ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	"THIS WILL NOT KILL US:" A REFLECTIVE EXPLORATION OF HOW BLACK WOMEN DOCTORAL STUDENTS AND ALUMNAE STRIVED FOR HOLISTIC MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS
	Joakina Stone Doctor of Philosophy 2024
Dissertation directed by:	Associate Professor, Bridget Turner Kelly, Department of Counseling, Higher Education and Special Education

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to develop a better understanding of the factors that influenced the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students and recent alumnae during their doctoral journey. Although research is emerging on the wellness of graduate students, there is limited literature on Black women doctoral students' wellness. From 2020 to 2023 there were national events involving Black women that underscored the necessity to understand and prioritize the holistic wellness of Black women doctoral students (e.g. Black women in higher education leaving their high-ranking positions and Naomi Osaka and Simone Biles taking a break from their respective sports and citing mental health as a factor). Using narrative inquiry as a methodological approach, and a conceptual framework comprised of Black feminist thought (Collins, 1986, 1989) and Hettler's (1980, 1984) six dimensions of wellness, the experiences of nine Black women doctoral students and recent

alumnae (who were no more than six-months post-graduation) were explored. This research sought to understand the strategies Black women doctoral students and recent alumnae used to manage and maintain their holistic mental health and wellness. The specific research questions that guided this study are: (1) How do Black women doctoral students and recent alumnae at Research 1 (R1) or Research 2 (R2) institutions in the mid-Atlantic region describe their mental health and wellness while pursuing their doctoral degree? (2) What contributed to and interfered with the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students and recent alumnae during their doctoral programs?

Co-narrators (participants of the study) participated in two semi-structured interviews, each ranging from 60 to 90 minutes in length. Data collection also included co-narrators submitting memes or gifs that represented their mental health and wellness during their doctoral journey. There were several themes that emerged from the data. First, the visual data revealed that co-narrators experienced exhaustion, anguish, fluctuation between joy and stress, and the need to keep moving forward despite what was happening around them. The images submitted served as a visual representation for the overall experiences of the women in the study and enhanced the understanding of the factors that contributed to or interfered with the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students (i.e., Research Question 2). The additional findings that emerged from study are as follows: (a) "Wellness for Your Whole Body:" Co-Narrators Definitions of Holistic Mental Health and Wellness; (b) Factors that Contributed to Holistic Wellness, including the subthemes "They Needed the Sisterhood:" The Importance of Community with Other Black Women, and "Finding Those Pockets:" Intentionally Choosing Wellness in the PhD Journey; (c) Positive *and* Negative Contributing Factors to Holistic Mental Health and Wellness, which included the subthemes "All Skin Folk

Ain’t Kinfolk:” Interactions with Challenging Black Faculty and Administrators, and “My Advisor . . . Was Super Supportive:” How Relationships with Black Faculty and Non-Black Faculty and Administrators of Color Can Influence Wellness; (e) Detractors From Holistic Mental Health and Wellness, which included the subthemes “The PhD Program Is Good About . . .Letting You Know You Don’t Belong:” Impostorism and Lack of Belonging in the Academy and “What Is the Benefit of . . . Being Productive, If You’re Literally Killing Yourself?”: Negotiating Wellness to Finish the PhD. The study concluded with implications for practice and research, followed by a letter from the author directly addressing Black women doctoral students.

“THIS WILL NOT KILL US:” A REFLECTIVE EXPLORATION OF HOW BLACK WOMEN DOCTORAL STUDENTS AND ALUMNAE STRIVED FOR HOLISTIC MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

by

Joakina Stone, M.Ed.

University of Maryland, College Park

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2024

Advisory Committee:
Bridget Turner Kelly, PhD, Associate Professor, Chair
Kimberly Griffin, PhD, Professor and Dean
Jioni Lewis, PhD, Associate Professor
Rossina Zamora Liu, MFA, PhD, Assistant Clinical Professor
Kris Marsh, PhD, Associate Professor (Dean’s Representative)

Dedication

To my husband, Delan:
You have been with me through each of my post-high school graduations. I promise this is my last one (I think). Thank you for your support, patience and kindness as I navigated this seven-year journey. Thank you for having the desire and dedication to love a Black woman.

To my parents:
To my Mother, for being my first educator and for your unwavering support and love.
To my Father, for your constant reminders to always aim high.
Thank you!

To my family:
Jolomi, Jeminé, Jemiyo: you each support and love me in different ways and I am forever grateful. The Modé love runs deep.
Zaccai, Isaac, Warren, Yemaya & Tajinere: You can accomplish anything.
My cousins, aunts, uncles, family-in-love and my sister-cousin, Nere: Thank you for your love and support throughout my life.

To the co-narrators:
Thank you for entrusting me with your stories. We laughed, we cried, and we learned together. Without you, this work would be impossible.

To my community:
My line sisters, sorors, UNCF Family, sister-scholars, Dr. McFadgion, District Motherhued Society, mentors, and friends: thank you for the encouragement, support, and faith in my abilities.

To Black women:
Across the globe, we are complex, dazzling gifts from God. May we always strive to be whole, healthy and happy. And may we always refract and reflect light.

To my son:
Jirin, you are the gift I waited for patiently, and the heart of my joy and inspiration. May you always feel my limitless love and protection. May you have the courage to seek answers that will liberate others. Thank you for introducing me to the woman I am and am becoming.

Acknowledgements

"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." –African Proverb

White U.S. American culture perpetuates the idea that success is earned by individual efforts. If one is not careful, it is easy to adopt that perspective and believe that any accomplishment is or was the result of individual tenacity and hard work. I am not that foolish.

This dissertation is the product of my community's spirit. It is the manifestation of my grandparents' fervent prayers, whispered to God to cover, bless, and protect our family. It blooms from the seeds my Mother and Father planted, relentlessly urging us to place education above all else. It flourishes from the love, protection, and encouragement of my siblings, affectionately known as Jolo-u, Na, and Jembo.

This dissertation—and doctoral journey as a whole—was inspired by trailblazers like Drs. Nere Ayu (my favorite sister-cousin), Alexandra Burrel, and Tobias Morgan, who demonstrated the delicate dance of full-time work and doctoral pursuit. It was made possible by my cherished line sister, Amber, who affirmed the attainability of a PhD; and my dear friend, Maleak, who is critical and challenged me to be the same, and constantly asked, "What did you learn today?" The completion of this significant task was fortified by my PhD BFF, Dr. Terra Hall, whose Marco Polo messages were a steady stream of motivation; by sister-scholars Drs. Ashley Hixson Clark, Di-Tu Dissassa, Patrice Greene, and Moya Malcolm whose steadfast support ushered me to the finish line; and by my District Motherhued Society sisters who appeared in my life at a time I needed it most.

The path to my doctoral degree was not without its challenges. It was demanding and intermittently draining, but the journey was illuminated by my husband's sacrifices and constant reminders that our son, Jirin, would witness his mother become a doctor. Delan, this dissertation

journey was enriched by your unwavering love and support. Jirin, you were my motivation long before I met you.

This dissertation was born from soft-spoken prayers that God answered loudly. Dr. Brandon Brown and I entrusted our dreams to God and He responded boldly. He cleared a path for us to start and complete our doctoral journey together in seven years. Seven, the number of completion.

This dissertation is the culmination of the University of Maryland faculty's dedication, providing a nurturing space for my growth as a scholar, practitioner, and researcher. Drs. Griffin and Kelly, I am forever indebted to you for your love, leadership and mentorship. Drs. Moore, Fries-Britt, Liu, Marsh, Lewis, Espino, and the HESI community, you have made me a better scholar and educator.

Lastly, the experiences and stories shared, unabashedly, by Black women in academia is what propelled this dissertation. Black women's voices—in this dissertation, and in my life in general—resonate with warmth, strength and resilience, and is the wind that pushes me forward.

To those named, and unnamed, I thank you. Thank you for lifting me up, holding me down, and praying with and for me. Every page and every word of this dissertation reflects those who carried me, poured into me, and believed in my abilities. This dissertation is as much yours as it is mine.

Table of Contents

Dedication ii
Acknowledgements iii
Table of Contents v
List of Tables viii
List of Figures ix
Chapter 1: Introduction 1
- Statement of Problem 4
- Conceptual Framework 9
- Research Design and Methodology 14
- Significance 15
- Definition of Terms 17
- Dissertation Overview 20

Chapter 2: Literature Review 22
- Graduate Students and Wellness 24
- Black Women in Graduate Education 32
- Mental Health and Wellness of Black Women and Black Women Graduate Students 41
- Protective Factors 42
- Literature Review Summary 45
- Gap in the Literature 47
- Conceptual Framework: Hettler's Six Dimensions of Wellness and Black Feminist Thought 47
- Hettler's Six Dimensions of Wellness 48
- Black Feminist Thought 50
- Conceptual Framework Summary 54

Chapter 3: Methodology 56
- Research Design 56
- Epistemological Standpoint 57
- Narrative Inquiry 58
- Dimensions and Types of Narrative Inquiry 60
  - Temporality 61
  - Social Context 61
  - Place 61
  - Event-Centered Approach 62
  - Experience-Centered Narratives 62
  - Sociocultural Approach 63
- A Critical Narrative Perspective 63
- Studies on Black Women Graduate Students 65
- Pilot Study 69
- Pilot Study Findings 71
  - Relationships With Advisors 71
  - Isolative Environments 72
  - Intentional Community Building 72
- Pilot Study Implications for Dissertation 73

Methods 74
Recruitment Methods and Co-Narrator Criteria 74
Data Collection 77
Interviews 77
Narrative Activity 78
Sample Size 79
Data Analysis and Management 80
Researcher Positionality 82
Validity and Trustworthiness 86
Strengths and Bounds of Study 88
Chapter Summary 90
Chapter 4: Co-Narrator Narratives 92
Marie's Narrative 95
Joyce's Narrative 97
Kaycee's Narrative 99
Willow's Narrative 101
Joan's Narrative 102
Belle's Narrative 104
Arianna's Narrative 107
Neka's Narrative 109
Iesha's Narrative 111
Chapter Summary 113
Chapter 5: Findings 114
Memes/Gifs 115
"Wellness for Your Whole Body:" Co-Narrators Definitions of Holistic Mental Health and Wellness 125
Factors That Contributed to and Interfered With Holistic Wellness 131
Factors That Contributed to Holistic Wellness 131
"They Needed the Sisterhood:" The Importance of Community With Other Black Women 132
"Finding Those Pockets:" Intentionally Choosing Wellness in the PhD Journey 136
Positive *and* Negative Contributing Factors to Holistic Mental Health and Wellness 142
"All Skin Folk Ain't Kinfolk:" Interactions With Challenging Black Faculty and Administrators 142
"My Advisor . . . Was Super Supportive:" How Relationships With Black Faculty and Non-Black Faculty and Administrators of Color Can Influence Wellness 147
Detractors From Holistic Mental Health and Wellness 155
"The PhD Program Is Good About . . .Letting You Know You Don't Belong:" Impostorism and Lack of Belonging in the Academy 155
"What Is the Benefit of . . . Being Productive, If You're Literally Killing Yourself?": Negotiating Wellness to Finish the PhD 163
Chapter Five Summary 169
Chapter 6: Discussion and Implications 171
Dissertation Overview 171
Background and Problem Statement 172
Summary of the Literature Review 174

Graduate Student Wellness 174
Black Women in Graduate Education 175
Mental Health and Wellness of Black Women Graduate Students 176
Review of Conceptual Framework 177
Methodology and Methods 177
Discussion 179
Findings Connected to the Conceptual Framework 180
Holistic Wellness of Black Women Doctoral Students 180
Hettler's Social Wellness Dimension and Black Feminist Thought 181
Financial Wellness as a Component of Black Women Doctoral Student Wellness 182
Highlighting an Ethic of Care and the Dialogic Process 184
Additional Highlights of Black Feminist Thought 186
Black Women's Identity as a Source of Joy 188
Findings Connected to the Literature 189
Relationships with Black Faculty and Administrators are Important 189
Advisor Relationships 191
Black Women's Persistence at the Expense of Our Mental Health 192
Implications for Researchers, Future Research & Practice 194
Messages from the Co-Narrators to Black Women Doctoral Students: 194
Key Takeaways: 201
Implications 202
Implications for Future Research and Researchers 202
Implications for Practice 204
Key Takeaways for Implications for Practice 211
A Note From the Author to Black Women on or Considering the Doctoral Journey 212
Conclusion 214
Appendices 216
Appendix A: Recruitment Email 216
Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer 217
Appendix C: Demographic Survey/Questionnaire 218
Appendix D: Interview Protocol 221
Appendix E: Second Interview Protocol 223
Appendix F: Narrative Activity Prompt 224
Appendix G: IRB Consent Form 225
Appendix H: University Pseudonym Information 229
References 230

List of Tables

Table 1 Participant Demographic Information 94

List of Figures

Figure 1 Hettler's Six Dimensions of Wellness 10

Figure 2 Marie's Image: Cat Typing Vigorously on Laptop 116

Figure 3 Joyce's Image: A Cartoon Image of a Dog Sitting in a Burning Room, the Caption Reads "This is Fine" 117

Figure 4 Kaycee's Image: A Before and After Picture of a Child's First Day of School 117

Figure 5 Willow's Image: Oprah With Both Hands on Her Forehead, Looking Around in Confusion 118

Figure 6 Joan's Image: A Young Boy Smiling Then Crying. The Caption Reads "I'm Fine" .. 118

Figure 7 Belle's Image: A Woman's Hair up in a Bun, the Back of the Hair Being Held up by Approximately 14 Clips. The Caption Reads: A Visual Representation of Me Trying to Hold My Life Together Right Now 119

Figure 8 Arianna's Image: Yandy (a Reality TV Star) Crying While Also Trying to Smile 119

Figure 9 Neka's Image: A Roller Coaster of Life With Different Emotions and Sentiments, Including "So Happy, So Sad, WTF is Happening and Okay We Can Do This" 120

Figure 10 Iesha's First Image: A Cartoon Image of a Dog Sitting in a Burning Room, the Caption Reads "This Is Fine" 120

Figure 11 Iesha's Second Image: A Drawing of a Black Woman Sitting on the bed, With Her Shoulders High, and Head Down..... 121

Chapter 1: Introduction

Mental health—a somewhat stigmatized concept—is being discussed more openly and frequently than in years past. Black women in particular are reclaiming the need to focus on their well-being. Perhaps the most controversial public debate about mental health and wellness occurred during the summer of 2021 when two prominent Black women athletes withdrew from their respective sports, citing mental health challenges for their early departures.

Naomi Osaka, a Japanese and Black woman, who was ranked number two in women's tennis, withdrew from the 2021 French Open because she did not want to engage the media after tennis matches. She explained she experienced bouts of depression and anxiety, which were exacerbated during press conferences (Fendrich, 2021). During the Tokyo 2021 Olympics, Biles withdrew from the gymnastic competition while they were underway. She shared in an Instagram post, "I truly do feel like I have the weight of the world on my shoulders at times. I know I brush it off and make it seem like pressure doesn't affect me but damn sometimes it's hard hahaha!" (Biles, 2021, @simonebiles).

Both Osaka and Biles received some backlash for their decisions to put their mental health first. A critic of Biles stated she was the "biggest quitter in sports" (Leitner, 2021, para. 1). The official French Open Twitter page mocked Osaka by posting pictures of other tennis players who participated in press conferences with the caption "they understood the assignment" (Lane, 2021, para. 4.). Other tennis athletes, such as Ashleigh Barby and Johanna Konta, expressed speaking to the press is part of an athlete's job (Fendrich, 2021). Undergirding the comments about Osaka and Biles is the idea they should have persisted regardless of their mental health battles.

The increased attention to mental health challenges in the media, especially with examples like Osaka and Biles, has furthered the global conversation about mental health and wellness, including in academia. Many college administrators are becoming keenly aware of college students' burgeoning mental health needs. Over 15,000 graduate students were surveyed in 2020, findings revealed anxiety and depression increased by 50% from the previous year (Murguía Burton & Cao, 2022). In a separate survey about graduate student wellness, anxiety had increased by 1.5 times from 2019, whereas reports of depression had doubled (Chirikov et al., 2020). In a 2021 ACE report, 72% of university administrators surveyed perceived student mental health and well-being as one of their most significant challenges—an increase from 68% when presidents were surveyed in 2020 (Taylor et al., 2021). Undergraduate students increasingly reported experiencing traumatic situations that influenced their mental wellness (Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013), challenges to academic performance because of mental health (Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013), and difficulty with time management due to stress (Misra & McKean, 2000). Although college student enrollment increased only about 5% from 2009 to 2015, student use of college counseling centers increased between 30% and 40% (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2022). The increase in demand for college counselors indicates students are either experiencing more mental health challenges or are more comfortable seeking help. The growing concern for the mental health and wellness of graduate students presents a need to further investigate this phenomenon.

Much of the research on college students and mental health focuses on undergraduate students; however, graduate students also suffer from mental health and wellness challenges. Graduate students experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression often at a significantly higher rate than the larger U.S. population (Evans et al., 2017; Mackie & Bates,

2019; Offstein et al., 2004; Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). Data suggests as many as 47% of doctoral students are depressed (UC Berkeley Graduate Assembly, 2014). Poor mental health, such as depression and anxiety, can stem from frequent feelings of being overwhelmed and experiencing high levels of stress (Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). The stress graduate students face may be due to financial challenges associated with obtaining a graduate degree (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Yusuf et al., 2020); the competitive nature of doctoral programs (Ferreira, 2003; Jairam & Kahl, 2012); the challenges of balancing school and work (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Offstein et al., 2004; Yusuf et al., 2020); or the advisor-student relationship (George et al., 2018; Offstein et al., 2004). Data suggests the COVID-19 global pandemic exacerbated graduate student stress, as graduate students reported higher levels of stress and anxiety during 2020 than in years past (Chirikov et al., 2020; Flaherty, 2020; Woolston, 2020). As institutions continue to assist students in developing tools to manage their mental health and wellness, graduate students must be considered in that conversation.

