this day, she has been doing cancer research at school for three years and she is taking the MCAT in two months and she is applying to Chapel Hill, which is her number one choice, and she did research there this past summer so I encouraged her. We talked on a regular basis to make certain that was something that she wanted to do. She was strong in math and science so you know, I encouraged her and got her involved in different math and science programs and kind of cultivated those areas and she just flourished so I would say young
ladies need to talk to their parents and make certain that the parents are involved with their careers because just because they say they want to do this does not mean that they can find their way. They need adults to help them as well and to encourage them to get to the next level.

**Factors Influencing Career Decision Making: Emerging Themes**

The participants indicated that the following factors influenced their career decision making: pursuit of happiness/interest, exposure to the field through working; financial security; and parental direction. Several of the participants indicated that they were able to make a career decision after having the opportunity to learn about or work in the field either through internship or as a job. Regardless of the initial intent for choosing a particular career, every participant indicated that the factor that should influence career decision making should be the pursuit of happiness. Several of the participants indicated that financial security should be secondary to happiness. Although a few of the participants stated that their parents were not influential in their career decision making, they did say that their parents advised them to do what makes them happy. The two participants who were in technological fields both indicated that their initial intent was to find a quick route to enter a burgeoning field that offered financial and career security, yet they desire to change fields into helping professions although they did not indicate a desire to take the steps to make the career change.

**Summary**

This chapter consisted of participants’ accounts of their experiences throughout their career decision making process. The researcher provided personal reactions and interpretations of the participants’ responses. Consistent with the qualitative tradition’s use of recursivity to strengthen the believability of the study, the researcher exposed feelings, concerns, and reactions to the participants’ responses so that the reader can understand the lens for which the researcher
interpreted the data. The researcher identified the following themes emerging from participant accounts: pursuit of happiness/interest, exposure to the field through working; financial security; parental direction; pursuit of a stable career.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The findings in this study indicated that all 10 participants desired to pursue careers that made them happy. As the participants discussed their pursuit of happiness in their career decision making, they connected identifying a career that was compatible with their interests to achieving happiness. Some of the participants explained that working in the field prior to pursuing it as a career and an affinity for a particular task or act influenced their decision to choose a particular field. Additionally, parental advice appeared to have a significant impact in all of the participants’ career decision making process, as almost all of their parents advised them to seek careers that made them happy.

Conversely, none of the participants reported that their parents’ direction impacted their career decision making. Financial stability emerged as a factor influencing career decision making in that many of the participants stated they did not want to consider money in their career decisions. Few of the participants who did consider money indicated that they regretted using it as the motivating factor for choosing their careers. The remainder of this chapter will explore the factors that influenced career decision making among the participants in this study, the limitations of the study, and implications for practitioners, and provide recommendations for future research.

Happiness and Fulfillment of Passion/Interest

All of the participants in this study indicated that the pursuit of happiness was the factor that influenced their career decision making. Regardless of age, socioeconomic status, career
aspirations, educational background, family background, or any other characteristics, all of the participants desired to identify a career that would ultimately make them happy. The literature does not support this finding, as there appears to be paucity of literature regarding the career decision making process for African American women or describing African American women’s perception of happiness.

However, there is abundant literature regarding happiness as a construct. Consistent with the literature on happiness, the participants’ desire to pursue a career that made them happy implies that they believe they have the power to obtain happiness in their lives. People have control over their happiness (Burford, 2008; Layous et al., 2012; Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006). The participants in this study appeared to place considerable importance on attaining happiness. The literature suggests that happiness does have a relatively significant impact in one’s life. Happiness is associated with life satisfaction (Ambriz & Montorio, 2011; Bauer et al., 2008; Bouazzaoui & Mullet, 2002; Bykvist, 2010; Kim-Prieto et al., 2005; Lacey et al., 2006; Layous et al., 2012; Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006) and life satisfaction contributes to subjective well-being (Ambriz & Montorio, 2011; Bauer et al., 2008; Bouazzaoui & Mullet, 2002; Bykvist, 2010; Kim-Prieto et al., 2005; Lacey et al., 2006; Layous et al., 2012; Rego & Cunha, 2009; Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

Since one’s career occurs over a life span and consumes a substantial part of one’s life, it is understandable that the participants desired to work in a field that made them happy. One concept that is discussed in happiness literature is “flow.” People who experience “flow,” a concept in which an activity is enjoyable to the extent that it is done seamlessly and the act itself is the reward, report being happier (Ambriz & Montorio, 2011; Carpentier et al., 2012; Kim-Prieto, 2005; Robinson et al., 2012; Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Perhaps the participants are
seeking a career that would incorporate “flow” in their lives. Not only did participants desire to pursue careers that contributed to their happiness, they desired to make others happy as well. Most of the participants in this study also indicated a desire to serve or help others.