Although scholars have increasingly explored what contributes to graduate students' mental wellness, little is known about the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students. Research has suggested students who are women and men of color have more mental health challenges than their white and/or male counterparts (Eleftheriades et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2014). In a study about graduate student mental health, UC Berkeley reported graduate students from minoritized racial/ethnic backgrounds reported lower levels of overall wellness (UC Berkeley Graduate Assembly, 2014). Researchers have also reported graduate students who identify as women experience more significant mental health challenges and delays in degree attainment than their peers who identify as men (Flaherty, 2020).

Being that women and people of color are reporting higher levels of stress and lower levels of wellness, Black women may be more vulnerable to wellness related challenges due to their membership in both groups. Unfortunately, the dearth of literature on the mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students leaves them out of the larger conversation about wellness of graduate students, rendering them invisible (Shavers & Moore, 2014a).

The experiences of Osaka and Biles can be paralleled with the experiences of Black women doctoral students. First, like Osaka and Biles, Black women in academia are expected to persevere despite their struggles (Shavers & Moore, 2014b). Second, like Osaka and Biles, if Black women do not prioritize their mental health and wellness, they are at risk for early departure from their programs. Attrition rates for doctoral students in general are high, at approximately 50% (Rigler et al., 2017). Due to the challenging experiences Black students and other underrepresented groups face in academia, they may be more vulnerable to leaving their graduate training before completing their degree (Barker, 2016; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008; Wallace & Ford, 2021). Attrition rates for Black women doctoral students may increase if attention is not paid to the factors that influence their overall mental health and wellness. Lastly, like Osaka and Biles, Black women deserve to choose joy and to center themselves, which includes making decisions that focus on our[1] holistic wellness.

Statement of Problem

Black women are not safe in academia. Four years ago, Leslie Lokko left her role as dean of the college of architecture at City College of New York after only 10 months, citing racism and workload as the main factors (Flaherty, 2020). In early 2024, Claudine Gay left her

[1] When referring to Black women doctoral students in the overall literature or Black women in general, I use terms like "we" or "our" because I am a part of those groups. When referring to Black women doctoral students in the present study, I use the term "they" because I am not a participant or co-narrator in the study. More information about this can be found in the Definition of Terms section of this proposal.

appointment as President of Harvard University after a 6-month stint filled with controversy (Moody, 2024). Tragically, Dr. Antoinette Candia-Bailey died by suicide in January 2024, leaving her role as a student affairs administrator at Lincoln University of Missouri (Jabali, 2024). Dr. Candia-Bailey reported experiencing "bullying and harassment" by the University president, leading to emotional "harm and mental damage" (Turman, 2024, para. 2). Although stories of Black women experiencing challenges in higher education are not new, how our experiences are connected to our mental health and wellness is an understudied phenomenon in academia. Although the previously mentioned women are not graduate students, their stories can be a window into the experiences of Black women in academia in general.

Literature is replete with studies that document the general experiences of Black graduate students, including the experiences of Black women navigating doctoral programs and the difficulties associated with it. Studies indicated Black women doctoral students experience challenging academic environments and utilize various coping mechanisms to persist (Grant, 2012; Griffith et al., 2017; Shavers & Moore, 2014a, 2014b; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Oftentimes, Black women doctoral students silence themselves and/or create different versions of themselves, also known as wearing academic masks, to navigate and survive their doctoral experiences (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Shavers & Moore, 2014a, 2014b; Walkington, 2017). Additionally, Black women doctoral students experience confrontational relationships with advisors (Barker, 2016; Ellis, 2001), lack access to meaningful mentoring relationships (Bertrand Jones et al., 2015; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Woods, 2001), and experience racialized and gendered microaggressions from faculty and peers (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Lewis et al., 2013; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). Black women doctoral students and other students of color often have difficulty developing mentoring relationships with faculty, are seen

as unintelligent, and their research interests are more likely to be viewed by peers and professors as unscholarly (Barker, 2016; Gusa, 2010; Miles et al., 2020; Wallace & Ford, 2021; Woods, 2001). Researchers have also explored retention of Black women doctoral students (Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Robinson, 2013; Shavers & Moore, 2014a, 2014b), their path to faculty positions (Bertrand Jones et al., 2015; Gay, 2014; Grant & Simmons, 2008) and the importance of mentoring for Black women graduate students (Bertrand Jones, 2015; Grant & Simmons, 2008; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Patton & Harper, 2003; Pope & Edwards, 2016).

Although many studies have examined the experiences of Black women doctoral students, very few researchers have directly addressed how Black women doctoral students' experiences influence their holistic wellness. For example, in Cook and Williams (2015) research, the authors mentioned Black women use relationships with other Black women to support their psychological and emotional health during their graduate education. However, understanding the wellness of their participants was not a focus of their study; rather, it was on the periphery. Similarly, although researchers have identified mentoring as a protective factor against the challenges of the academy (Bertrand Jones, 2015; Grant & Simmons, 2008; Patton & Harper, 2003; Pope & Edwards, 2016), this research does not fully explore the experiences Black women doctoral students may have with mental health. For example, Pope and Edwards (2016) explored the mentoring relationships between Black women faculty and Black women doctoral students. They briefly mentioned mental health in their work and asserted understanding Black women doctoral students' relationships with mental health must go beyond examining mentoring relationships.

The lack of attention given to the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women in academia may be due in part to the perception Black women are "magical," strong, and uniquely

able to persist despite challenges. Let me be clear, Black women are, in fact, magical and strong. However, as Jesse Williams stated, "just because we're magic, doesn't mean we are not real" (Workneh, 2016, para. 2). The perpetuation of our strength and magic sometimes does a disservice. For example, Kaba (2008) argued Black women are the new model minority. He explained despite the long history of systemic oppression of Black Americans, Black women continue to make significant gains "in education, politics and the economy" (Kaba, 2008, p. 311). Additionally, Black women are often touted as one of the most educated groups in the United States because they outpace their male counterparts in obtaining postsecondary degrees (Guerra, 2013; Katz, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Although statements Black women are the most educated group in the United States are often critiqued and based on misrepresentations of data (Cohen, 2020), perceptions of Black women as the most educated group or "Black American women are… the new model minority" (Kaba, 2008, p. 309) are pervasive. This is problematic because these frames perpetuate the idea Black women do not need support to thrive (Patton & Croom, 2017). These assertions place unrealistic burdens on Black women to excel, even if their wellness is at stake (Lewis et al., 2013; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010). Furthermore, monikers that may be used to reaffirm Black women's identities do not capture the psychological or emotional burden some Black women experience. In fact, the strong, magical, Black woman narrative bolsters the idea resiliency of Black women is without consequence (Patton & Croom, 2017; Walker-Barnes, 2017; Watson & Hunter, 2015). On the contrary, Black women's "performance of this strength comes at an enormous cost" (Walker-Barnes, 2017, p. 43), which very well may be mental health and wellness. As noted by Rosales and Person (2003), "the myth that Black women have achieved high levels of educational . . . attainment over the past twenty years may contribute to the lack of attention by colleges and

universities" (p. 53). To fully understand the mental health and wellness needs of Black women doctoral students, "fantasies about Black women in higher education . . . must be critically interrogated and examined to illuminate the complexities of our experiences across the higher education landscape" (Patton & Croom, 2017, p 1).

Black women doctoral students are often left out of the literature regarding graduate student education and mental health and wellness discourse. Black women may exude strength and even magic sometimes, but we still need support academically, mentally, and emotionally. Furthermore, the hyperfocus on the challenges Black women experience in academia does not present a complete picture of how Black women navigate our wellness. This study adds to the overall literature on Black women doctoral students and provides insight on the experiences with mental health and wellness during graduate education. Findings from this study elucidates the range of experiences of Black women doctoral students and how they define, navigate, and cope with mental health during their academic journeys.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to develop a better understanding of the factors that influenced Black women doctoral students' mental health and wellness during their doctoral journey. Participants of this study were current Black women doctoral students who have completed coursework and Black women doctoral alumnae who completed their program within 6 months of data collection. Selecting participants at these stages in their doctoral education allowed them to reflect on their various experiences throughout the different stages of their doctoral program. Additionally, this research assisted in understanding how Black women's social identities influenced their wellness during graduate school and the coping mechanisms they employed. The following research questions guided this proposal:

1. How do Black women doctoral students and recent alumnae at Research 1 (R1) or Research 2 (R2) institutions in the mid-Atlantic region describe their mental health and wellness while pursuing their doctoral degree?
2. What contributed to and interfered with the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students and recent alumnae during their doctoral programs?

Conceptual Framework

This study was informed by two theoretical frameworks: Hettler's (1976, 1980, 1984) six dimensions of wellness model and Black feminist thought (Collins, 1986, 1989). Because the research questions in this study focused on race, gender, graduate student status, and wellness, it was appropriate to use theoretical frameworks that allowed me to explore how Black women doctoral students describe and define their mental health.

Hettler's (1980, 1984) six dimensions of holistic wellness include: intellectual, emotional, physical, social, occupational, and spiritual. This model is illustrated in a hexagonal figure, divided into six equal parts (see Figure 1). Guided by Hettler (1980, 1984) in this study, holistic mental health and wellness are defined as an individual's active pursuit to strive for optimal alignment between their intellectual, emotional, physical, social, occupational, and spiritual states for an overall healthy existence.[2] Hettler (1980) explained collegiate institutions naturally create spaces for intellectual development, but support for other dimensions of wellness is lacking. Promoting comprehensive wellness programs at the collegiate level can increase retention for students and help them develop successful wellness practices once they graduate (Hettler, 1980, 1984). Using Hettler's work as a foundation for understanding mental health and

[2] Although I acknowledge that the terms mental health, wellness and well-being may have slightly different meanings, for purposes of this proposal, they will be used interchangeably. I cite researchers that use variations of the terms without making a distinction. More information can be found in the definitions of terms section.

wellness allowed me to understand how participants may describe and define areas that influence their overall wellness and creates a lens for me to understand the strategies used to employ and maintain wellness.

Hettler's (1980, 1984) model of wellness provided a helpful tool to examine the wellness of Black women doctoral students; however, it does not aim to contextualize wellness in terms of a social environment. But context is important when exploring wellness, especially for Black women. Gamby and colleagues (2021) argued conversations about wellness often ignore the historical context of the western world, and wellness practices developed by Indigenous People, Africans, and other People of Color. Additionally, wellness discourse centers on practices often stolen from Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC; Gamby et al., 2021). Hettler's model explains the holistic dimensions of wellness but does not account for oppressive environments that may impact an individual's wellness.

Figure 1

Hettler's Six Dimensions of Wellness

To better address the influence of context on the wellness of Black women doctoral students, I also used Black feminist thought as a framework. Black feminist thought aims to counter the invisibility of Black women in scholarship (Collins, 1986). When used as a theoretical framework, Black feminist thought allows researchers to critically explore and examine the racialized and gendered experiences of Black women and highlights the multilayered and interconnected nature of Black women's identities. Black feminist thought enables the researcher to understand the contextual factors and forces that may influence both the specific dimensions and overall state of Black women's wellness, including the interlocking roles of race, gender, culture, and community (Collins, 1986). Intersectionality is also a feature of Black feminist thought, which enables researchers to explore how multiple oppressed social identities shape and impact lived experiences (Collins, 1986; Museus & Griffin, 2011). Although intersectionality is a feature of Black feminist thought, it is its own theory. Utilizing Black feminist thought (instead of intersectionality by itself) allowed me to focus on the unique

experiences of Black women doctoral students and their intersectional identities, from a Black woman's vantage point, thus aiding in a self-defined standpoint of Black women (Collins, 1986).

Another feature of Black feminist thought is to create knowledge for, about, and by Black women. Specifically, Collins (1986) asserted, "Black Feminist Thought consists of ideas produced by Black women that clarify a standpoint of and for Black women" (p. S16). In this regard, using Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework empowers the researcher to leverage insider knowledge of Black women's doctoral experiences and center those experiences in a way that has not yet been done in graduate education research or mental health and wellness research. Furthermore, Black feminist thought allows the researcher to "describe and explain different expressions of common themes" (Collins, 1986, p. S16) among Black women. In this study, Black feminist thought enabled me, the researcher, to reveal the similarities and differences of Black women's mental health experiences in doctoral programs, for Black women themselves, and for academia as a whole.

Combining Black feminist thought with Hettler's (1980, 1984) six dimensions of wellness allowed me to understand how Black women make sense of their holistic wellness while in doctoral programs and the various factors that contribute to their wellness. Although this research study explored Black women and their intersectional identities, this study did not focus solely on Black women's experiences with oppression and how it affects their wellness. Instead, this study was an opportunity for Black women doctoral students to holistically define their wellness in a society that pushes an image that Black women are magical, strong, and not in need of emotional support or otherwise. Much of the literature about Black women graduate students and graduate students of color is framed in a negative light, highlighting the challenges and barriers these populations face in academia (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021). Focusing solely on

the difficulties Black women experience in academia due to racism and sexism perpetuates a deficit approach and fails to paint a complete picture of their experiences (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021). This study aimed to offer a full picture of Black women, to center their voices and experiences in a way that highlights Black women as whole beings, not just people who experience oppression. Furthermore, this study revealed specific ways Black women doctoral students described their wellness, factors contributing to it, and the tools Black women used to manage and maintain wellness.

Although Black feminist thought is the critical theory of choice for this study, there are other critical theories that may be fitting, such as critical race theory (CRT) or BlackCrit. It is important that I briefly share what those theories are and why I intentionally chose not to use them. CRT emerged from legal scholars who intentionally examined how laws played a role in perpetuating racial injustices (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT scholars posit that race is a social construct and race intersects with law, power, and society to bolster systemic racism and racial inequality (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT challenges the notion of colorblindness, centers the stories of marginalized people (known as counterstorytelling) and emphasizes the importance of identifying how racism is embedded in legal systems and everyday practices. BlackCrit is an extension of CRT, by focusing on how Black people specifically are impacted by racist structures and systems (Coles & Powell, 2020).

These theoretical frameworks, while originating in legal scholarship, offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of Black people, including Black women doctoral students. While critical race theory (CRT) has seen interdisciplinary application beyond the legal domain, notably in education and sociology, it is essential to recognize that Black feminist thought (BFT) inherently prioritizes the centrality of Black women across all contexts. Moreover, the utilization

of Black feminist thought provides a compelling rationale for the focused examination of holistic mental health and wellness of Black women within academia. And although Black feminist thought centers race and gender, this study is not specifically *about* race and gender. Rather it is a study that highlights how Black women experience and cope with mental health and wellness during their doctoral journeys, including the challenges they experience due to life challenges and joys, and racist and sexist structures. Put a different way, this study highlights the stories of Black women doctoral students who have intersectional identities and shares their human experience. One goal of my research was to center Black women in a way that extended beyond our race and gender, while still acknowledging how identities may influence our experiences.

Research Design and Methodology

To amplify the voices of Black women doctoral alumnae, I used narrative inquiry as a research methodology. Narrative inquiry allows researchers to investigate the fullness of human experiences through stories (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Creswell, 2007; Squire et al., 2013; Polkinghorne, 1995). Clandinin and Huber (2010) asserted, "narrative inquirers attend to both personal conditions and, simultaneously, to social conditions" (p. 436). Hopes, feelings, and beliefs constitute personal conditions, whereas social conditions are related to social identities such as race, religion, gender, and ability. The social and physical context is essential when engaging in narrative inquiry (Squire, 2013). By using narratives to depict participants' experiences, researchers present full pictures of participants using their own words and describe the "differences and diversity of people's behavior" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 11).

Stories, also referred to as personal narratives, are tools used to convey and share the human experience (McAlpine, 2016). An objective of Black feminist thought is to provide and clarify standpoints of Black women for Black women (Collins, 1986). Narrative inquiry as a

research methodology enables Black women to serve as the narrators of their own stories while recognizing stories shape and define human existence (Clandinin, 2013). In the context of this study, narrative inquiry allowed Black women doctoral alumnae to share—in their own words—their experiences with the academy and how those experiences influenced their mental health and wellness. Participants' narratives were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews, one focus group, and through responses to a narrative prompt. Narrative inquiry methods require data are "analyzed for the story they have to tell" in a chronological order (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 155). Because narrative inquiry is an interpretive collaboration process between the researcher and the participants (Bamberg, 2007; Clandinin & Huber, 2010), data was first analyzed and interpreted by the researcher, and then shared with participants to ensure their stories were being interpreted and retold accurately. Using Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1986) and Hettler's (1980, 1984) six dimensions of wellness, I made sense of the data and highlighted the participants' experiences with mental health and wellness.

Significance

The importance of understanding the mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral alumnae is multifold. First, as institutions and society at large continue to focus on mental health and wellness issues, it is imperative to pay attention to the reflections of Black women doctoral students and alumnae as it provides insight into their experiences. Researchers found Black adults in the United States reported higher levels of hopelessness, sadness, and exerting more effort for daily tasks compared to their white counterparts (Office of Minority Health, 2019). Furthermore, data revealed Black women in the United States have higher anxiety and mood disorders rates than other women of color (Lacey et al., 2015). The challenges

associated with completing a doctoral program may place Black women doctoral students at a higher risk of experiencing challenges with mental health.

In addition to colleges and universities focusing on mental health and wellness, institutions also increasingly state the need to diversify academia (Alex-Assensoh, 2003; Clark, 2011; Slay et al., 2019). Goals of diversity are also permeating graduate programs (Slay et al., 2019). However, diversity in the academy does not ensure students with marginalized identities will have pleasant experiences (Milem et al., 2005; Slay et al., 2019). When institutions rely on simply enrolling students with marginalized identities, they "have a tendency to focus on diversity as an end in itself, rather than as an educational process that—when properly implemented—has the potential to enhance many important educational outcomes" (Milem et al., 2005, p. 16). Espousing diversity without paying attention to the specific needs of underrepresented students once they enroll in a graduate program does a disservice to the students (Slay et al., 2019) and could lead to attrition. Shedding light on how Black women doctoral students experienced wellness may enable institutions to better understand and support this population. A deeper understanding of Black women doctoral students allows administrators to create appropriate interventions to support their holistic mental health and wellness, thus enhancing their experiences while in the graduate program and increasing retention rates for this population. As the number of Black women who complete doctoral programs each year continues to increase (U. S. Department of Education, 2022), institutions have a responsibility to move beyond the superficial diversity goals and ensure students with marginalized identities have what they need to thrive academically, socially and mentally (Kelly et al., 2017).