One component of happiness involves community and humanity as people act in ways that benefit others (Bergsma & Ardelt, 2012; Bonke et al., 2009; Brulde, 2010; Layous et al., 2012; Savino et al., 2011; Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Three of the participants in this study indicated that they wanted to pursue fields to help others or indicated that they possessed skills that could benefit others. Seven of the participants in this study were in public service fields including education, counseling, social work, and nutrition. The three participants in this study who were not in helping professions indicated a desire to change fields; a couple of the participants shared that they wanted to pursue careers in counseling.

Based on the literature and the participants’ accounts, it appears that happiness entails giving to others, which is consistent with what African American women did historically when they used their careers as platforms to advocate for their communities. The participants’ interest in pursuing jobs requiring altruistic behavior may apply meaning to one’s life. Living a meaningful life contributes to happiness (Bauer et al., 2008; Carpentier et al., 2012). The participants’ decision to pursue careers that were compatible with their interests also contributes to their happiness. Having passion for an endeavor provides meaning to life, thus contributing to happiness (Carpentier et al., 2012). The participants who decided to choose careers that served others reported being happy with their decision. Decision making also plays a role in happiness.

Happy people are consistently satisfied with their options and the consequences of their decisions (Allison et al., 2003; Bouazzaoui & Mullet, 2002; Layous et al., 2012). Most of the participants shared that they were happy with their decisions. Two of the participants in this
study indicated that they wished they had chosen fields that would make them happy rather than fields that guaranteed financial stability. The participants who were dissatisfied with their decisions still reported being content in their current fields and apprehensive about taking the necessary steps to change fields. The participants who chose careers that would make them happy were ultimately satisfied with their decisions, while the participants who chose careers for other reasons indicated that they wanted to change their careers for something that would contribute to their happiness. All of the participants who chose careers that made them happy indicated that their parents advised them to seek happiness as they explored various career options. The participants who pursued financial stability also did so under the advisement of their parents.

**Parental Involvement**

It appears that parents played a significant role in the career decision making process of the participants in this study. All of the participants in this study indicated that their parents advised and encouraged them throughout the career decision making process. Throughout their accounts of their career decision making process, the participants mentioned communicating with their parents regarding their decisions to pursue a particular career. There is little literature that addresses parental involvement in career decision making among African Americans. Harold E. Cheatham created a career development model for African Americans based on the concept of “Africentricity” in 1990 (Cheatham, 1990; Falconer & Hays, 2006). In his model, Cheatham (1990) asserted that African Americans inherited certain values and practices from their African ancestry. Cheatham (1990) explained that African Americans are part of a collectivistic culture that values interdependence and mutuality in decision making. African Americans’ commitment to their families appears to impact their career development (Cheatham, 1990; Falconer & Hays,
As the participants in this study shared stories of their career decision making process, many noted that they had consulted with their parents throughout their career exploration. The participants’ accounts of their conversations with their parents about their career pursuits are consistent with literature regarding the conversations African American parents have with their children about education.

Much of the literature regarding parental involvement within African American families is related to education (Cooper, 2009; Fan et al., 20012; Falconer & Hays, 2006; Graves, 2010; Hayes, 2011; Koonce, 2005). African American parents’ involvement in education is an aspect of career planning, as education is a prerequisite for many fields (Banerjee et al., 2011; Falconer & Hays, 2006). African American parents frequently engage in conversations about educational topics with their children (Banerjee et al., 2011; Cooper, 2009; Fan et al., 2012; Graves, 2010; Koonce, 2005). African American parents report giving more educational advice than Asian and Hispanic parents (Fan et al., 2012). According to the stories of the participants, all of their parents appeared to support their collegiate pursuits. African American parents encourage their children to pursue higher education (Cooper, 2009; Falconer & Hays, 2006; Hayes, 2011). Parental advice appeared to have a significant impact in career decision making among the participants, as they acted according to their parents’ instruction and they often referred to their parents for discussion regarding their career pursuits.

Financial Gain and Exposure through Work Experience

Two of the participants in this study indicated that they chose careers seeking financial gain. These participants also indicated that they were dissatisfied with their decision and wanted to change careers to pursue work that would make them happy. Four of the participants in this study indicated that pursuing happiness was more important than financial gain. The participants
in this study appeared to conclude that seeking careers with the intent of financial gain would not guarantee happiness. It appeared that happiness was a priority, while financial gain was not, among the participants in this study.

The literature supports the participants’ apparent conclusion about financial gain and happiness. Financial wealth does not guarantee happiness (Aknin et al., 2012; Burford, 2011; Nickerson et al., 2007). Perhaps the participants in this study experienced pursuing financial wealth as a struggle, causing them to categorize it as an unhappy process. One participant discussed her pursuit of higher pay as she was fighting for her right as a Black woman seeking equal pay to her White counterparts. African American women encounter barriers as they seek increased pay, as a result of the intersections of their gender and race (Combs, 2003).

Another participant pursued career advancement as a means to achieving higher pay, and she too encountered barriers. In fact, African American women often face barriers to career advancement (Betz, 2002; Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). However, despite the challenges African American women face with regard to career advancement and higher pay, the participants did not indicate a concern with these issues; rather, their primary concern was happiness. Participants also discussed exposure to the fields prior to choosing their careers. Although three of the participants indicated that they had previous experience in their fields prior to selecting their fields, they all indicated that pursuing a career that made them happy was the most influential factor in their decision making process.

**Implications for Practice**

When working with African American women in career counseling, career counselors (Constantine & Greer, 2003; Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001; Zunker, 2005) and mental health practitioners (Szymanski & Gupta, 2009; Szymanski & Stewart, 2010) should allow them
to share their life stories, as these stories will reveal their challenges, concerns, coping strategies, decision making skills, interests, and motivation for pursuing certain fields (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Elley-Brown, 2011; Savickas, 2011; Trevino et al., 2008). Life stories provide new insight into people’s lives and better equip practitioners as they learn more about clients (Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Savickas, 2011; Trevino et al., 2008). Practitioners should also consider the barriers African American women face as they encounter negative stereotypes, oppression, and biases in the workplace (Alfred, 2001; Betz, 2002; Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). By acknowledging the lack of opportunities for career advancement in the workplace, practitioners can guide African American female clients in pursuing opportunities and developing self-advocacy skills so that they can succeed in obtaining prominent positions. Practitioners should be aware of using culturally appropriate strategies as they guide their African American female clients.

Practitioners should incorporate counseling strategies from theories that provide a multicultural perspective (Sue, Bingham, Porche-Burke, & Vasquez, 1999). Practitioners should be educated on the values and beliefs within the African American culture, as Afrocentric values often counter the norms of traditional career decision making models based on White middle class women (Collins, 1990; Cheatham, 1990; Walsh et al., 2001). Practitioners should utilize career decision making models that include multicultural practices, such as Bingham and Ward’s model (Walsh et al., 2001) and Cheatham’s (1990) model. Such models explain the African American culture as well as the way African Americans perceive the way they are treated and the way they operate in the world of work. Practitioners should also consider that African American women may be resistant to seeking counseling, particularly from those who do not share their
race, as they may have experienced mistreatment from those with biases and prejudices against them (Alfred, 2001; Constantine & Greer, 2003).

Since the findings of this study revealed that African American women are seeking careers that make them happy, practitioners should be prepared to engage in an in-depth discussion about how their African American female clients define happiness. A discussion on happiness can clarify career options that are best suited for the client. As the participants in this study engaged in constant communication with their parents throughout their career decision making process, practitioners should be open to inviting families into career counseling meetings with African American female clients or discussing family input with their clients as they consider career options.