Lastly, beyond a discussion of Black women's mental health in graduate education, there is a larger discourse happening in the United States about Black women's overall health. The

performance and perception of Black women's strength has sometimes done a disservice to Black women's wellness. In a medical setting, Black women's complaints about pain are not taken seriously and they are believed to experience less pain than their white counterparts (Rao, 2020). Regardless of education or income level, Black women have a greater likelihood to suffer from maternal mortality or injuries during childbirth (Njoku et al., 2023). Compared to other racial and gender groups, Black women are disproportionately impacted by high rates of obesity (Chinn et al., 2021; Office of Minority Health, 2019), increased heart diseases (Chinn et al., 2021; Toirac, 2021), and reproductive challenges (Davis & Hilmantel, 2018). Additionally, Black women also experience high levels of mental and emotional distress (Gibbs & Fuery, 1994). The pervasive stereotypes around Black women's strength are doing more harm than good. These stereotypes are likely why Naomi Osaka and Simone Biles were not given grace when they decided to step away from their profession to center their holistic mental health. The present study added to the larger discourse around Black women's overall health. It creates space to understand the richness of Black women's experiences, to remove the shield of strength and see their vulnerability, joy, and humanity. The results of the study benefit institutional leadership, faculty members, and most importantly, Black women in or considering doctoral programs.

Definition of Terms

Black. Black refers to persons of African descent (excluding South Afrikaans with European descendants). Although Black is used interchangeably with African American in this research, Black extends beyond an American context and includes those in the African diaspora residing in the United States, including Africans, Afro-Latina, Caribbeans, and African/Black Americans. Black is more than a racial identity; it includes shared experiences, cultural

understandings and social connections. As explained by Dumas (2016), “Black is understood as a self-determined name of a racialized social group that shares a specific set of histories, cultural processes, and imagined and performed kinships” (pp. 12–13). Accordingly, the term Black is capitalized throughout this paper. In contrast, the term white (in reference to white people) is not capitalized in this text. As justified by Dumas (2016), white is “nothing but a social construct and does not describe a group with a sense of common experiences or kinship outside of acts of colonization and terror” (p. 13).

Woman. The terms gender and sex are often used synonymously, although they are different. Cohen (2012) explained “the term ‘gender’ often refers to expressions of masculinity, femininity, and/or androgyny in words, persons, or characteristics” (p. 692). Terms such as woman, man, or transgender are rooted in social, cultural, and political experiences. Sex, on the other hand, is commonly associated with specific biological features. Cohen (2012) described sex (or biological sex) as “a socially constructed designation that reflects the presence of a specific combination of gonads, chromosomes, external sex organs, secondary sex characteristics, and hormonal balances” (p. 692). When a person’s sex and gender align (e.g., born female and identify as woman), they are considered cisgender. In this paper, the term woman is being used to describe cisgender women. This is not to negate the experiences of women who identify as nonbinary, transgender, gender nonconforming or androgynous; their experiences are equally important and should be examined. However, exploration of those identities was outside the scope of this research. Nonbinary, transgender, gender nonconforming and androgynous people have unique experiences nuanced, meaningful, and varied that deserve attention. By including those identities in this paper would only obfuscate their unique experiences.

Black woman. By combining the two definitions mentioned above, Black woman is defined as a person of African descent that identifies as a cisgender woman. These two terms are grouped because examining race and gender separately does not account for those with marginalized racial and gender identities. As explained by Black feminist researchers, Black women's gender and racial identities cannot "be untangled from the other; both influence black women's standpoints, how we view the world, and how we experience our various truths" (Patterson et al., 2016, p. 56).

Co-Narrators. Researchers utilizing Black feminist thought and critical research approaches are encouraged to co-construct knowledge with participants (Collins, 1986, 1989; Creswell, 2003; Hickson, 2016; Jones et al., 2014). Additionally, narrative inquiry is a form of storytelling. In an effort to connect my conceptual framework to my methodology, I referred to participants in the study as co-narrators.

Doctoral student. In this research, doctoral student is defined as a student pursuing a doctor of philosophy (PhD) degree. The study does not include juris doctorates, doctor of medicine degrees, doctor of education (EdD), or a doctor of psychology (PsyD), as the process for earning these degrees may vastly differ from earning a PhD degree (e.g., writing a dissertation or thesis).

Holistic mental health and well-being. Holistic mental health and well-being is defined as an individual's active pursuit to strive for optimal alignment between their intellectual, emotional, physical, social, occupational, and spiritual states for an overall healthy existence (Hettler, 1980, 1984). By using this term, I recognize the fullness of a person's humanity and how various aspects of a person's identity, environment, and life may contribute to positive and negative well-being.

Mental health. Although the term mental health may be used interchangeably with wellness or well-being, mental health is associated with medical diagnoses (e.g., anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder). This term is used when quoting research that uses this terminology and may not always align with the wellness/well-being definition developed for this research project.

Wellness and/or well-being. The definition for holistic mental health and wellness applies to the terms wellness and/or well-being.

"We" and "Our." As noted by Merriweather and Howell (2022) "the ontological we . . . references the collective we of Black bodies" (p. 57). Black women in the United States have shared experiences by nature of our identities (Collins, 1986, 1989). The intimate knowledge I possess of Black womanhood by virtue of being a Black woman makes it difficult to separate myself from the literature about Black women doctoral students. As such, at different points throughout this proposal, I use the term "we" or "our" when referring to Black women doctoral students. When discussing the co-narrators of this study, I use the term "they" as I am not a participant of this study.

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation proposal is composed of three chapters. Chapter 1 highlights the importance of exploring and understanding the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students, the problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, and the significance of the proposed study. Chapter 2 is a comprehensive review of the literature, focusing on Black women in higher education, graduate students' experiences, the prevalence of mental health and wellness challenges in graduate education, and a reintroduction to the conceptual framework. Chapter 3 explores the proposed research methodology, research design,

recruitment methods and co-narrator criteria, data collection, sample size, data analysis and data management, researcher positionality, the study's validity and trustworthiness, the researcher's positionality and the strengths and boundaries of the proposed study. In Chapter 4, the stories of the co-narrators are presented through in-depth narratives. In Chapter 5, the findings of the study are highlighted. The dissertation concludes with Chapter 6, where a discussion of the findings is explored and implications for research, researchers and practice are offered.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Black college students continue to receive increased attention in research studies (Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Grier-Reed, 2013; Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Griffin, 2006; Griffith et al., 2017; Solórzano et al., 2000; Stewart, 2015). This literature highlights Black students have a variety of experiences across different institutional types. In some collegiate settings, Black students reported feeling isolated from others (Bacon, 2014; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Solórzano et al., 2000), experiencing racial microaggressions (Bacon, 2014; Jones, 2023; Lewis et al., 2013; Solórzano et al., 2000) and hostile campus climates (Dortch, 2016; Pope & Edwards, 2016). Although researchers continue to explore the experiences of Black college students, I contend the vast majority of literature available about Black students in higher education focuses on undergraduate students, is not specific to Black women, and uses a deficit approach (Gallimore, 2022). A deficit framework contributes to a one-sided research approach and highlights negative aspects of Black students' experiences rather than focusing on their achievements (Gallimore, 2022; Harper, 2013). The lack of information about Black women doctoral student warrants further investigation.

Similar to research on undergraduate students, the literature available on Black women doctoral students also reveals the negative experiences encountered in academia (e.g., Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Griffith et al., 2017; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). By mainly focusing on negative encounters, an understanding of the comprehensive experiences of Black women doctoral students becomes nonexistent. In this chapter, I journey through the existing stories of Black women in academia and analyze how their experiences may impact their mental health and wellness. Specifically, I argue the importance of understanding the full experiences of Black women doctoral students (not just the negative aspects) to gain a deeper understanding of their

holistic mental health and wellness. Illuminating the full experiences of Black women doctoral students allows me to highlight the challenges, successes, and joy Black women experience in academia. Additionally, I argue many of the studies that focus on wellness of graduate students, including Black women doctoral students, do not examine holistic wellness.

I organized this literature review in four parts. First, I focus on literature about graduate students and wellness. Specifically, I present studies focused on the factors that influence the wellness of graduate students, the experiences of doctoral students as it relates to their mental health and wellness, and the impact wellness has on student outcomes. Presenting literature related to graduate students reveals the context of graduate education for Black women doctoral students. Second, I present research on the experiences of Black women in graduate school and in higher education**,** as their racialized and gendered identities afford them unique experiences in academia. In this section of the literature review, I highlight the strengths, successes, and challenges Black women encounter in the academy to aid in presenting a more complete picture of Black women doctoral students. Because the literature about Black women doctoral students is limited, this section of the literature review will be inclusive of undergraduate students; however, I focus on Black women graduate students as much as possible. Third, I explore how Black women doctoral students experience wellness during their graduate journey. I review literature that examines what factors contribute to positive and negative wellness, and the strategies used to maintain wellness. By reviewing and analyzing the aforementioned areas of literature, I uncover the need to focus on Black women's holistic mental health and wellness in graduate education, as the current understanding of Black women's wellness is not holistic in nature, nor does it illuminate their full experiences in academia.

In the last section of this chapter, I outline the conceptual framework used in this study. Specifically, I discuss how Black feminist thought provides a lens to understand the nuanced experiences of Black women doctoral students and how Hettler's (1980, 1984) six dimensions of wellness enables a focused discussion on mental health and wellness. I explore, in depth, the core tenets and dimension of each theoretical framework and how combining the two helps readers to better understand Black women doctoral students' holistic mental health and well-being. Lastly, I conclude the literature review by revisiting the research questions for the present study and how answering them fill a gap in the literature.

Graduate Students and Wellness

The purpose of graduate education is to prepare and train emerging researchers for careers in academia or industry (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Charles et al., 2022; Pifer & Baker, 2016). Until recently, the experience of graduate students was severely understudied. As researchers continue to uncover graduate student experiences, there is a growing concern for the mental health and wellness of this population (Woolston, 2019). Various researchers have revealed heightened levels of mental health challenges for graduate students, including anxiety and depression (Eisenberg et al., 2007; Hyun et al., 2006; Nagy et al., 2019; Woolston, 2020; 2019; Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). In fact, "graduate students are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as compared to the general population" (Evans et al., 2017, p. 282). Thirty-six percent of respondents to the annual *Nature* survey about PhD student experiences reported seeking professional help for anxiety or depression (Woolston, 2019). Rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges have generally increased over the past years (American College Health Association, 2019). The COVID-19 global pandemic exacerbated mental health challenges, including graduate students, as the prevalence of

depressive disorders for graduate students doubled in 2020 and anxiety disorders increased by 1.5 times compared to the previous year (Chirikov et al., 2020).

The stressors graduate students experience during their doctoral education include managing challenging relationships with their supervisor, advisor, or primary investigator (PIs; Byrom et al., 2020; Charles et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2017; Gin et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2023; Juniper et al., 2012; Lovitts, 2002), financial difficulty (Byrom et al., 2020; Charles et al., 2022; Fitch et al., 2011; Posselt, 2021; Woolston, 2019), balancing time spent in the lab with other academic commitments (Gin et al., 2021; Woolston, 2019), the competitive nature of graduate programs (Bekkouche et al., 2022), and navigating remote instruction (Chirikov et al., 2020). Graduate students also reported being overwhelmed, feeling exhausted, and being under academic pressure (Hunter & Devine, 2016; Hyun et al., 2006). The inability to successfully manage these stressors can lead to poor academic performance (DeRoma et al., 2009), early departure from doctoral programs (Bekkouche et al., 2022; Lovitts, 2002), moderate to severe mental health challenges (Evans et al., 2017), and even worse, self-harm or suicide (Bekkouche et al., 2022; Garcia-Williams et al., 2014; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2022).

Data regarding graduate students' overall well-being do not always differentiate between masters' students and doctoral students (Evans et al., 2017; Hyun et al., 2006; Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). However, different junctures of doctoral education pose varying unique challenges, successes, and concerns for doctoral students (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Pifer & Baker, 2016). In one doctoral student development model, researchers described the phases of doctoral development as the admission process and the beginning of coursework (Phase 1); coursework, progressing toward, and completing comprehensive exams (Phase 2); and passing qualifying exams and dissertating (Phase 3; Gardner, 2009). These various stages of doctoral

education are marked by different stressors. Phase 1 stressors include navigating the admissions processes, engaging with potential faculty members, and deciding what program they will commit to (Gardner, 2009). Phase 2 stressors involve adjusting to the demands of a new academic course load, showing competency in coursework and other academic material, and transitioning from being a student to being a scholar (Gardner, 2009; Pifer & Baker, 2016). Phase 3, when students have completed their qualifying examinations and are actively dissertating, can be marked with isolation as students work to complete independent research and begin a job search process (Gardner, 2009; Pifer & Baker, 2016). Although the present study is not an in-depth exploration of how doctoral students develop or stage-based related stressors, it is important to acknowledge the degree of stress experienced by doctoral students may be influenced by the phases of doctoral degree attainment.

Although the previously mentioned literature provides a glimpse of the unique challenges associated with doctoral education, researchers have failed to parse out the experiences of doctoral students based on identities. For example, in a study that examined the systemic challenges that influence graduate student mental health (Bekkouche et al., 2022), differences in social identities were not addressed. Authors of the study argued institutions of higher education are nested in a larger system (e.g., society) which ultimately impacts the experiences of both students and faculty (Bekkouche et al., 2022). The authors identified three layers of a system that can influence the daily interactions of students and affect their mental health and wellness: micro (members of the system), macro (the department and/or the institution), and mega (society at large; Bekkouche et al., 2022). Using integrative literature review as a methodological approach and systems theory as a theoretical framework, the authors explored the various stressors students encountered. Findings revealed academic cultures, the socialization process for graduate

students, relationships with lab mates and cohort members, and socioeconomic environments all contribute the wellness (or lack thereof) of doctoral students (Bekkouche et al., 2022). Ironically, in a study about the influence of systems on the mental health and wellness of doctoral students, racism, sexism, and other isms (which are all systems) were not addressed. Although the authors acknowledged international students have difficulty adjusting to academic cultures since cultural socialization is occurring simultaneously with academic socialization, there is no other mention of students with marginalized racial or gender identities (Bekkouche et al., 2022).

In a separate mixed–method study, Gin et al. (2021) explored the depression doctoral students experience. Specifically, they sought to answer the following research questions: "1) what specific aspects of graduate research and teaching affect PhD student depression? 2) How does PhD student depression affect their experience in research and teaching" (Gin et al., 2021, p. 3). Researchers surveyed graduate students, yielding responses from over 840 students. Of those respondents, 56% self-identified as having depression. Additionally, the researchers conducted interviews with 50 students who had completed their survey. They found contributing factors to depression and anxiety were unstructured lab time, failed research projects, negative interactions with peers and PIs, lack of support, social isolation, comparing themselves to others, and a host of other things (Gin et al., 2021). Although the researchers did an excellent job at exploring how mental health challenges effected doctoral student research and teaching, the experiences of students with marginalized identities were not discussed. Over 70% of their sample was white. In fact, of the 50 students interviewed, only one participant identified as Black and/or African American.

It is problematic researchers (e.g., Bekkouche et al., 2022 & Gin et al., 2021) do not acknowledge how institutions of higher education perpetuate harmful systems (e.g., racism,

sexism, ableism), how students with marginalized identities often report higher levels of stress in academia (Harper, 2013), and how unique experiences of Black students are not highlighted in the literature about graduate student experiences. Experiences in graduate school for Black women doctoral students may be complicated by their race and gender (Ellis, 2001; Gildersleeve et al., 2011). In addition to dealing with academic socialization, navigating academic research, and balancing graduate studies, Black women are navigating the graduate school terrain with at least two intersecting identities. However, very little is known about their experiences in the academy (Grant, 2012).

Although some literature revealed students of color and women often have more severe challenges with mental health than their peers of different races and genders (Eleftheriades et al., 2020; Evans, et al., 2017; Flaherty, 2020; Hyun, et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2014; Wilkins-Yel, 2022), there is a dearth of research about the factors that contribute to the overall wellness of graduate students with intersecting identities. When examining the prevalence of mental health challenges with graduate students (Nagy et al., 2019; Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013), researchers did not explore, in depth, the experiences of doctoral students of color. In a comparative study of undergraduate and graduate students, Wyatt and Oswalt (2013) found graduate students reported higher levels of stress than undergraduates. However, race or gender variables were not a part of their study (Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). When examining various social identities, including race, gender and economic status, Nagy et al. (2019) did not identify differences in mental health challenges (such as burnout) for doctoral students in the sciences. However, when delineating the differences in factors contributing to graduate student stress, El-Ghoroury et al. (2012) found discrimination was indeed a factor for graduate students of color.

When scholars do not acknowledge or examine how race and gender factor into graduate student experiences and their overall wellness, it contributes to the pervasive erasure of students with marginalized identities (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2022). Additionally, when researchers focus solely on negative factors that influence graduate student wellness, it does not leave room for understanding elements of the graduate experience that contribute to positive wellness outcomes and it contributes to a deficit perspective (Harper, 2013; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021). When exploring the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students, it is vital to also share positive factors related to wellness, otherwise Black women doctoral students are defined by just their struggles and not their strengths. Since the participants in this study were recent graduates, they were able to reflect on their full PhD journey and share what contributed to their overall wellness. As such, I contribute to the literature by highlighting balanced experiences of Black women doctoral students, by showcasing their challenges and successes.