Although the participants indicated that they were less concerned with financial gain in choosing a career than with seeking happiness, statistics show that African American women are earning less while they are heading households, which may lead to financial stress. Practitioners should assist African American female clients in identifying careers that will make them happy and offer financial stability. Finally, some participants in this study indicated that they were able to identify a career after they were initially exposed to that field through working or engaging in a hobby. One participant talked about her experience observing role models in the field of education, which influenced her decision to pursue education as a career. Practitioners should consider referring African American female clients to a mentoring program where they can develop a relationship with someone who can guide them in advancing their chosen careers.

African American women encounter barriers to career advancement as a result of being excluded from networking opportunities in the workplace (Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Crawford & Smith, 2005). Studies show that mentoring can be an effective intervention in
fostering career development among African American women. African American women would benefit from mentoring that would assist them in obtaining more responsibility and gaining more visibility in their fields. Such mentoring might also encourage young African American women to pursue careers in which they have historically been underrepresented (Crawford & Smith, 2005).

Mentoring is particularly beneficial for African American women, as they experience biases in the work setting as a result of their race and gender (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Evans & Cokley, 2008). African American women are typically placed in positions where they receive little mentoring and guidance from leaders, which puts them at a disadvantage for career advancement (Crawford & Smith, 2005). Mentoring contributes to an individual’s personal growth and career development (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Simon et al., 2004). Mentoring involves fostering a relationship between the mentor and mentee in which the mentee is learning from the mentor, while the mentor guides and cultivates a developing professional identity in the mentee (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Evans & Cokley, 2008; Simon et al., 2004). In addition to referring African American female clients to mentoring programs, practitioners should address psychological issues African American women may experience as they encounter multiple discriminatory events, which may shape the way they perceive themselves.

Internalized oppression is a concept that explains the psychological impact discriminatory experiences may have on African American women. Internalized oppression occurs when members of marginalized groups react to deliberate and inadvertent discriminatory acts from the dominant group by adopting the dominant group’s negative ideology of them (Bailey et al., 2011; Pyke, 2010; Szymanski & Gupta, 2009; Szymanski & Stewart, 2010; Tappan, 2006). A point of concern with internalized oppression is the implication that members of marginalized
groups contribute to their own oppression when the source is external as marginalized groups encounter racism and sexism throughout various settings (Pyke, 2010; Szymanski & Gupta, 2009; Szymanski & Stewart, 2010). Internalized oppression contributes to feelings of inferiority, shame, low self-image, and self-deprecation (Szymanski & Gupta, 2009; Tappan, 2006). Because internalized oppression is a form of self-blame, the effects of it are compounded as the perception of sexist and racist events contribute to psychological distress (Szymanski & Gupta, 2009; Szymanski & Stewart, 2010). Szymanski & Stewart (2010) argued that African American women have substantial external factors that contribute to internalized oppression compared to White women because they encounter sexist and racist experiences. The more African American women perceive encountering racist (Bailey et al., 2011) and sexist events, the more they experience internalized oppression (Bailey et al., 2011) and psychological distress (Szymanski & Gupta, 2009; Szymanski & Stewart, 2010). Practitioners may explore any apparent internalized oppression among their African American female clientele. Practitioners working with African American female clients should not only address psychological issues, but are also obligated to engage in advocacy efforts as African American women encounter barriers as they enter the workforce.

Counselors should engage in advocacy efforts as they work with African American female clients who encounter barriers inhibiting them from experiencing successful career development. The interest in developing the role of advocacy among counselors is increasing as there is an awareness of a need for competent multicultural counselors who can identify factors that prevent minorities from achieving in various arenas of life as well as provide resources to help minorities to successfully combat their barriers (Astramovich & Harris, 2009; Lewis et al., 2011). Counselors have the opportunity to advocate for clients as they identify discriminatory
and oppressive events that prevent clients who are members of marginalized groups from achieving success (Astramovich & Harris, 2009; Brady-Amoon, 2011; Lewis et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Advocacy is a critical component to counseling a multicultural population (Astramovich & Harris, 2009; Brady-Amoon, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). As advocates, counselors are called to recognize the social conditions in which minority clients operate (Astramovich & Harris, 2009; Brady-Amoon, 2011). Advocacy is focused on issues of power, accessibility to resources, and discriminatory acts against members of marginalized groups (Lewis et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Counselors can engage in advocacy in varying levels and settings as detailed by the American Counselor Association competencies including collaborating with community agencies, advocating within schools or other institutions, and working with legislators and politicians to promote societal changes (Lewis et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). While literature provided strategies and techniques practitioners may use when working with African American female clients, there still appears to be more research needed in order to further understand African American female experiences.