Although literature regarding the positive elements that contribute to graduate student wellness is limited, it is not nonexistent. Several researchers have explored factors that enable graduate students to maintain a positive sense of well-being, which include supportive academic and social environments (Charles et al., 2022; Hyun et al., 2006; Tompkins et al., 2016), positive relationships with advisors and supervisors (Byrom et al., 2020; Dinsmore & Roska, 2023; Griffin et al., 2023), and mentoring relationships with faculty (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Gaston Gayles & Kelly, 2004; Gayles & Kelly, 2019; Hyun et al., 2006). Charles and colleagues (2022) conducted an in-depth exploration of the positives factors that contributed to graduate student wellness. Through a quantitative study with over 3,600 survey respondents, researchers found the following items helped lessen depressive symptoms among graduate students: positive social and academic climate in a department, optimistic perspective about future career opportunities,

and social support (Charles et al., 2022). Positive factors contribute to lower depressive symptoms among graduate students and help to mitigate the negative stressors that lead to a poor sense of wellness (Charles et al., 2022). This study clarified factors that contributed to poor and positive mental health, which aids in painting a balanced picture of doctoral students. However, the results did not delineate between racial groups or gender identities. Lack of attention to social identities implies all graduate students, regardless of identities, experience mental health in the same way. Additionally, because the study was quantitative in nature, respondents were unable to describe, in-depth, their experiences related to mental health. Lastly, the researchers focused on depressive symptoms, rather than examining holistic mental health and wellness. The present study expanded the literature by doing an in-depth exploration of Black women doctoral students holistic mental health and wellness. Through a qualitative approach, I uncovered and provided narratives of students' wellness experiences in thick, rich detail.

Although there is limited research available on the holistic well-being of graduate students with intersecting identities, Wilkins-Yel and colleagues (2022) explored the experiences of graduate student women who identified as Black, Latina, and white. Through a qualitative research design using intersectionality and social cognitive theory as a theoretical framework, researchers examined the impact of the STEM academic and social climates on the wellness and persistence of Black, Latina, and white women graduate students. Each of the 12 participants in the study completed a demographic survey and participated in a 60 to 75-minute interview. Findings revealed lack of interpersonal support from advisors and faculty contributed to poor mental health and influenced participants' decisions to remain enrolled in their program (Wilkens-Yel et al., 2022). Additionally, women of color in the study reported experiencing racial battle fatigue, overt and covert sexism and racism, and demeaning encounters with peers

and faculty; all of which impacted their overall well-being (Wilkens-Yel et al., 2022). Participants in the study also described experiencing stress due to academic challenges, which took a toll on their wellness (Wilkens-Yel et al., 2022). All the participants in the study reported mental health challenges in some capacity, including anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation. As a form of coping, several of the participants intentionally chose not to share their mental health challenges with others, whereas other participants in the study sought psychological support from peers, academic advisors, university staff, and counseling center staff (Wilkens-Yel et al., 2022). Six of the 12 participants chose to discontinue their enrollment in graduate school in an effort to maintain their wellness (Wilkens-Yel et al., 2022).

Women graduate students have experiences that differ from their white male counterparts (Wilkens-Yel et al., 2022). Black women doctoral students, and other women of color, shoulder a unique burden in that they are managing the stressful, exhausting, and dehumanizing process of graduate school (Bertrand Jones et al., 2013, 2015; Ellis, 2001; Gay, 2004; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2004; Wilkens-Yel et al., 2022), while also holding multiple intersecting identities. As evidenced in the research by Wilkens-Yel and colleagues (2022), the racist and sexist nature of graduate school can impede a successful graduate school journey and interfere with doctoral student holistic wellness. Although Wilkens-Yel and additional researchers (2022) explored how women managed their wellness, two thirds of the findings centered the negative encounters of women in academia, which contributes to a deficit approach when understanding Black women in in the academy. The lack of adequate attention to the well-being of doctoral students with various intersecting identities, including ways Black women doctoral student seek to maintain a healthy sense of wellness, further confirms a need for the current study. My study

expanded the literature about Black women doctoral as it highlighted not only our challenges but also the ways in which we thrive.

In the next section of this chapter, I review literature about Black women in higher education. Understanding Black women doctoral students' experiences allows for readers to understand the context for Black women's mental health and wellness in graduate school. Additionally, I draw attention to the fact although research about Black women's experiences in academia continues to emerge, very little of the research focuses on how those experiences influence our overall wellness.

Black Women in Graduate Education

Students of color in doctoral programs have reported encounters with racism, prejudice, and isolating environments (Bacon, 2014; Gay, 2004; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2004). Graduate students of color at historically white institutions (HWIs) "have to function in an alien and often hostile environment, consistently encounter irrelevant curriculum, and frequently are taught by culturally insensitive and uncaring instructors" (Gay, 2004, p. 266). Negative academic environments can lead Black doctoral students to feel isolated, doubt themselves, and engage in self-silencing practices (Bacon, 2014; Gay, 2004; Gildersleeve et al., 2011). In a study examining the experiences of Black and Latinx doctoral students, researchers found graduate education fostered harmful cultural environments, reinforced dominant and toxic race-related narratives, and did not account for power dynamics between students and faculty (Gildersleeve at al., 2011). Similarly, Gay (2004) reported doctoral students of color often have their research interest dismissed by faculty and are not supported academically, emotionally, or culturally. More must be done to support students of color in doctoral education (Ellis 2001; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2004). Although the aforementioned studies do not

explicitly examine the experiences of Black women graduate students, Black women are not exempt from the challenges associated with graduate education that could ultimately hamper their success and influence their overall wellness (Shavers & Moore, 2014b).

Black women in the United States and in academia occupy a unique social location due to their race and gender (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). In institutions of higher education, the marginalized identities of Black women often impact how they are perceived by peers (Miller, 2017). Black women at both the undergraduate and graduate level have reported feelings of isolation (Bacon, 2014; Dortch, 2016; Dortch & Patel, 2017; Gay, 2004; Miller, 2017; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Winkle-Wagner, 2009); a heightened sense of awareness of social identities (Griffith et al., 2017); feeling pressure to change who they are to fit in (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Winkle-Wagner, 2009), and experiences with racism and sexism (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Griffith et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2004). Black women have also reported experiencing impostor syndrome and impostorism (McGee et al., 2022). Due to the negative encounters Black women face in academia, they are less likely to be satisfied with their experiences (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Shavers & Moore, 2014b).

Eboni McGee and colleagues (2022) conducted a phenomenological study that examined the experiences of Black science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) doctoral students. The researchers utilized focus groups and in-depth interviews to collect data from over 60 participants. Thirty-seven of the participants identified as men, 25 identified as women, and they all studied at various institutions across the United States (McGee et al., 2022). Findings uncovered that 54 of the 62 participants described experiencing racialized exclusion and marginalization (McGee, 2022). McGee and colleagues (2022) posit that although Black doctoral students identified impostor syndrome as part of their graduate experience, what they really are

encountering is impostorism. The use of the term impostor syndrome "grossly minimizes institutional factors, policies, and practices that cause Black students to logically respond with distress and frustration" (McGee et al., 2022 p. 488). In other words, the onus of responsibility is placed on students with marginalized identities, rather than institutions that perpetuate racism and a lack of belonging for Black students. Although McGee and colleagues (2022) work is powerful, it does not specifically look at Black women doctoral students. Additionally, the researchers acknowledge how experiencing impostorism can contribute to stress, however they do not explore how Black doctoral students can center their wellness in environments not designed for them to thrive.

Johnson-Bailey and colleagues (2009) conducted a quantitative study that examined the experiences of Black graduate students at a southern research one university. Researchers were specifically interested in learning about how Black graduate students experienced social support during their graduate program and the challenges Black graduate students encountered (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). Their findings revealed four major themes related to Black graduate students' experiences: 1) Black graduate students experienced racist encounters with white professors 2) and white students; 3) social isolation was enforced by both white students and white faculty; 4) Black students' academic ability was often underestimated; and 5) Black students were expected to represent their race (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). The authors of this study acknowledged negative encounters Black graduate students experienced could have deleterious effects on their overall mental well-being; however, exactly how negative interactions influenced mental health and wellness was not explored. Additionally, the framing of the study focused on the negative encounters Black graduate students had. Although those encounters are valid and need to be uncovered, the authors did not create space for Black

students to share where they found joy, support, and happiness. Furthermore, the study conducted by Johnson-Bailey and colleagues (2009) did not solely examine the experiences of Black women in graduate education; rather, their sample was composed of both Black men and women, and it was unclear what percentage of the participants identified as Black women. Lastly, due to the researcher utilizing a quantitative research design, the study did not allow for the stories and voices of the participants to be highlighted.

Similar to the Johnson-Bailey et al. (2009) study, Shavers and Moore (2014a) explored the experiences of Black graduate students; however, they focused specifically on Black women. Particularly, they were interested in how Black women doctoral students made sense of their academic experiences and how those experiences impacted persistence and wellness (Shavers & Moore, 2014a). Using Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework, the authors interviewed 15 participants. In their research, five major themes emerged from the data, including Black women doctoral students: (a) wear academic masks to aid in their survival of oppressive academic environment, (b) develop a public self, (c) develop a private self, (d) utilize academic masks as a protective strategy and, (e) experience downsides for wearing academic masks (Shavers & Moore, 2014a). The overall well-being of Black women doctoral student participants was in jeopardy due to the exhausting task of showing up inauthentically and dealing with both racism and sexism (Shavers & Moore, 2014a). These findings are congruent with other research on Black women in academia. In the *Unchosen Me,* Winkle-Wagner (2009) addressed the two-ness Black women often feel in academic spaces. She explained Black women in collegiate environments often make a conscious decision to hide who they are as a mode of survival (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). In their book, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) discussed how Black women often "'shift' their behavior to accommodate others" (p. 9). This finding emerged

from a research study, where Jones and Shorter-Gooden surveyed and interviewed Black women across the United States. The idea Black women must change their behavior, tone of voice, or even physical appearance to appease white people or even their Black male partners, is shifting (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). The act of wearing different masks (Shavers & Moore, 2014a), shifting (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003), and performing to appease others (Kelly et al., 2019) can be mentally and emotionally draining (Kelly et al., 2019; Shavers & Moore, 2014a; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). I assert Black women in academia employ these tactics to survive and cope with the gendered racism they experience in the ivory tower. Additionally, I argue the experiences of Black women in academia can influence our overall wellness. In my study, I uncovered not just the coping strategies Black women use to survive in academic settings, but also the tools Black women use to thrive.

The academic environment for Black doctoral students is not always welcoming, friendly, or accepting (Shavers & Moore, 2014a, 2014b). In a study that explored how doctoral education is experienced by Black and Latino/a students, researchers found participants in the study often encountered racism which made them question themselves (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). Other researchers contend graduate education for Black students can be a dehumanizing process (Lewis et al., 2004). Dehumanizing experiences for Black women doctoral students may manifest as receiving little to no support from their faculty members, experiencing gendered racism (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017), and being viewed as less competent than their non-Black and female peers (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009; Walkington, 2017; Wilson, 2012).

In a phenomenological study conducted by Patterson-Stephens and colleagues (2017), researchers examined the experiences of seven Black women doctoral students and the factors that influenced their overall success and/or challenges. They explained multiple intersecting

identities (such as race and gender) can complicate the social experiences of Black women doctoral students. Three major themes emerged from the data: socialization experiences, student success, and challenges (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017).

Socialization experiences allowed the participants to authentically engage with Black women faculty at their institutions, without wearing the "mask" that typically accompanies engagement in predominantly white spaces (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). As previously discussed, socialization experiences during graduate education an influence wellness (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Bertrand-Jones et al., 2013), and wearing academic masks can be draining (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Shavers & Moore, 2014a). Informal interactions with Black faculty allowed participants to show up as their authentic selves and engage in real conversations about life in academia and how to pursue their career goals (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). These experiences had a positive effect on students' understanding of academic culture and ultimately their socialization process in academia. I assert positive socialization experiences can aid in having healthier mental health and wellness outcomes in doctoral education. Negative socialization experiences can have the opposite effect. For example, participants of the study reported faculty intentionally tried to dissuade some of them from continuing their doctoral degrees, which contributed to adverse socialization experiences (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). Participants attributed these negative encounters to their identity of being a Black woman, which created barriers to participants' success. I argue these types of encounters, both positive and negative, may also influence the wellness of the participants; however, that was outside the scope of the study Patterson-Stephens and colleagues (2017) conducted.

The second finding of student success revealed participants were motivated to persist in their programs by internal factors (i.e., not wanting to quit a project they started) and external

factors (i.e., family members who inspired them; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). Students also felt moderately successful when they were able to be identified and supported by mentors. The third finding, challenges, centered on internal and external challenges, like experiencing impostor syndrome, and the lack of adequate mentorship that some students encountered. Additionally, challenges such as negative interactions with faculty impacted Black women doctoral student persistence (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017).

Patterson-Stephens and colleagues (2017) made a valiant effort to present a balanced picture of Black women doctoral students by not just focusing on negative experiences, and they were successful in part. They reported on areas that influenced the academic and social success of the participants, including where Black women doctoral students find support and balance. Researchers identified family, friends, and community support (e.g., hairdressers, church, and other community groups) as ways that participants experienced healthy work-life balance in their programs. Additionally, the authors recommended Black women doctoral students seek mentorship, as mentorship can aid in positive relationship development between students and faculty, contribute to academic success, and enhance overall acclimation to graduate school. Although the researchers sought to examine the challenges and supports of Black women doctoral students, unfortunately, much of their discussion section focused on the challenges the participants encountered. Beyond the discussion of mentorship and community support, very little attention was given to exploring the aspects of graduate programs that facilitated academic and personal success. The authors indicated that they did not want to perpetuate deficit narratives about Black women, but they felt compelled to acknowledge how racist and sexist structures influenced the experiences of Black women in academia—which is understandable. Although the mere mention of racism and sexism do not automatically perpetuate a deficit approach, an

unbalanced presentation of participants experiences does. The authors successfully presented impediments for Black women in doctoral programs, but the lack of time spent focusing on what facilitates success is how the work could have been strengthened.

Perhaps, the experiences that Black women have in academia are due in part to higher education spaces feeling inherently white (Liu et al., 2023). Liu and colleagues (2023) argued systemic racism creates and perpetuates white space and white time. White supremacy, antiblackness, and racial capitalism collaboratively generate and sustain these constructs (Liu et al., 2023). Acquiring and retaining space is crucial for upholding systemic racism. Consequently, Black students and People of Color are consistently monitored and controlled within white spaces (Liu et al., 2023). This concept manifests in how Black women are excluded from and dehumanized in higher education spaces, and the socialization process for Black women doctoral students. Although Liu and colleagues (2023) work does not specifically address Black women doctoral students, it provides some context for *how* Black women may experience academia.

Though disappointing, the literature available on the experiences of Black women doctoral students is not surprising. The race and gender of Black women make them more likely to face hostile academic environments (Dortch, 2016; Pope & Edwards, 2016; Shavers & Moore, 2014b). Furthermore, although many Black women in academia experience challenging environments, many are not offered grace or support. Rather, they are expected to perform despite the systemic challenges they encounter. As briefly explored in Chapter 1, Black women are touted as one of the smartest groups (Guerra, 2013; Katz, 2020; Rosales & Person, 2003), the new model minority who persist despite oppression (Kaba, 2008), and are celebrated as being "magical" (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017, p. 465). Viewing Black women as a model minority or superhuman in an academic setting erases their unique experiences and tacitly plays

into the strong Black woman (SBW) trope, a trope harmful to the mental health and wellness of Black women.

The SBW race-gender moniker is often worn as a badge of honor for Black women, and it suggests Black women can persist despite racism, oppression, financial hardships, and other obstacles (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Walker-Barnes, 2017; Watson & Hunter, 2015). Although the SBW label can be a sense of pride for Black women, it unhealthily "promulgates beliefs that African American women should handle situations alone and not depend on others for help" (Watson & Hunter, 2015, p. 605). The SBW narrative was developed in response to negative stereotypes about Black women but embodying it may lead Black women to develop anxiety, depression, and maladaptive behaviors (Lashley, et al., 2017; Walker-Barnes, 2017; Watson & Hunter, 2015). Walker-Barnes (2017) characterized the SBW race-gender schema as demonstrating "emotional strength/regulation, caregiving and independence" (p. 44). In an academic setting, the perception of strong and magical Black women may lead to less attention given to this population and a lack of understanding of their experiences and their needs (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Patton & Croom, 2017; Rosales & Person, 2003).

The conundrum of Black women is that we are seen as superhuman while also experiencing dehumanization; we are seen as magical while simultaneously being viewed as incompetent. We are expected to persist regardless of the narratives that exist about us. I assert the challenges of Black women in academia are so commonplace there are few studies that explore our holistic well-being. Further, I assert the lack of attention to how Black women fully experience academia limits the understanding of this population and perpetuates the idea we do not experience joy and holistic mental health and well-being. By not highlighting the full experiences of Black women doctoral students, Black women run the risk of being defined solely

based on our pain and struggles and being "framed as a problem in the literature" (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017, p. 7). Having described how some Black women graduate students experience academia, I shift my attention to literature that specifically addresses the mental health and wellness of Black graduate students, with a focus on Black women doctoral students. I start with a focused discussion on mental health and wellness for Black women in general and move toward an examination of mental health and wellness for Black women doctoral students. Reviewing literature on the mental health and wellness of Black women in general gives insight into what Black women doctoral students may experience.

Mental Health and Wellness of Black Women and Black Women Graduate Students

Women suffer from depression more frequently than men (Martin et al., 2013; Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017). In a U.S. context, racially minoritized people experience greater challenges with mental health and wellness (Copeland & Butler, 2007). This is not innate to marginalized communities, rather a result of oppressive systems (Dortch, 2016; Turner & Allen, 2022). Black women who suffer from depression are at a higher risk of other health issues (e.g., as obesity, breast cancer, and heart disease) than white women (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017). Although Black women may experience mental health challenges at the same or higher rates than our peers, we are less likely to seek help (Martin et al., 2013). As noted by researchers, "Black women continue to function until they 'break,' and as a consequence, their depression becomes more debilitating" (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 201, p. 462). Exposure to sexism, racism, oppression, poverty, and socialization practices make Black women more susceptible to experience depression and other mental health challenges (Turner & Allen, 2022; Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017).

Literature about the mental health and wellness of Black women in the general U.S. population is available; however, studies exploring and centering Black women doctoral students' wellness is sparse. Although research continues to emerge about Black women graduate students, very little research centers our mental health and wellness. It is clear by the previous literature I have shared Black women experience toxic, racist, and sexist environments in academia which can impeded their success (Shavers & Moore, 2014a, 2014b). Clearly, Black women persist through challenging academic environments, but current literature does not explore how our mental health is influenced by our experiences. How do we thrive and find the joy to make it through some of the challenges of academia? Below I explain some of the protective factors that aid Black women in matriculating through PhD programs.