**Future Research**

Although there is extensive literature regarding African American women and careers, much of the literature is focused on the barriers and challenges these women encounter as they pursue career endeavors and as they enter the workplace (Alleyne, 2011; Combs, 2003; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Giscombe & Matiss, 2002). This study focused on how African American women make career decisions. There is a deficit in the literature regarding African American women’s career decision making practices. Bingham and Ward developed a model that addresses how practitioners should work with African American women as they engage in career exploration, which involves acknowledging and processing the barriers they face and
utilizing culturally appropriate counseling strategies (Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001). For example, this may include a discussion about family because African American culture is collectivistic.

Although Bingham and Ward contribute to an understanding of how practitioners can work with African American women, more research is needed on how African American women make career decisions in the midst of all the challenges of discrimination, biases, and negative stereotyping (Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001). Collins (1990, 2000; Griffin, 1991) argued that learning more about the experiences of African American women will contribute to a better understanding of other phenomena. For example, more research regarding the way African American women make career decisions will contribute to a broader multicultural perspective on career decision making, support or refute information in career decision making models, and contribute to information about how marginalized groups make decisions in the midst of barriers and challenges as a result of their intersections of identity (Sue et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2001).

Collins (1990, 2000; Griffin, 1991) asserted that learning about the experiences of African American women also leads to more questions about various phenomena. As the findings of this study identified factors that influenced career decision making among African American women, more questions emerged regarding how African American women make decisions, with whom they consult, the impact of perceived barriers on their decisions, their level of satisfaction with their final decisions, and how they react to perceived “wrong” decisions. Results of this study indicated that the pursuit of happiness, pursuit of interest, parental input, financial stability, and exposure to careers were factors that influenced these participants’ career decisions. More research is needed on each factor that impacts African American women’s career decision making.
The pursuit of happiness emerged as the strongest factor influencing career decision making among African American women. More research is needed to explore how African American women perceive happiness. While the literature regarding happiness is vast, there is a dearth of literature regarding how African American women define happiness. Given the barriers African American women encounter as a result of biases, prejudices, and negative stereotyping, more research is needed to assess whether these barriers play a role in their desire to pursue happiness.

Furthermore, research on how African American women describe achieving happiness contributes to a multicultural perspective of happiness, as it explains the impact of barriers on the perception and expectation of happiness. For example, as African American women encounter failures as a result of discrimination, more information is needed on how those failures affect their happiness and whether their expectation of happiness is consistent with that of their White counterparts. More research is needed regarding the nature of the happiness African American women are seeking as they choose a career. While this study revealed that African American women are seeking happiness as they select their careers, the findings did not convey whether African American women are seeking intrinsic or extrinsic happiness.

Research is also needed examining whether African American women are seeking self-satisfaction, increased self-efficacy, self-confidence, or other internal factors of happiness, as opposed to external factors such as increased income, a luxurious lifestyle, a different social network, or more power in terms of leadership positions. While the pursuit of happiness in choosing a career was a significant finding among all the participants in this study, many of the participants also shared the conversations they had with their parents. More research is therefore needed on parental involvement in career decision making in African American families.
Much of the literature regarding parental involvement is focused on parental involvement in education. There is a dearth of literature on the impact of parental advice on career decision making within African American families. Although Cheatham (1990) presented a career development model for African Americans that identifies the importance of family involvement in aspects of career decision making through the concept of “Africentricity,” there has been little contribution to this topic in the last 20 years. Research identifying the aspects of careers that most concern African American parents may provide insight into the guidance they provide throughout the career decision making process within African American families.

For example, an exploration of whether African American parents are most concerned with careers that provide financial stability, power and authority, happiness, or compatibility with interests and skills will provide information on the motivation behind African American parents’ career advice. Research can also assess whether the perceived prevalence of discrimination in certain fields influences the direction African American parents provide as they guide career decision making. Further research can determine whether the career experiences of African American parents as they work in their fields influence the advice they provide.