Protective Factors

The American Mental Wellness Association (2024) defines protective factors as "something that helps to prevent [mental health and wellness] problems" (n. p.). Protective factors can include family, community, spiritual and/or religious practices, exercise, and participation in other activities (e.g., creative writing, music, maintaining a healthy diet; Mental Health First Aid USA, 2022). According to Mental Health First Aid USA (2022) "protective factors and coping skills can bolster resilience" (para. 6). Researchers have examined, explicitly and implicitly, the use of protective factors by Black women in higher education. Protective factors for Black women in higher education include advisor mentoring relationships (Gooden et al., 2020; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017), peer-to-peer mentoring relationships (Dortch, 2016; Pope & Edwards, 2016; Porter et al., 2022), fictive kinship bonds (Cook & Williams, 2015), sistah circles (McLane-Davison et al., 2018), and community support (Shavers & Moore, 2014b).

In a phenomenological study that looks more closely at the psychological stressors Black students face on college campuses, Grier-Reed et al. (2008) explored the lived experiences of African American students who intentionally formed community in a race-based student network (known as AFAM). Racism is implied as a stressor for Black students in the study; however, exact stressors (outside of racism) are not explicitly stated. Rather, the authors focused on how the AFAM group is used to support Black students in that institution. When examining the group experiences using traditional therapeutic factors, researchers found AFAM served as a protective factor against the harmful and stressful racial campus climate (Grier-Reed, 2013). Students used AFAM as a coping mechanism to deal with the isolating campus environment and reported feeling empowered, connected, and validated as a result of participation in the program (Grier-Reed, 2013; Grier-Reed et al., 2008). These findings are relevant to understanding the holistic experiences of Black women doctoral students. Although findings are not disaggregated by gender, the study makes clear Black students, including Black women, need community to thrive.

Black women utilize community and mentoring relationships to help manage challenging academic environments and to persist in their graduate education (Bertrand Jones et al., 2015; Grant, 2012; Grant & Simmons, 2008). Mentoring relationships play a vital role in graduate students' education (Ellis, 2001; Patton & Harper, 2003). The race and gender of both graduate students and advisors impact the advising and mentoring experience, especially for Black students (Ellis, 2001; Gildersleeve et al., 2011). Black women doctoral students relied on same race-gender mentoring and advising relationships as support in academia, although these opportunities were sparse (Bertrand Jones et al., 2015, 2013; Patton & Harper, 2003; Pope & Edwards, 2016; Shavers & Moore, 2014a). For Black women doctoral students, positive

relationships with other Black women (mentoring or otherwise) help support Black women's psychological and emotional health during graduate education (Apugo, 2019; Cook & Williams, 2015; Pope & Edwards, 2016). In fact, relationships with other Black women can be "sources of strength, affirmation, and empowerment that provide critical support outlets in spaces where Black women's identities and cultures" are othered (Apugo, 2019, p. 255).

In an article focusing on the intersections of race, gender, class, education, and spirituality for Black women, researchers applied the concept of fictive kinship to Black women matriculating through graduate programs (Cook & Williams, 2015). Fictive kinship can be a tool used to support Black women's psychological and emotional health during graduate education (Cook & Williams, 2015). For Black women in the academy, fictive kinship serves as a protective factor, provides nurturing relationships, and honors Black women's intellect and humanity (Cook & Williams, 2015).

Similarly, Young and colleagues (2023) found fictive kinship bonds sustained them as they pursued their doctoral degrees. Specifically, using a sista circle methodology, the authors shared how they intentionally and boldly held space for their cohort, which was comprised of four Black women enrolled in a PhD program. Interweaving a metaphor of pregnancy and birth, the authors told the story of how their cohort initially connected (i.e., preconception stage), intentionally created a healthy and safe space for one another (i.e., gestation stage), publicly and privately recognized the strength and wisdom of their cohort (i.e., birth stage) and intentionally fostered community among each other (i.e., mothering stage; Young et al., 2023). The authors beautifully shared how they elevated one another, held each other accountable, honored their Blackness during violence in academia, and owned their brilliance.

Other researchers illustrated how Black women's relationships with one another sustained them while in academia (e.g., Bacon, 2014; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Merriweather & Howell, 2022). Although these stories are critically important to understand Black women's experience in academia, these studies do not explicitly state how Black women experiences influence our mental health in doctoral programs. What I was interested in uncovering are the factors and forces that influence Black women's holistic wellness. Protective factors explain the strategies Black women use to survive academia (and in some cases, thrive). However, they do not explain what our experiences are with holistic health and wellness, and the causes of mental strain (beyond the stories of racism and sexism).

Literature Review Summary

I started Chapter 2 by reviewing the state of mental health and wellness for graduate students. Particularly, I uncovered graduate students encounter a host of different challenges that contribute to and detract from their overall wellness, including financial struggles, relationships with advisors, and balancing academic commitments (Byrom et al., 2020; Charles et al., 2022; Dinsmore & Roska, 2023; Evans et al., 2017; Fitch et al., 2011; Gin et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2023; Juniper et al., 2012; Lovitts, 2002; Posselt, 2021; Woolston, 2019). Exploring literature on graduate students' experiences provided context for Black women doctoral students. However, the literature was limited in that studies on graduate students did not aggregate data by race and gender. As such, it was pertinent to flesh out the experiences of Black women while pursuing their doctoral degree.

Literature on Black women doctoral students indicated we encounter racism and sexism, shift our personalities to accommodate peers and faculty different with different race and gender backgrounds, and face unfriendly academic environments (Dortch, 2016; Johnson-Bailey et al.,

2009; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Shavers & Moore, 2014a, 2014b). By illuminating the experiences of Black women in doctoral programs, I offered insight on the possible contributing factors for our mental health and wellness. Furthermore, I made the connection the experiences of Black women in academia (positive, negative, or in between) can ultimately influence our holistic mental health and wellness.

Though limited, I highlighted literature that specifically illustrated the state of mental health and wellness for Black women in the United States and Black women doctoral students. Literature about Black women in academia revealed several major concerns. The first concern is research on Black women doctoral students' holistic wellness is sparse. The lack of attention given to this population contributes to the erasure of our presence and experiences in academia. Second, much of the research available about Black women doctoral students centers our identities as a problem, without acknowledging how our identities bring joy and contribute to our wellness. Third, researchers who have explored the mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students have not focused on holistic wellness or have not made a direct connection to how our experiences have the potential to influence our overall wellness. Rather, researchers shared protective factors Black women employ to thrive in the academy (e.g., being in community with other Black women) without a clear focus on holistic wellness.

Throughout the literature review, I made the case that the research focusing on Black women doctoral students is often negative in nature and centers the gendered racialized experiences we have. By reviewing the literature, I make the case more research is needed understand the holistic wellness of Black women doctoral students and identify gaps in the current research.

Gap in the Literature

As I explored literature about graduate students' mental health and wellness and Black women doctoral students, a gap in the literature became very clear. The holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students are severely understudied, and the literature related to this topic is almost nonexistent. Furthermore, when the experiences of Black women in graduate programs are explored, it is often done through a deficit lens (Gallimore, 2022). Even in literature where researchers intend to highlight the success of Black women, the negative encounters we have in academia are still centered (e.g., Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). I understand due to the systemic racism and sexism embedded in U.S. culture studies where researchers examine the experiences of minoritized students will likely reveal hostile climates. However, it is the responsibility of researchers to ensure negative stories are not the only narratives put forth about Black women. My researcher contributed to literature by including Black women doctoral students in the literature about graduate student mental health and wellness. Additionally, I centered the varied experiences of Black women doctoral students and how experiences during their doctoral journey influences holistic mental health and wellness. Lastly, using Black feminist thought and Hettler's (1980, 1984) six dimensions of wellness, I uncover and explore the ways Black women doctoral students experience and define holistic mental health and wellness, which is needed to enrich the literature on graduate student wellness.

Conceptual Framework: Hettler's Six Dimensions of Wellness and Black Feminist Thought

I intentionally chose to frame the exploration the mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students work through two theoretical frameworks: Hettler's (1980, 1984) six dimensions of wellness and Black feminist thought. In the next section of this chapter, I provide

detailed information about my choice to use these two theoretical approaches to guide my work, and how my conceptual framework enhances the study.

Hettler's Six Dimensions of Wellness

In research about mental health and wellness, researchers tend to center medical diagnoses (e.g., bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety; Griffin et al., 2023). Although these elements are important to understand, it is also necessary to recognize the ways in which people experience holistic wellness. In an effort to focus attention on holistic wellness, and not just physical health, Hettler (1984) developed the six dimensions of wellness which encouraged institutional leaders to think about the different elements of overall wellness. Hettler (1984) defined wellness as "an active process through which individuals become aware of and make choices toward a more successful existence" (p. 13). The six dimensions of Hettler's model are: (a) social; (b) occupational; (c) spiritual; (d) physical; (e) intellectual; and (f) emotional.

Although Hettler's model was developed over 30 years ago, I find it particularly useful as it was developed specifically to address holistic wellness for college students. Hettler's work was perhaps ahead of its time. Serving as the director for university health services at the University of Wisconsin—Stephens, Hettler explained the comprehensive wellness program being developed and implemented at his institution (Hettler, 1984). In his work, he stressed the importance of administrators being intentional about supporting and encouraging college student wellness. Although Hettler's framework was developed for college students, there is very little research that uses this model to understand college student wellness, and I was unable to locate any literature on graduate student wellness using Hettler's model. According to Hettler (1984), it is the responsibility of institutional leaders to understand the elements of academic and social life that help and harm students, and to then enact policy to create change. Hettler (1984) asserted "It

seems ludicrous to prepare students for a lifetime career . . . and not prepare them for . . . maintaining their life" (p. 17). I agree with Hettler: institutional leaders must be thoughtful in understanding how students experience wellness and must enact measures to help students be proactive in managing their overall well-being. I assert a focus on holistic mental health and wellness should also extend to graduate students. One of the goals of my research is share examples and guides for Black women on how to maintain wellness holistically during the doctoral journey. Another one of my goals is to provide insight to faculty and staff about how to support the wellness of this population.

I chose to utilize Hettler's (1980, 1984) six dimensions of wellness for my study because of the intentional focus on college students. As college and university leaders begin to recenter mental health and wellness as a priority, it is helpful to use a model developed for college administrators with college student development in mind. However, I would be remiss if I did not mention the internal challenges I have with this framework. First, this model was developed specifically for undergraduate students. Hettler does not address graduate or doctoral students in the framework. By using Hettler's model, I expand the conversation about wellness to include graduate students, specifically Black women who pursued doctoral education. Second, Hettler is a white man in academia. Like many foundational student development theories developed by white men, understanding the social context and the experiences of students with marginalized identities is beyond the scope of his work. Additionally, the campus Hettler was on, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point (UWSP), is a historically white institution. Present day, UWSP is 86% white with only 2.2% of the student population identifying as a Black or African American (College Factual, Data Analytics, 2023). Hettler's understanding of student wellness was derived from white students' experiences and from his own perspectives which makes the six dimensions

model limited in its applicability to students who are not white or undergraduate. With these boundaries in mind, I overlay Black feminist thought (Collins, 1986, 2000) as part of my conceptual framework to situate Black women doctoral students' wellness and experiences in academia.

Black Feminist Thought

My decision to incorporate Black feminist thought as a theoretical underpinning for my research is multifold. First, as noted, the wellness framework by Hettler (1984) does not account for student identities. Because one of the purposes of Black feminist thought is to counter the invisibility of Black women (Collins, 1986, 2000), this framework allows me to bring forth the unique experiences of Black women doctoral students as it relates to holistic mental health and wellness. Second, Black feminist thought centers the voices and experiences of Black women. Specifically, leading scholars on Black feminist thought asserted how Black women view and experience the world is inevitably tied to our social identities (Allen, 2000; Collins, 1986, 1989, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Patterson et al., 2016). As such, Black women have a unique standpoint that can, and often does, enrich and elevate discourse about intersectionality and women's experiences (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). In the next section of this chapter, I illustrate the benefit of using Black feminist thought in the study by outlining the core tenets of the framework and explaining how it aligns with my doctoral research.

In Collins' (1986) seminal piece examining Black women's status as "outsiders within" (p. S14) she identified and defined three key themes of Black feminist thought: (a) self-valuation and self-definition, (b) interlocking nature of identities, and (c) the importance of culture. As explained by Collins (1986), "self-definition involves challenging the political knowledge-validation process that has resulted in externally-defined, stereotypical images of Afro-American

womanhood" (p. S16). Self-valuation and self-definition, then, is the idea Black women reject externally defined images and our assigned status in society (Collins, 1986). Stereotypes negatively define Black womanhood and are linked to the inhumane treatment of Black women (Collins, 1986). By rejecting external images and stereotypes, Black women honor our own humanity and exert the power and agency to define and create images of and for themselves. In the present study, I honor Black women's experiences with holistic mental health and wellness by amplifying their voices and showing the full range of our humanity as doctoral students. I plan to do this by allowing co-narrators to share their experiences that contributed and detracted from their overall wellness.

In the second tenet of Black feminist thought "interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression," Collins (1986) explained how identity cannot be disembodied (p. S19). The multiple parts of Black women's identities are interconnected and impact Black women's experiences. In this regard, Black women should reject notions that force the subordination of some identities over others (e.g., Black/white, male/female). The splintering of identities erases the compounded experiences of Black women and, ultimately, their humanity. Furthermore, dichotomous views of identity reinforce opposition between identities and notions one identity is better than the other (e.g., Black/white, male/female, rich/poor); Black women are often assigned the lesser half identity (Collins, 1986). This tenet is similar to the concept of intersectionality in that it honors how multiple forms of identity converge (Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991).

The final theme in Black feminist thought "involves efforts to redefine and explain the importance of Black women's culture" (Collins, 1986, p. S21). Asserting the importance of Black women's culture serves two purposes. First, it allows Black feminist scholars to highlight previously unexplored experiences of Black women (e.g., Black women doctoral students'

holistic mental health and wellness). Second, it identifies Black women's communities as spaces of sisterhood, support, and a place to cope with stressors related to marginalized identities. Although Black women are not a monolithic group, there are certain shared experiences among Black women that create a sense of sisterhood, political consciousness, and collective culture (Collins, 1986). By allowing co-narrators in the study to engage in conversation with other Black women doctoral students, I reveal the experiences of the group while also encouraging community amongst the co-narrators.

In addition to the four main tenets of Black feminist thought, there are other aspects of the theoretical framework that influence this work: concrete experiences as criterion meaning, the ethic of care, and dialogue to understand knowledge claims (Collins, 1989). Due to the proximity Black women have to white spaces, we understand whiteness intimately, despite being silenced and marginalized in those spaces (Collins,1986). Black women are the "outsider within" meaning, we have insider knowledge of a society that often pushes Black people to the margins (p. S14). Our knowledge, produced through our experiences in our Black bodies, is valid and valuable. Contemporary Black feminists asserted knowledge is gained not just through scientific methods but though observation and living (Collins, 1989, 2000). In the context of this study, I honor Black women doctoral students as knowledge sites, especially as it relates to what contributes to their own holistic mental health and wellness. This validates Black women's standpoints and creates space for the co-narrators to engage in self-definition, by describing and defining their mental health and wellness (which is directly related to Research Question 1).

As a qualitative researcher who understands Black women's voices and experiences are often left out of the literature, I approach this work with an ethic of care. As noted by Collins (1989), "the ethic of caring suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions and empathy are

central to the knowledge validation process" (p. 766). Discussing one's holistic health and wellness may evoke a range of emotions for the co-narrators. As a researcher, I hold space for their experiences and exercise empathy to honor the co-narrators' full humanity. In addition to an ethic of care, dialogue as a process to understand and validate knowledge is central to the proposed study. Narrative inquiry centers storytelling and the dialogic process between researchers and participants, which can yield rich data.

Other researchers have used Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework to understand the experiences of Black women in higher education. Grant (2012) used Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework to explore feelings of isolation in academia, development of mentoring relationships, and the multilayered identities of Black women doctoral students. By applying Black feminist thought to Black women doctoral students, the researcher was able to expose our nuanced and unique experiences. Patterson and colleagues (2017) also researched the experiences of Black women doctoral students using a qualitative approach and Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework. As discussed earlier in this literature review, their study revealed Black women's intersecting identities complicated our social experiences in doctoral education, authentic engagement with Black women faculty assisted in our academic socialization, and Black women doctoral students experienced internal challenges (e.g., lack of confidence and imposter syndrome) which impacted persistence (Patterson et al., 2017). Furthermore, Gooden and research associates (2020) studied the mentoring relationships of two Black women doctoral students and one of their Black male faculty members. The authors situated their ethnographic study in Black feminist thought to uncover and analyze how culturally responsive mentoring relations are vital for Black women doctoral students (Gooden et al., 2020). By incorporating Black feminist thought into my conceptual framework, I continue

the lens other scholars have used in exploring the experiences of Black women doctoral students. However, I have the opportunity to expand the use of Black feminist thought by focusing on holistic mental health and wellness by overlaying it with a wellness framework.

As researchers have discussed, the convergence of social identities (with race and gender at the center) create complex experiences for Black women (Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991; Gooden et al., 2020; Patterson et al., 2016). These intricate experiences produce unique vantage points, which allow Black women to define themselves, for themselves and develop their own forms of knowledge (Collins, 1986; Grant, 2012; Patterson et al., 2016). Black feminist thought centers around the idea Black women's identities are interconnected to one another. Researchers explained "the connectedness among individuals results in deeper, more meaningful forms of self-definition, empowerment, and solidarity" (Patterson, et al., 2016, p. 59). In this regard, the community Black women create among each other fosters self-definition, self-valuation, and kinship. In the context of my doctoral research interests, Black feminist thought alongside Hettler's (1980, 1984) six dimensions of wellness, allow me to uncover how the multiplicative identities of Black women impact their mental health and reveal their experiences in the academy.

Conceptual Framework Summary

I concluded this chapter with a focus on the conceptual framework that guides this study. I illustrated the usefulness of Hettler's (1980, 1984) six dimensions of wellness and why it is a fitting framework to understand the holistic wellness of Black women doctoral students. I also noted where this framework fell short and shared more about the incorporation of Black feminist thought. I identified the tenets of Black feminist thought and how overlaying this framework with Hettler's six dimensions, enables me to illuminate the specificity of Black women doctoral

students' mental health and wellness. In the next part of this study, I describe my methodological approach and methods.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore and develop a better understanding of the factors influencing Black women doctoral students' holistic mental health and wellness. Moreover, this research assisted in understanding how Black women's social identities influence their wellness during graduate school and the coping mechanisms they employ. The broad research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do Black women doctoral students and recent alumnae at Research 1 (R1) or Research 2 (R2) institutions in the mid-Atlantic region describe their mental health and wellness while pursuing their doctoral degree?
2. What contributed to and interfered with the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students and recent alumnae during their doctoral programs?

Black communities have a rich tradition of storytelling and dialogical communication (Collins, 1989; Jørgensen & Largacha-Martinez, 2014; Kelly et al., 2022). As such, using narrative inquiry to explore the mental health and wellness experiences of Black women doctoral students is a fitting methodological approach and helps to illuminate experiences in our own words. In this chapter, I describe the research design and methodological approach, and share a recap of the pilot study that influenced the design of this study.

Research Design

Research design is the process in which a researcher organizes, gathers, and analyzes data to better understand a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research allows richer and deeper understanding of a phenomenon, allowing the researcher and participants to elucidate a social reality (Yates & Leggett, 2016). In qualitative research, the researcher themselves are a key factor in the data collection process and they explore how people make

meaning of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007; Mertens, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2007; Yates & Leggett, 2016). Because my research questions focused on understanding how Black women doctoral students' experiences in graduate school influence their mental health and wellness, a qualitative approach was not only befitting, but necessary.

Epistemological Standpoint

The epistemological standpoint of a researcher informs the theoretical perspective, which in turn informs the methodology and methods of a research project (Glesne, 2016; Pallas, 2001). Therefore, I identify my epistemological stance before delving more deeply into the proposed research design.

As a qualitative researcher, my epistemological stance is a combination of both a constructivist and a critical worldview. Constructivism is the idea knowledge and meaning are subjective and are derived through people's lived experiences and interactions with others (Creswell, 2009; Jones et al., 2014). People construct meaning from the world around them and their social interactions. The goal of constructivist-based research is to allow participants and researchers to uncover, together, how participants have made meaning of a phenomenon in a complex world (Creswell, 2009; Jones et al., 2014; Mertens, 2005). Constructivism allows researchers and participants to define multiple truths and acknowledge the complexity of a social environment (Creswell, 2009).

Similar to a constructivism epistemology, a critical paradigm adheres to the idea meaning is made through lived experiences. However, systems of power and oppression influence how individuals experience the world (Collins,1986; Crenshaw, 1991; Walkington, 2017). The goal of critical researchers is to not only uncover injustices but also to actively create change (Jones et al., 2014). My epistemological stance exists between constructivism and a critical paradigm, as I

believe there are multiple truths, and the sociopolitical context affects how we experience the world around us. Race, gender, age, ability, religious beliefs, and other social identities undoubtedly shape how we experience and interpret our experiences, whether consciously or unconsciously. This standpoint is what led me not just to qualitative research but also to the methodological approach of narrative inquiry. Black women doctoral students may have shared identities, but we may experience similar phenomena differently; thus, each of the co-narrator stories were unique.

My epistemological standpoint also influenced the choice to use Black feminist thought as part of my conceptual framework. One of the tenets of Black feminist thought, which is explored in more Chapter 2, is the interlocking nature of oppression (Collins, 1986, 1989). This concept is closely related to the idea of intersectionality. Crenshaw (1991), a critical, Black feminist and legal scholar created the term intersectionality to identify how Black women experience simultaneous oppression due to their racial and gendered identities. Collins (1986, 1989) extended her Black feminist thought work to include the concept of intersectionality, which allows for the examination of how race, gender, class, and other oppressed identities, shape the experiences of Black women. Using Black feminist thought, in concert with narrative inquiry, allowed me to uncover the experiences Black women share because of their intersecting identities of race and gender, in addition to other intersecting identities that shape and inform their well-being (i.e., socioeconomic class, sexuality, nationality).

Narrative Inquiry

Storytelling has long been a tradition of communities of color and human culture (Daiute, 2014). In fact, in various African communities, storytelling was a daily, central part of preserving history and culture (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021; Tuwe, 2016). In the research sector,

narrative inquiry can be viewed as a formalized process of storytelling which enables researchers to utilize stories to uncover the complexities of the human experience in a social context (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Creswell, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1995; Squire et al., 2013). By using narratives to depict the experiences of participants, researchers present a full picture of participants using their own words and describe the "differences and diversity of people's behavior" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 11). A person's story, and how it is told and retold, is a salient component of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Creswell, 2009; Daiute, 2014; Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative inquiry focuses primarily on "*what* is told within a story or *how* the story is told" (Pitre et al., 2013, p. 119). Narrative inquiry researchers deconstruct stories and language to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives (Hickson, 2016). The story, also referred to as personal narratives, is a tool used to convey and share the human experience and to make sense of our realities (McAlpine, 2016; Polkinghorne 2007). Employing this methodology to explore the experiences of Black women doctoral students' mental health and wellness feels inherently apropos, as it aligns with various Black cultures and with the conceptual framework.

To further illustrate the need to utilize narrative inquiry as the methodological approach to explore the mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students, I draw on the work and story of a Nigerian author, Chimanda Ngozi Adichie. Adichie (2009) facilitated a Ted Talk where she focused on the danger of a single story. She explained how single narratives about various groups of people, particularly Africans, are harmful and perpetuates a lack of understanding. Repeated stories about a group of people—good, bad, or otherwise—reinforce a single story. The perpetuation of single stories is an issue of power. She explained:

> How [stories] are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. (Adiche, 2009, n.p.)

I contend there are many single narratives of Black women in America: Black women are strong, magical, welfare queens, mammies, sexually promiscuous, and the list goes on (Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2011). These narratives make it difficult for Black women to present themselves in other ways. In an academic setting, the stories and experiences of Black women and other marginalized groups have historically been left out of academic research. Similar to Adichie's (2009) description of who has the power to tell stories, Daiute (2014) asserted, "it is through storytelling that societies indicate who belongs and who does not" (p. 7). By nature of telling the stories of Black women doctoral students, I assert Black women matter while also shining light on their unique experiences in academia.

Dimensions and Types of Narrative Inquiry

There are three core dimensions of narrative inquiry, also referred to as commonplaces: temporality, social context, and place (Clandinin et al., 2007). To engage in narrative inquiry effectively and thoroughly, researchers must tend to the three commonplaces (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). In addition to commonplaces, there are three different approaches researchers take in understanding commonplaces and drawing out personal narratives: event-centered, experience-centered, and sociocultural approaches. Next, I explore the core dimensions of narrative inquiry, the types of approaches of narrative inquiry, and how these concepts are connected to one another.

Temporality

In narrative inquiry, researchers acknowledge the temporality (or time) associated with people. That is, people are connected to specific events and all events are connected to the past, the present, or the future (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin et al., 2007). Experiences should be understood on a continuum because people transition from one time to another (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin et al., 2007). When retelling the stories of participants, the sequence of events is vital to understanding the story (Clandinin et al., 2007).

Social Context

Sociality, or social context, is the idea a person's environment and conditions shape their individual context (Clandinin et al., 2007). Sociality is the setting in which a person's story unfolds (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Influenced by societal and environmental factors, "social conditions are understood, in part, in terms of cultural, social, institutional, and linguistic narratives" (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 436). Sociality is also influenced by the narrative inquirer's social identities. Much like authors of Black feminist thought asserted Black women cannot separate their race from their gender (Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991), narrative inquiry researchers asserted narrative inquiry researchers cannot separate themselves from the relationship to the participant (Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Daiute, 2014).

Place

Place refers to the physical location of where a story unfolds. As explained by Clandinin and Huber (2010), every event occurs somewhere. That is, the events people experience happen in a physical location. Though place is a crucial element of narrative inquiry, it is one of the more challenging elements for researchers to focus on due to the data collection process. Unless a researcher is conducting observations as a mode of data collection, place is not as easily

accessible to the researchers. Researchers must rely on participants to share their experiences in relation to a place. In the context of this study, the multiple places Black women are present in academia (e.g., a classroom, their academic labs, advisor's offices) make it challenging to report on the physical location of their experiences.

The three commonplaces are inextricably linked to how narrative inquirers approach data collection. In the next part of this proposal, I explain the different approaches to narrative inquiry and how they are tied to the core dimensions of the methodology.

Event-Centered Approach

The Labovian approach to narrative inquiry is focused on personal narratives that center events (Patterson, 2013; Squire, 2013). For Labov, the event-centered approach to personal narratives is connected to temporality and elucidates feelings associated with a singular time in someone's life (Patterson, 2013). This form of narrative inquiry limits participants to discussing a specific event, as researchers are only interested in a particular occurrence (Patterson, 2013). For example, if using an event-centered approach to personal narratives when studying Black women doctoral students, participants may be asked to reflect on a particular class, or a specific event in their doctoral program.

Experience-Centered Narratives

Personal narratives that focus on experiences are better suited to uncover the breadth of lived experiences (Patterson, 2013; Squire, 2013). Experience-centered narratives allow participants to explore multiple significant events in their lives, rather than just one (Squire, 2013). This particular approach is connected to the core dimensions of temporality and place. In this type of narrative, the assumption is "experience can, through stories, become part of consciousness" (Squire, 2013, p. 48). Expanding on the previous example, if using an

experience-centered approach to personal narratives when studying Black women doctoral students, participants may be asked to reflect on their experiences in academia rather than a singular class or event in their doctoral program.

Sociocultural Approach

Although the sociocultural approach to personal narratives is also experience-centered, it focuses on the social and cultural conditions of the storyteller (McAlpine, 2016; Squire, 2013). The act of storytelling has the power to create and shape public life and social context (Daiute, 2014). Narrative researchers must acknowledge "stories operate within 'interpretive communities' . . . that are political as well as cultural" (Squire, 2013, p. 62). This means researchers must tend to personal and social conditions (i.e., the sociality) of the storyteller and the listener (Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Squire, 2013). Who and where people are influences how they make sense of and tell their stories. Using a sociocultural approach to draw out personal narratives, Black women doctoral students may be asked to reflect on how their social identities impact their experiences in academia.

In this study, I utilized a combination of the sociocultural and experience-centered approach to gather and analyze personal narratives. The combination of these approaches allows me to focus on identity and also create space for participants to share general experiences that may or may not be related to their social identities.

A Critical Narrative Perspective

As noted, I utilized a sociocultural and experience-centered approach to explore the lived experiences of Black women doctoral students. However, because my epistemological stance is situated between constructivist and critical, I inevitably viewed the data through a critical lens. A critical narrative perspective enables the researcher to acknowledge and expose the role power

and sociopolitical context plays in the lived experiences of participants, and also being cognizant of the power dynamic between the researcher and research collaborators (Creswell, 2003; Hickson, 2016; Jones et al., 2014). A goal of critical research is to use the data that emerges to enact tangible change (Jones et al., 2014).

Additionally, critical social perspectives and approaches to research bolster the need to resituate human beings as narrators and emancipators of their own stories and social conditions (Sonday et al., 2020). The practice of narrative inquiry requires researchers to acknowledge stories are situated in a social context. Because stories "do not spring from the minds of individuals but are social creations" (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 18), using a critical perspective to explore and understand stories is not only appropriate but necessary.

A critical narrative perspective allowed me to craft interview questions that examine how intersections of identity influence participants' experiences in academia, which may influence their wellness. Furthermore, a critical paradigmatic perspective creates space to more deeply understand and analyze participants' stories because of the strong focus on the social conditions that influence how people make meaning of their experiences (Hickson, 2016; Sonday et al., 2020). Utilizing a critical perspective aligns with the methodological approach and the conceptual framework guiding this study: Black feminist thought and Hettler's (1980, 1984) six dimensions of wellness.

The researcher's epistemological standpoint must be tied to the research design, as should the methodology and theoretical framework (Jones et al., 2014). Using narrative inquiry alongside Black feminist thought and Hettler's (1980, 1984) six dimensions of wellness creates an opportunity for Black women to collect, write, analyze, theorize, and heal from our stories and experiences by creating space for and highlighting the various ways Black women exist and

experience wellness in academia (Baker-Bell, 2017, p. 531; Jørgensen & Largacha-Martinez, 2014). A benefit of Black feminist thought is it allows for the examination of the intersectionality of Black women's identities and acknowledging the simultaneous presence of strength, success, oppression, and resistance inherent in Black women's experiences in the academy (Evans-Winters, 2019). In other words, Black feminist thought enables researchers to explore the full experience of Black women, which is a goal of this work. Pairing Black feminist thought with narrative inquiry and Hettler's six dimensions of wellness creates an opportunity to thoroughly and intimately explore and analyze how Black women doctoral students describe and experience wellness. The interconnected nature of all aspects of the study, including the research questions, conceptual framework, methodology, and presentation of data enhances the overall research design.

To ensure I crafted my study in a way that aligns with a narrative inquiry methodological approach, I sought out research that also utilized a narrative methodology to serve as examples for my work. Research on Black women doctoral students is limited. The use of narrative inquiry to explore the wellness of Black women doctoral students is even more sparse. However, I was able to find one research project where the author utilized narrative inquiry to explore Black women in academia. This dissertation, in addition to my pilot study, helped inform the development of my study. Below I describe the study and share how it influenced the present dissertation proposal.

Studies on Black Women Graduate Students

Using narrative inquiry as a methodological approach in her dissertation research, Gallimore (2022) sought to understand how Black women graduate students (BWGS) in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) at historically Black colleges and universities

(HBCUs) defined, made meaning of, and enacted their holistic well-being. The researcher was also interested in how STEM academic learning environments influenced the wellness of BWGS. Holistic well-being in this study was defined as how individuals "set boundaries in their daily lives by centering their culture, race, gender, and other salient identities that allow them to show up authentically and holistically" (Gallimore, 2022, p. 2). This study incorporated students pursuing both their master's and doctoral degrees. Similar to my proposed study, Gallimore (2022) also stressed the importance of not exploring Black women graduate students through a deficit lens.

The research questions of this study were:

> 1. How do Black women in graduate STEM programs at HBCUs make meaning of their holistic well-being? 2. In what ways have STEM learning environments at HBCUs influences BWGS holistic well-being? 3.What strategies, if any, have Black women used in their graduate STEM programs at HBCUs to nurture their holistic well-being?" (Gallimore, 2022, p. 80)

These questions are very similar to my research questions, which makes this study useful as a dissertation model. The conceptual framework used in this study is a psychological framework for radical healing and a Black feminist epistemology. Although this conceptual framework differs from what I used, it is similar in it has a Black feminist thought foundation and centers wellness.

Gallimore (2022) selected a total of seven women to participate in her study, four of which were doctoral students and three were masters' students; all students attended HBCUs. The participants majored in different areas in the STEM field, including robotics, biomedical engineering, and neuroscience. Participants of Gallimore's study completed five weekly blogs

and participated in two focus groups (each lasted over 60 minutes). The researcher did not conduct interviews; rather, she utilized focus groups and blogs to allow the participants to creatively express their experiences in academia.

Findings of the study revealed Black women graduate students in STEM connected their holistic wellness to various aspects of health, including mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being. Several of the participants (three) used language of "being in a good headspace" to define their holistic well-being (Gallimore, 2022, p. 140). Additionally, participants described strategies to maintain holistic well-being as being in community with others (family and friends) and being away from their academic environments. Participants also differentiated between self-care and self-maintenance, which was critical for the participants to accurately define holistic wellness.

Participants of the study also reflected on the strong Black women archetype and how that influenced their wellness and other people's perception of Black women graduate students. Participants actively chose to redefine or disassociate themselves with the SBW archetype in an effort to protect and preserve their wellness. Specifically, participants were open to expressing their emotions (which was in direct contrast to the SBW narrative), seeking therapy, and setting boundaries to protect their peace. Because all the participants attended HBCUs, the author shared how the findings revealed the academic environment as a whole was affirming to the students' identities. Peer support, being in classes with students with the same racial identities, and faculty affirming behaviors were all a part of the affirming environment at the participants' respective institutions.

The dissertation concluded with Gallimore (2022) making direct suggestions to Black women on what we can do to ensure we maintain our wellness while in graduate school. She

intentionally directed her suggestions to Black women because of her Black feminist epistemological stance (i.e., the academic work she produced is for the benefit of Black women). Her recommendations included reminding Black women to find joy outside of the academic setting, make rest a priority, and find and build community with people who can provide support for both the good and bad times. After addressing Black women doctoral students, Gallimore urged researchers to utilize culturally relevant methods and frameworks when researching BWGS. She also stressed the importance of exploring how varying dimensions of Black women's lives influence our wellness, how the socialization process in graduate school affects Black women, and how faculty and staff can be intentional about supporting this population.

The study conducted by Gallimore (2022) further confirmed the need for my dissertation work. As noted in her work and throughout Chapter 2, studies about Black women graduate students are sparse (Gallimore, 2022). By using narrative inquiry as a methodological approach, Gallimore (2022) highlighted the voices and stories of the participants in her study, in their own words. Gallimore's study affirmed my methodological choice by reiterating narrative inquiry centers the voices and experiences of the participants. Gallimore and I share the sentiment the approach to studying Black women in academic spaces often uses a deficit model. Additionally, this study was helpful in confirming the need to examine the various aspects of students' lives that can ultimately influence wellness. Although Gallimore's work centered the experiences of Black women graduate students, only three of her participants were doctoral students. I focused on doctoral students only, which allowed for a more in-depth approach to understanding and uncovering our stories, and how our academic experiences influence our overall well-being. Additionally, my study represented various institutional types (e.g., HWCUs and HBCUs), which allows the researcher to explore how institutional contexts may influence wellness.