The findings of this study suggest that parental advice played a relatively significant role in career decision making among the participants in this study. Further research is needed to determine how African American women perceive the opinions of their parents as they engage in conversations regarding career decision making. While parental advice appeared to be influential in career decision making among the participants, a few participants indicated that financial gain should not be the deciding factor for choosing a career.

Because the participants who pursued careers based on financial stability acknowledged that they would have preferred a career that made them happy, further research regarding how
African American women value money is needed. Much of the literature regarding African American women and money appears in the popular press rather than in scholarly journals. Given the studies that show that African American women are at an economic disadvantage in the U.S., further research can evaluate whether African American women’s perspectives on financial stability are realistic for their circumstances.

Future research can also determine whether a lack of concern about financial gain in career pursuits may hinder the representation of African American women in prominent fields. Similarly, future research may provide an explanation for why African American women are less concerned with financial gain than with other factors when choosing a career. Although participants shared that financial gain should be secondary when choosing a career, many of the participants indicated that they chose their careers based on their interests and their initial exposure to a particular field.

Several of the participants in this study indicated that they became interested in a particular subject area in school or a particular task at their work setting, which led to their career decision. While the participants explained the importance of pursuing a field that would make them happy, they shared that becoming aware of a field through their educational experience, work experience, or interest led them to pursue their careers. Further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of applying methods and strategies to equip African American women to process and cope with discrimination as they participate in programs that prepare them for certain careers. While this study suggested that further research is needed to explore the lives of African American women, limitations of this study may restrict the applicability of the findings to a broader audience.
Limitations

Limitations of this study involve the number of participants, the location of the study, the length of the interviews, and the data collection method. This study recruited 10 participants, which may be limited in reflecting the scope of experiences African Americans encounter as they make career decisions. Also, the participants were comprised of college educated career women, providing a narrow perspective on the work experiences and career pursuits of African American women. African American women who are not college educated would undoubtedly provide a different perspective on the career decision making process.

This study occurred in one city, which reflects the work experiences of African American women in one particular location. African American women may have different experiences working in different regions of the country. One participant in this study indicated that her work experience in another state was vastly different from her experience in her current location, given the increase in African American female employees at her current job site.

Since the duration of the interview was 45 minutes to an hour, the researcher worked to adhere to the pre-set time limit of the interview. This caused the interview to remain focused on answers that directly related to the research question, although other topics and issues emerged that may have provided further insight into the career decision making experience. The researcher utilized a semi-structured interview to collect data on the factors influencing career decision making. Having participants write in a journal or complete a career questionnaire might have allowed participants to open up more and share more information about their career decision making process.
Summary

This study revealed that happiness plays a significant role in career decision making among African American women, yet there is little scholarly literature that addresses African American women’s perception of happiness or their decision making style. The limitations of this study along with the deficits in the literature indicate that future research is needed to address how African American women make decisions about their career and in other facets of their lives, how they define happiness, and whether non-college educated African American women would identify the same factors as influencing their career decision making. There is little literature to support the findings of this study; therefore, more research is needed to explore career decision making among African American women.
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APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM

I, _________________________________, agree to participate in a research study titled
"Narrative analysis of Factors Influencing Career Decision Making Among African American
Women" conducted by Stephanie David from the Department of Counseling and Human
Development Services at the University of Georgia under the direction of Dr. Diane Cooper. I
understand that my participation is voluntary; therefore, I do not have to be in this study if I do not want to. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at anytime without giving any reason and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have the information that can be identified as mine returned, removed from the research records, or destroyed. Participants will have the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview within a 48 hour time period. There are no known benefits of this study; however, the participants will be able to reflect on their experiences as African American women in their work environments, which may result in feelings of empowerment and validation. There are no physical discomforts. The emotional risk may include discovering feelings related to their experiences of discrimination or other challenges/barriers the participants may have or are currently encountering.

• The reason for this study is to understand college educated African American career women experiences as they engaged in career decision making through conveying the factors that influenced their career choice as they describe it in their lives.
• The researcher, Stephanie David, hopes to learn about what it is like for African American women to engage in career exploration. The researcher would like to use this information to educate P-16 practitioners as they work with African American women in guiding them through the career decision making process.

• If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to spend about 45 minutes to an hour in an individual interview with the researcher. During this meeting, the researcher will audio tape the conversations about my experiences as I engaged in career decision making.