In addition to reviewing Gallimore's (2022) work to assist in the development of my doctoral research, I also gleaned learnings from my pilot study. Next, I share the pilot study and how it influenced this study.

Pilot Study

During the spring of 2020, I conducted a pilot study where I examined how Black women doctoral students created community amongst each another. This study was part of a class assignment and the foundation for the development of my dissertation research. The research questions guiding the pilot study were: 1) How do students in doctoral programs who self-identify as Black women experience community, and 2) How might these experiences influence persistence? The frameworks guiding the pilot study were Black feminist thought (Collins, 1986) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). I chose these two theories to frame the study in hopes it would allow me to uncover and examine the nuanced experiences of Black women in academia.

The methodological approach for the pilot study was Black feminist/womanist storytelling and elements of narrative inquiry. Black feminist/womanist storytelling is rooted in linguistics and the cultural value of storytelling (Baker-Bell, 2017). This approach is flexible and allows the researcher to determine how they want to approach data collection. As a novice researcher at the time, the lack of structure of the methodological approach made me uneasy, so I also utilized aspects of narrative inquiry. Like Black feminist/womanist storytelling, narrative inquiry has a focus on stories. More research was available on methods associated with narrative inquiry data collection. Given the relevance of Black feminist/womanist storytelling, I did not want to abandon this approach altogether. Rather, I felt combining these methodological approaches would strengthen the study and center the experiences of Black women doctoral students.

I utilized purposive criterion sampling to find individuals who met the criteria of the study (Creswell, 2009; Jones et al., 2014). Students interested in participating in the study were sent a consent form, and after the consent form was signed and returned, the interviews occurred. I conducted semi-structured interviews with two participants who self-identified as Black women and were enrolled full-time as doctoral students at a mid-Atlantic university. Although both participants were enrolled in education related disciplines, the programs were in two different departments with very different curricula.

Pilot study interviews were conducted online through a web-conferencing platform and were audio recorded. Because narrative inquiry methods are typically more relational in nature (Clandinin & Huber, 2010), virtual interviews are not a desired mode of data collection as it does not allow for the researcher to capture nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and other relevant body movements. However, circumstances (i.e., COVID-19 global pandemic) did not permit traditional in-person data collection methods. I did my best to pay attention to verbal cues, such as tone and laughter, to understand and illustrate participant stories.

Interviews consisted of about seven interview questions, excluding follow-up questions. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Interview records were professionally transcribed. I reviewed each transcript and interview audio to correct any errors and to become familiar with the data. Although utilizing multiple data gathering techniques yields richer data (Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Glesne, 2016), I was unable to use other data collection methods due to the COVID-19 global pandemic; interviews were the sole data collection method in the pilot study.

During interviews “participants are asked to tell their stories in a variety of ways: by responding to more or less structured interview questions; by engaging in conversation or

dialog" (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 437). In the pilot study, many of the interview questions asked the participant to provide a story that highlighted an experience. For example, interview questions included: "Tell me about yourself and your doctoral journey. Is there a story that stands out about how you entered the doctoral program or how it has been going so far? Why this particular story?" These types of questions allowed the participant to share more than just their experience, but also their stories.

Pilot Study Findings

Three salient themes emerged from the pilot study: relationships with advisors had an impact on their overall graduate student experiences, Black women doctoral students often experienced isolative environments, and Black women doctoral students were intentional about creating relationships with one another to thrive in their doctoral programs. These findings aligned with broader research about Black women in graduate school (e.g., Gay, 2004; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2004) and served as an impetus for exploring Black women doctoral student mental health and wellness. Before delving into how the pilot study influenced my dissertation interests, I outline the findings and themes from the pilot study.

Relationships With Advisors

A prominent and common thread present in both participants' stories was the role their advisor played in their doctoral journey. One participant described how she relied on her advisor for support and guidance in navigating academia, for better or for worse. Another participant shared how her advisor did not make her feel welcomed or supported. Both participants indicated the relationship they developed with their advisors was important for them to feel acclimated to their department and had the potential to exacerbate other negative experiences they faced in academia. One participant had such a negative experience she requested a change in advisor.

Although not explicitly stated, the participants' interactions with their advisors influenced their holistic wellness and overall satisfaction with their programs. This finding aligns with emerging research principal investigators (PIs) and academic advisors have potential to influence the mental health and wellness of their students (Griffin et al., 2023; Maher et al., 2020).

Isolative Environments

Participants of the study also expressed experiencing isolation inside and outside of the classroom. Both participants described how their racial and gender identities influenced how they were treated by other students, faculty, and/or staff in their respective departments. Negative comments from peers and dismissive interactions with faculty led both participants to feel disconnected and isolated from their programs, and ultimately pushed them to seek community with other Black women. Black doctoral students who experienced isolation and racialized experiences have reported high levels of stress and anxiety (McGee et al., 2019). The isolating environments experienced by the participants in the pilot study led me to question how those experiences ultimately influenced their overall mental health and wellness.

Intentional Community Building

Both participants in the study explicitly stated their desire and intentionality around building community with others who shared their racialized and gendered identities or similar interests. The combination of their respective communities having shared identities and shared interests positively impacted the participants' academic experiences. The Black women in their communities helped the participants navigate difficult academic situations, allowed space for them to debrief their shared experiences and ultimately provided a space for them to fully exist as Black women doctoral students. Additionally, both participants discussed needing and finding balanced support that promoted their emotional well-being.

Pilot Study Implications for Dissertation

The pilot study revealed several things about how I would like to move forward with my doctoral research. First, it helped me realize community among Black women doctoral students—which was a central focus in the pilot study—was an outcome of some of the experiences in their programs. When the participants experienced negative interactions with their advisors or peers in their programs, they turned to each other for support. These findings piqued my interests in how Black women doctoral students experience wellness, and what were the factors that contribute to their holistic mental health and wellness, both inside and outside of the classroom. The pilot study participants sought support with other Black women in their respective programs to help them to maintain their wellness, which seemed to be a source of joy. However, I did not ask questions specifically about wellness; I solely focused on how Black women formed community with one another and why. It was not until after the study concluded I realized forming community is a protective factor in managing wellness (Cook &Williams, 2015; Lewis et al., 2013).

Second, the data collection methods did not allow for an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences. Although the interview questions were helpful in drawing out stories, one 45-to-60-minute interview is not enough to gain a deep understanding of participant experiences. Understanding the limitations of the data collection process, I was able to think more critically about how I planned to collect data for my dissertation to ensure I gathered rich data. Specifically, the interview protocol included more than seven questions and I used multiple modes of data collection (e.g., interviews, a focus group and review of written narratives).

Lastly, I realized I needed more structure for my methodological approach. Although Black feminist/womanist storytelling is a powerful methodology to uncover and retell the stories

of Black women, the lack of structure made me feel lost on how to effectively collect data. Narrative inquiry provides the structure I need, which is why it is the methodology of choice for my doctoral research. The pilot study helped solidify my use of criterion sampling, and semi-structured interviews, and the methodological approach of narrative inquiry.

Methods

In the methods section, I outlined the data collection methods used in the present study. I explained the techniques used to attract potential participants, participant criteria and the data collection methods. I also highlight the importance of Black women doctoral students reflecting on their experiences to explore their wellness.

Recruitment Methods and Co-Narrator Criteria

I utilized purposive criterion sampling to recruit individuals who meet the criteria of the study (Creswell, 2009; Jones et al., 2014). Purposive criterion sampling is the intentional act of seeking participants that can assist in yielding information rich cases that can generate a deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009; Jones et al., 2014; Rapley, 2014). In addition to criterion sampling, I asked co-narrators to share information about the study with their peers. This method of recruiting is known as snowball sampling (Krathwohl, 1991). I began recruitment during the summer of 2023, after I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Participants of this study must: (a) identify as a Black or African American cisgender woman, (b) be a current PhD student who has completed coursework at a Research 1 (R1) or Research 2 (R2) institution or recently completed a doctoral program in the last 6 months at a R1 or R2 institution, and (c) attend/attended school in the mid-Atlantic region. I selected R1 and R2 institutions because these institutional types engage in high levels of research. The focus on

research may have an impact on a student's doctoral experience and perhaps their overall wellness.

The various stages of doctoral degree attainment present different challenges. In phase 1, doctoral students are adjusting to coursework and navigating academic socialization (Gardner, 2009; Pifer & Baker, 2016). In phase 2 of doctoral training, students have completed "coursework, candidacy exams, and the dissertation proposal development and defense" (Pifer & Baker, 2016, p. 20). In phase 3 of doctoral training, students are actively conducting dissertation research, writing the dissertation, preparing for their dissertation defense, and engaging in the job search process (Gardner, 2009; Pifer & Baker, 2016). In this study, I focused on students who are in phases 2 or 3 of their doctoral journey which would allow co-narrators to reflect times during their doctoral journey that influenced their wellness. Phases 2 and 3 are where doctoral students may experience high levels of stress as they complete coursework, prepare to defend their proposal, and search for jobs (Gardner, 2009; Pifer & Baker, 2016). Additionally, I invited recent completers to share their "reflective perspective" (Kelly et al., 2021, p. 435) on their holistic wellness at different stages of their doctoral journey as this enables co-narrators to think through what contributed to their mental health and wellness during their program.

As I think about Black women doctoral students reflecting on their experiences, Mahalia Jackson's song *How I Got Over* comes to mind. This gospel song, which was part of the real-time soundtrack to the civil rights movement, highlights how Black people, and Black women in particular, are able to endure and triumph over difficult circumstances. Black women in academia use different methods to survive academia (Jackson, n.d.). The present study allowed participants to reflect on the tools they used to maintain their wellness and make it through their respective doctoral programs (Jackson, n.d.). Reflections allow researchers to gain a deeper

understanding of how participants made meaning of their past experiences (Hickson, 2016). Additionally, asking people to participate in reflective activities is a tool used in therapy (Evans et al., 2017). Although this study does not aim to serve as therapy, utilizing this approach aligns with managing holistic wellness, as sharing experiences can be cathartic in nature, allowing for release and relief. Lastly, interviewing current students and recent completers who have successfully navigated the various phases of the doctoral degree provided an opportunity for richer and thicker data, as participants can reflect on different parts of their doctoral journey that may have contributed to or detracted from overall wellness.

In this study, mid-Atlantic refers to the following states/cities: Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C. Seventeen percent of the Black population in the United States resides in the mid-Atlantic region, which is second only to the south (Tamir, 2021). Furthermore, 32.2.% of Black people who hold a bachelor's degree live in Washington, D.C. (Headlight Data, 2016). Additionally, the mid-Atlantic region is home to approximately 59 research institutions (R1 & R2 Research Institutions, 2023). Given Black women earn post-baccalaureate degrees at a higher rate than their male counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2022), there is a large population of Black people in the mid-Atlantic region, and there are over 50 respective high-level institutions in the mid-Atlantic region; it stands to reason this region allows for rich data to emerge in a study about Black women doctoral students.

To solicit participation in the study, an email was sent to various institutional representatives (i.e., faculty, staff, and student groups) asking them to share information about the study with their stakeholders. An example of a recruitment email can be found in Appendix A. Additionally, I distributed a recruitment flyer (see Appendix B) to my professional and social

networks to help amplify recruitment efforts. Potential co-narrators were sent an electronic demographic questionnaire to ensure they met the criteria of the study. Survey data were collected through Qualtrics. I confirmed the interest of potential co-narrators who met the criteria of the study and scheduled a 60 to 90-minute interview. A copy of the demographic questionnaire is available in Appendix C. Co-narrators were offered a $40 Visa or Amazon gift card for participation once they completed the demographic survey, written prompt, and two interviews.

Data Collection

Next, I highlighted the data collection methods used in the present study. I explained how in-depth interviews and narrative activities were fitting for this work. Additionally, I shared the sample size of the present study, the data analysis process, and my positionality as a researcher. I also explored the validity and trustworthiness of the study, and the strengths and bounds of the present work. I conclude with a chapter summary.

Interviews

Focus groups, interviews, and observations are traditional data collection methods for narrative inquiry (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). Aligned with a narrative inquiry approach, I conducted two semi-structured virtual interviews with co-narrators. Although virtual interviews are not ideal for narrative inquiry, it does enable the researcher to have a wider reach. Because the target population of the study were Black women doctoral students in the mid-Atlantic region, a region spanning several different states, being able to conduct virtual interviews was necessary. Black feminist thought and narrative inquiry encourages researchers to pay attention to what is said and what is unsaid. To tend to this, I recorded audio and visual during the interviews so I could review the footage to assist in understanding unspoken cues. Additionally, I

took notes during the interviews and captured when a response felt like there was a deeper meaning. When appropriate, I probed to dig deeper. An interview protocol for both the first and second interview can be found in Appendices D and E.

Interviews were conducted during the summer of 2023, following IRB approval. Interviews allow co-narrators to share their stories in their own words, by creating space for participants to engage in dialogue (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Additionally, co-narrators highlighted experiences or events meaningful to them by focusing on specific stories, events, and time-periods (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Conducting two interviews allowed me to dig deeper into the participants experiences and uncover their lived experiences and stories.

Narrative Activity

In addition to two interviews, via email, co-narrators were asked to share a meme or gif that described their mental health during their time in graduate school; the image was discussed during the first interview (see prompt in Appendix F). Although co-narrators were asked to share an image prior to the interview, if for some reason they were unable to, they could pull up an image during the interview. Adding this narrative activity achieves multiple goals. First, it allows participants to reflect on their experiences prior to their individual interview. Second, collecting memes/gifs offers another method to construct and make meaning of the participants' stories (Daiute, 2014; Kortegast et al., 2019). Utilizing different forms of narrating activities enables the researcher to expand their understanding of participant experiences and gain insight that may not be gained in other ways (Daiute, 2014). Lastly, utilizing visual data collection methods (such as collecting images) rejects hegemonic norms of data collection and knowledge production (Kortegast et al., 2019). Asking participants to share an image that resonates with their mental health was guided by the research questions and literature from narrative inquirers (e.g., Daiute,

2014) who encourage researchers to use multiple forms of narrative activities. Additionally, racialized minoritized women doctoral students exert a lot of labor (Miller & Roska, 2020). Allowing coresearchers to submit a meme or gif as a narrative activity hopefully felt less like extra labor for the participants and more like an opportunity to share their story in a creative way. Though it is a playful activity, responses to the narrative activity allowed participants to think about the current state of their wellness.

Using multiple narrative activities—two interviews and submitting a gif or meme—enabled the participants to reflect on an event in a thoughtful way and also produces different forms of data (Daiute, 2014). More than one data collection method allows researchers to triangulate data, which aids in the trustworthiness and validity of a study (Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Creswell, 2009; Glesne, 2016).

Sample Size

Researchers should select a sample size that will allow for saturation of the data or coverage (Jones et al., 2014). Previous research conducted on Black women doctoral students has included sample sizes that range from two to 48. For the present study, my goal was to have between eight to 12 participants. Although it was impossible to know prior to starting data collection if this sample size would allow me reach coverage or saturation of data, a smaller sample size allows for deeper and richer data, as researchers are able to spend more time with participants and tend to the different elements of the research process. In narrative inquiry, to "attend to people, places, and events" during data collection process, a smaller sample size is necessary (Clandinin et al., 2007, p. 27). After the recruitment process, nine co-narrators participated in the study. Initially there were 10 participants; however, it was discovered one of the participants did not meet all of the requirements therefore she was omitted from the sample

population. A sample size of nine participants was manageable for me as a single researcher, and it was also appropriate given my research methodology. Additionally, it allowed me to conduct longer, more in-depth interviews which aided in my ability to be exhaustive in my storytelling. With nine co-narrators, I was able to reach saturation.

Data Analysis and Management

In qualitative research, data is often analyzed as it is being collected (Creswell, 2007; Jones et al., 2014), which is what I did in this study. During and after interviews, I wrote memos that captured my thoughts and responses to the interview. Memoing allows researchers to uncover patterns in the data and capture researcher thoughts (Creswell, 2007). I sent data to co-narrators to confirm meaning and add clarity. As noted by Evans-Winters (2019), "writing and reading the lives of Black . . . women should be . . . communal . . . and must be conversational" (p. 69). As such, data analysis about Black women in academia must be done with Black women in academia, as it adds to the validation of the research (Evans-Winters, 2019).

Because the interviews were hosted and recorded on Zoom, a transcription of the interview was provided at the conclusion of each meeting. However, the Zoom transcripts needed to be checked for accuracy. As such, for five of the participants, I reviewed the automated Zoom transcripts and listened to the audio to ensure accuracy. I made edits as needed. Given the length of time this took, I solicited the support of an independent transcription contractor, a Black woman, who completed the transcriptions for the remaining four co-narrators.

After the interview data were transcribed, they were sent to co-narrators to complete member checks. None of the co-narrators responded to the member-check requests. The transcripts were then uploaded to a Google Drive (e.g., Google sheets or Google docs) into

folders. My Google drive is password protected and only accessible by me. I only accessed the data from my password protected personal laptop. This aided in the protection of the data and helped maintain confidentiality. The data of each co-narrator (interviews and researcher memos) were saved with their pseudonym as the title on my secured Google drive.

Using a combination of an inductive and deductive coding, I reviewed the data and developed a preliminary codebook to guide the coding process (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). Inductive coding allows the researcher to explore the ideas in the data and to identify patterns driven by what the data reveals (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022; Jones et al., 2014). Deductive coding is the process by which a researcher creates codes based on theory prior to data analysis, organizes data by categories, and applies theoretical frameworks (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). Utilizing both inductive and deductive coding processes allowed me to stay close to the stories emerging from the data and also overlay my conceptual framework to deepen my understanding of the data. After the codebook was developed based on the inductive and deductive codes, I uploaded them to a qualitative data coding platform, Dedoose. I also uploaded the individual transcripts to Dedoose to assist me in further organizing and coding all the data. Additionally, I saved the images from the narrative activity on a secure folder; these data were not uploaded to Dedoose.