• The research is not expected to cause any harm or discomfort. I can quit at any time. If I would like to seek further counseling, the researcher will refer me to other licensed counseling professionals.

• Any individually-identifiable information collected about me will be held confidential unless otherwise required by law. My identity will be coded using a pseudonym (fake name), and all data will be kept in a secure location. The recordings of the interviews and the pseudonym code will be destroyed after the completion of data collection.

• The researcher will answer any questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and can be reached by telephone at: 404-316-9058 or e-mail at stephad1@uga.edu. The principal investigator, Dr. Diane Cooper, can be reached via e-mail at dlcooper@uga.edu.

• I understand the study procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to take part in this study. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.
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Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 629 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu.
APPENDIX B

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Do you ascribe to a gender? If so, what is it?
2. How do you describe your race/ethnicity?
3. What do you do for a living?
4. What is your education?
5. Who headed your household?
6. Tell me about your parents’ careers and education?
7. Describe how you chose your career.
8. What fields were you drawn to?
9. What fields did you reject?
10. What is it like working in your field?
11. What do you think about the process for which you selected your career?
12. What is your opinion on career exploration and decision making?
13. What do you believe influenced your career decision making?
14. What do you think most impacted your career decision making?
15. How do you feel about your decision?
16. Are you where you thought you were going to be in your career?
17. What do you admire? Who would you like to pattern your life after?
   a. Who did you admire when you were growing up?
b. Why?

c. How are you like _________________?

d. How are you different from ________________?

18. What do you like to do with your free time?
APPENDIX C

PHONE SCRIPT

GOOD MORNING/GOOD AFTERNOON/ GOOD EVENING, MY NAME IS STEPHANIE DAVID AND I AM CALLING TO FOLLOW UP WITH YOU REGARDING YOUR INTEREST IN PARTICIPATING IN MY RESEARCH STUDY. AS I HAVE INDICATED IN MY MESSAGE, THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY IS TO IDENTIFY FACTORS INFLUENCING CAREER DECISION MAKING AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN. I WILL BE ASKING PARTICIPANTS TO PARTICIPATE IN A 45 MIN- 1 HOUR INTERVIEW SESSION WITH ME. DURING THIS INTERVIEW, I WILL BE ASKING YOU QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCED YOU AS YOU WERE MAKING CAREER DECISIONS. THIS INTERVIEW WILL BE RECORDED. YOU CAN WITHDRAW FROM PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY AT ANY POINT. BEFORE SETTING AN INTERVIEW TIME, I WILL HAVE TO DETERMINE IF YOU ARE ELIGIBLE FOR THE STUDY BY ASKING YOU A FEW QUESTIONS. WOULD THAT BE OK? ARE YOU FEMALE? ARE YOU AFRICAN AMERICAN? HAVE YOU EARNED A COLLEGE DEGREE? DO YOU HAVE A CAREER?

IF PARTICIPANT IS INELIGIBLE, THE CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR WILL SAY THE FOLLOWING: WHILE I TRULY APPRECIATE YOUR INTEREST IN PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY, YOUR RESPONSE(S) TO THE QUESTIONS DETERMINE THAT YOU ARE
INELI GIBLE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR TIME.

IF PARTICIPANT IS ELIGIBLE, THE CO PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR WILL SAY THE FOLLOWING: BASED ON YOUR RESPONSES TO THESE QUESTIONS, I HAVE DETERMINED THAT YOU ARE ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. OUR NEXT STEP IS TO DETERMINE A LOCATION AND TIME FOR US TO MEET FOR THE INTERVIEW. I CAN IDENTIFY A LOCATION FOR US TO MEET THAT WOULD BE CONVENIENT FOR YOU. WHAT AREA WOULD BE BEST FOR YOU? WHAT DAYS/TIMES WOULD BE BEST FOR YOU TO MEET?

THANKS AGAIN FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION, I WILL MEET YOU AT ___________________________ ON___________ AT __________PM/AM.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS, PLEASE FEEL FREE TO CALL ME AT 404316-9058 OR VIA EMAIL AT STEPHAD1@UGA.EDU OR THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR OVER THE STUDY, DR. DIANE COOPER VIA EMAIL AT DLCOOPER@UGA.EDU