After data was coded and analyzed, I presented the findings by developing full narratives of the co-narrators. Using direct quotes from co-narrators, and centering their experiences, I retold the stories of the co-narrators and offered my interpretation of the data. A person's story, and how it is told and retold is a salient component of narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2007; Daiute, 2014). As a narrative inquiry researcher, I deconstructed stories and language to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives (Hickson, 2016). Employing this methodology to

explore the experiences of Black women doctoral students' mental health and wellness felt inherently appropriate as it aligns with various Black cultures and with the conceptual framework. The data that emerged from this study provides university administrators, faculty, and staff with a deeper understanding of the experiences of Black women doctoral students and what is needed to support them. Most importantly, this study gives Black women doctoral students and recent completers deeper insight into our own experiences and how to navigate our holistic wellness while in graduate school.

Researcher Positionality

All researchers have a positionality, whether it is explicitly stated or not. Qualitative researchers are considered "reflexive practitioner[s]" who are "aware of [their] own political and cultural perspectives, yet willing to engage in self-questioning and self-understanding" (Yates & Leggett, 2016, p. 225). As such, it is imperative for qualitative researchers to develop a positionality statement.

In narrative inquiry, researchers are encouraged to provide a personal justification for the study (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Personal justification situates the study in the context of the researchers' own life and personal experiences. In critical research, investigators are encouraged to practice reflexivity, which is understanding how the researcher's personal background may influence the research process (Hickson, 2016). Researchers must reveal their identities in relation to the study being examined (Jones et al., 2014), therefore, the concepts of personal justification, reflexivity, and positionality are connected.

As a heterosexual, cisgendered Black woman in a doctoral program, my identities are closely related to my interest in this research project. First and foremost, I care for Black people deeply. I have always wanted my scholarship to center the rich lives of Black people. I entered

academia with the goal of serving as a truth-teller and witness to and for the Black community. My belief *all* Black Lives Matter, and Black liberation is intertwined with our wellness. and education, is, in part, what led me to my research topic.

Second, I love Black women. Although I resist the urge to own the term "Black girl magic" because of the dissonance I feel with how such labels can be unintentionally harmful, I know, unequivocally, Black women (and girls) are indeed magical. The arcane nature of Black womanhood brings my life joy and I feel it is my responsibility to the collective sisterhood of Black women to share our stories, especially stories that have the power to bring healing.

Last, my own journey to holistic wellness is what sparked my curiosity about other Black women doctoral students' experiences with wellness. Specifically, during the 4th year of my doctoral program, I realized I was struggling mentally, emotionally, and physically. As a wife, active sister and aunt, fulltime practitioner, part-time graduate research assistant, and part-time student, I started to feel weighed down. I was struggling with infertility, feeling overwhelmed with both work and school, and was seriously wrestling with the idea perhaps the timing was off for my PhD journey. While trying to balance the multiple competing roles in my life, I realized I was wearing the proverbial Black woman superhero cape, but it felt like the cape was starting to suffocate me. As I became more attuned with my emotions and factors influencing my own mental health challenges, I sought therapy because I was not well.

During the therapeutic process, I became curious about the experiences of other Black women doctoral students and their wellness. I pondered questions like: what were some of the things Black women doctoral students faced on and off campus that contributed to their sense of wellness? How were other Black women managing and centering their mental health? Was I alone in what I was experiencing? I searched for answers on my own through my membership on

an academic research team that studied graduate students; the voices of Black women were glaringly missing. The missing experiences of Black women in the literature about graduate students and mental health, coupled with my own experiences directly influenced the development of my research questions. I wondered how Black women doctoral students described their mental health and wellness. I thought about many of the factors that influenced my wellness were mostly things that happened outside of academia. I became curious about what were some of the things—positively, negatively, or otherwise—that contributed to the mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students during their doctoral programs? The different facets of my identity and the responsibility that came with those identities influenced my wellness. To illustrate this point, I offer a personal story.

I currently serve as a director for a scholarship program. Part of my job is to manage the daily operations of the team and oversee several large programs that involve student travel. During the pandemic, student travel halted, and all student-facing programs became virtual. In September of 2022, the organization as a whole resumed in-person activities for students and staff. I asked my supervisor several times if one of our annual in-person events was going to take place in-person, to which he said no. I needed to know if the program would be in-person because I had recently returned from parental leave and I needed to make plans for childcare if it were in fact happening face-to-face. Also, I needed time to plan and implement the event because there were so many moving parts. My supervisor assured me the event in question would be virtual for the foreseeable future. In January of 2023, he called and said the program would be happening in-person and we had 6 weeks to plan it. I could feel the stress build up in my chest. A program of this level is not an easy thing to plan; there are 100 students and 20 faculty and various speakers who attend this week-long event in a west coast state. Not to

mention, I was balancing working from home with an infant, trying to be a good wife, writing my proposal defense, and managing my various work-related tasks. Adding this task to my plate with such short notice was stressful. For about 5 weeks straight, I neglected some of my responsibilities. I was unable to adhere to my self-imposed writing schedule, I postponed or canceled therapy sessions, and I did not feel present as a wife and mother.

Eventually, it was time to implement the program. Things went fairly smoothly, despite some minor hiccups. On the last day of the event, one of my colleagues mentioned to my supervisor he had been noticeably missing from the event throughout the week. My supervisor replied "Yeah, I have been doing other things because I know Joakina has this event." Although on the surface this comment seems like a compliment, it is not. It reflects the labor Black women exert in the workplace with very little support. I was left to plan and implement this major program because my supervisor knew I could get it done, and I did. But at what cost? After this experience, I set clear boundaries at work to center my well-being and add balance to my life, but the previously mentioned experience (and others) made me question at what cost do Black women in academia perform? What factors inside and outside of the classroom influence our wellness and how can we be intentional about maintaining our wellness? How does performing at high levels influence our wellness?

My interest was piqued as it related to this topic, and I knew I wanted to make Black women doctoral students mental health and wellness the topic of my dissertation. Although this research was sparked by my own personal story, I must be intentional about holding space for my experiences and not projecting those onto the co-narrators. I recognize as a somewhat middle class, partnered woman, I was (and am) able to center my wellness in a way some people may not have the privilege to do. For example, when I was away on business, I was able to secure

childcare for my son during the day and my husband took over his fatherly duties in the evenings. I had insurance that covered my therapeutic journey. Also, I have a network of family and friends who were there to support me as my overall well-being waned. I also recognize as a child of a Southern Black American mother and a Nigerian father, I have not always recognized the importance of centering wellness. My experiences are my own and may not be the experience of other Black women doctoral students. I want to create space for co-narrators to share the various aspects of their lives that bring them joy and also pose challenges to their wellness. This work is healing work, not just for me, but for other Black women doctoral students who may feel unseen or unheard.

In qualitative research, "there often is, and should be, a relationship between the researcher and the researched" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 11). Although my personal experiences are what drew me to this topic, I recognize Black women doctoral students are not a monolith; our experiences will vary. I approach this research with that in mind and create space to uncover and honor the experiences of the participants in the study. In the next section of this chapter, I address how I plan to do that.

Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure the validity in qualitative research, the researcher must consider threats to trustworthiness in a study (Glesne, 2016). As described by Jones et al. (2014), "trustworthiness is associated with confidence in the research findings" (p. 36). Essentially, trustworthiness is ethical and competent data collection practices that honor participants and acknowledge the relationship between the researcher and the topic being studied. Consistent with other qualitative approaches, Clandinin and Huber (2010) asserted in narrative inquiry, the voice of the researcher should not supersede the voices and experiences of the participants. To ensure this does not

occur, I engaged in memoing prior to data collection to capture and set aside my own thoughts, feelings, and assumptions (Creswell, 2007). I engaged in analytical and reflexive memoing after each interview to capture my initial thoughts and process the data (Birks et al., 2008; Glesne, 2016). Additionally, I conducted member checks to confirm data were represented accurately to reflect the co-narrators' thoughts. Co-narrators had the opportunity to review their transcripts, make edits, and clarify data.

After interviews were complete, I reviewed transcripts and developed codes, then grouped those codes into categories, and then into themes (Saldaña, 2016). Clandinin and Huber (2010) encouraged narrative inquirers to not allow the development of codes and themes to undermine the emerging narratives of the participants. To remedy this, I grounded the findings of this research in the voices and experiences of the participants and utilize a peer-debriefer (Creswell, 2003) who can confirm or deny the findings were supported by the data. The peer-debriefer was a doctoral student familiar with qualitative research and has knowledge of Black women in academia. Additionally, peer-debriefing occurred during group advising sessions where other doctoral students, who may be studying similar topics, were able to provide feedback on my work.

My salient identities allow me an insider perspective which can enhance the data analysis process. Although Black women are not one monolithic group, there are certain commonalities between Black women that create distinctive experiences that only other Black women can understand (Collins, 1986). Although it is important I allow the data to speak for itself, it is also of critical importance I recognize how my own identities aid me in being uniquely positioned to conduct this research.

Strengths and Bounds of Study

Aligning with other Black women scholars (e.g., Breeden, 2021), I titled this section of the proposal as Strengths and Bounds of the Study, instead of limitations. Throughout this chapter, I highlighted the need to approach research on Black women from a growth perspective and not a deficit approach. Terminology such as "limitations" stems from a "positivist paradigm and a deficit lens" (Breeden, 2021, p. 175). As a researcher with a critical and constructivist epistemological stance, it is important and necessary for me to honor Black women's stories through language. This means being intentional about the words I choose to retell and describe Black women's experiences. In the next part of the chapter, I acknowledge the strengths and boundaries of the proposed research.

Although I was thoughtful about ensuring the guiding research questions, methodological approach, and conceptual framework aligned, that does not mean this study is without boundaries. One of the strengths of this study—soliciting the reflections of recent PhD completers—may also be viewed as a boundary. Although recent completers have the ability to reflect on the totality of their doctoral experiences (i.e., strength), human memory is not always the most reliable (i.e., boundary). Co-narrators may forget and leave out details of their experiences that may be relevant to the study by sheer nature of being removed from their doctoral journey. To assist co-narrators with remembering their experiences, I asked co-narrators to respond to a written prompt prior to their interview as this allowed time for the co-narrators to think through their experiences without the pressure of responding to an interview question on the spot. Additionally, I sent the co-narrators the interview questions prior to the interview to help jog their memory.

To participate in this study, co-narrators must complete two 60–90-minute interviews and complete the narrative activity. Co-narrators were asked to review interview transcripts for member-checking purposes, but this was optional. Black women doctoral students who completed coursework or recently completed their program may have more time and energy to engage in a study than Black women doctoral students still enrolled in class. Additionally, they may be more willing to share their experiences without fear of retaliation than those still engrossed in their programs. Recent completers do not have the same academic pressure (e.g., coursework and writing the dissertation) currently enrolled students may have. By only including co-narrators who have completed coursework or graduated within the last 6 months and limiting participation to no more than 12 participants, I simultaneously removed barriers for participation while decreasing the study's attrition rate.

Another boundary of this study is the geographical location being limited to the mid-Atlantic states. Undoubtedly, Black women doctoral students who complete their education in the middle, southern, and western regions of the United States have meaningful experiences worthy of research. Not including Black women doctoral students outside of the mid-Atlantic region is in no way a reflection their stories are not valid or valued. Rather, restricting participation in this study to students in a particular region allows a more in-depth exploration of experiences, as there are regional similarities among R1 and R2 institutions in the mid-Atlantic area. Additionally, there is a predominance of Black women doctoral alumnae in mid-Atlantic region which makes this region ideal for research inquiry. I support future research that explores Black women doctoral students in different regions of the United States.

Chapter Summary

Throughout this chapter, I revisited the research questions that guided this study. I expounded on how my epistemological standpoint influenced the selection of narrative inquiry as a methodological approach. Furthermore, I outlined some of the guidelines of narrative inquiry and why this particular methodology is appropriate to explore the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students. To support my choice to use narrative inquiry, I explored how other research influenced my work, paying special attention to researchers who utilized the same methodology to illuminate Black women doctoral students' experiences. I connected my methodological approach to my conceptual framework and highlighted how all aspects of my proposed study (e.g., methodology, recruitment methods, data collection process and analysis, conceptual framework) will work in tandem to help me elucidate the experiences of Black women doctoral students. I described my recruitment methods which included using purposive criterion sampling to recruit between eight and 12 Black women doctoral students who recently completed their program to participate in the proposed study. Furthermore, I shared the lessons learned from my pilot study and how I used those lessons to inform the present study. Additionally, I outlined the data collection methods which include responses to narrative prompts (that will be discussed during their individual interviews), one 60-to-90-minute interview, and one 60-minute focus group.

Toward the conclusion of the chapter, I shared my positionality and how my intersecting identities and experiences have equipped me with the tools to explore my topic. Acknowledging my various intersecting identities have potential to cloud my research perspective, I also highlighted how I plan to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of this study. Specifically, I memoed, consulted with a peer debriefer, and engaged in member-checking to ensure the stories

of the co-narrators are highlighted, rather than my own voice. I concluded the chapter by acknowledging potential perceived strengths and boundaries of my research.

In Chapter 4, I share brief participant narratives for each co-narrator to aid in developing a deeper understanding of each participant in this study.

Chapter 4: Co-Narrator Narratives

The goal and purpose of this qualitative research study was to develop a better understanding of the factors that influenced Black women doctoral students' holistic mental health and wellness during their doctoral journey. Additionally, I sought to understand how Black women's social identities influenced their wellness during graduate school, the coping mechanisms they employed, and what brought them joy. The Black women co-narrators who participated in this study were either current students or had completed their doctoral program in 6 months of data collection, identified as a cisgender Black woman, and attended a R1 or R2 institution as a full-time doctoral student. The following research questions guide this study:

1. How do Black women doctoral students and recent alumnae at Research 1 (R1) or Research 2 (R2) institutions in the mid-Atlantic region describe their mental health and wellness while pursuing their doctoral degree?
2. What contributed to and interfered with the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students and recent alumnae during their doctoral programs?

Narrative inquiry research requires "gathering stories, analyzing them for key elements of the story . . . and then rewriting the story" (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 332). Before this process can occur, characters must be identified and placed in the context of the overall story. Co-narrators are characters in their own story; in fact, they are the main characters. Although the term *character* may imply a fictitious person, that is not the intended meaning in narrative research. Character, in the context of narrative inquiry, "does not mean that the people they refer to do not exist in real life" (Daiute 2014, p. 191). Rather, the term character allows the storyteller to creatively introduce relevant persons and important experiences of participants and using an analytical lens to develop meaning from each character to tell their full story (Daiute, 2014).

Telling the stories of participants is considered re-storying. The process of re-storying, which is similar to rewriting a story, begins with the researcher collaborating and renegotiating information with participants, constantly returning to the field text for reference, and eventually, creating a narrative that effectively captures the lived experiences of the participants (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Put a simpler way, the researcher uses data to retell the story of participants. It is through the process of re-storying I share the data in this study. Before introducing the data, I describe the characters of the story through individual narratives. Below, I provide a brief outline of how the narratives were created and what elements are included in each one.

Because "narrating [is] an interactive process" (Daiute, 2014, p. 1), I crafted the narratives using the co-narrators' own words to capture their essences. Using the participants' words is also a part of the process of re-storying the data. Text in quotations are direct quotes from the co-narrators, which are derived from the data collection interviews. Parts of the narratives not direct quotes is where I synthesized and paraphrased the stories of the co-narrators. Each narrative presented in this chapter includes self-identified salient identities for each co-narrator, what institution they attended, their overall reflection of their mental health, and direct quotes from the participants. The quotes used in the narratives were pulled from responses to specific questions in the first interview. Because the process of re-storying is not prescriptive, I did not write each narrative in the same way. Although all the narratives include certain elements (e.g., salient identity, year in school), I allowed the co-narrator's energy and the data to lead me in how I developed each narrative.

Of the nine participants, five of them self-selected their pseudonyms. The remaining four participants were asked to select a pseudonym and did not, so I selected one for them. I also

developed pseudonyms for the institutional names, each named after Black women historical figures and/or leaders (see Appendix G). An in-depth table can be found with additional demographic information of each co-narrator (see Table 1). The narratives were woven together through data collected from two research interviews and a demographic survey. Physical descriptions of the co-narrators and interview setting were observations made by the researcher, me, during the data collection interview. My rationale for including detailed descriptions of co-narrators (e.g., hair style, nonverbal gestures) was to further highlight and humanize the co-narrators, as this is a function of Black feminist thought which is part of my conceptual framework.

Next, I present the narratives of each participant. Following the narratives, I provide a chapter summary and foreshadow the next couple of chapters.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Academic status	Institution type	Country of origin	PhD university pseudonym	Years in program	Academic discipline	Graduation date
Marie	35	Current PhD student	R1, HWI	USA	McMillan State University	6	Education	December 2023
Joyce	38	Graduate of a PhD program	R2, HBCU	UK	L. Hansberry University	5	Higher education administration	May 2023
Kaycee	42	Current PhD student	R2, HWI	USA	N.H. Burroughs University	5	Social work	Expected May 2024
Willow	32	Graduate of a PhD program	R1, HWI	Nigeria	M.W. Stewart College	4	Higher education	May 2023
Joan	36	Current PhD student	R1, HWI	USA	Katherine Johnson College	5	Human & community development	Expected May 2024
Belle	41	Graduate of a PhD program	R1, HWI	USA	M.W. Stewart College	6	Higher education	May 2023

Pseudonym	Age	Academic status	Institution type	Country of origin	PhD university pseudonym	Years in program	Academic discipline	Graduation date
Arianna	36	Graduate of a PhD program	R1, HWI	USA	McMillan State University	5	Urban education	May 2023
Neka	37	Current PhD student	R1, HWI	Antigua and Barbuda	McMillan State University	6	Higher education	Expected May 2024
Iesha	31	Current PhD student	R1, HWI	USA	AJ Cooper College	5	Clinical psychology	Expected May 2024

Marie's Narrative

Marie was comfortably leaned back in her chair as the virtual interview began. Her background was blurred but she was home, in her parents' house, where she decided to live after her 5th year in her program. She wore fashionable glasses and had long box braids tied up in a bun. Marie rocked back and forth as she started to share her story. She immediately explained her "religious identity" was very important to her. Identifying as a Black, Christian woman of African descent, Marie credited her faith as one of the things that "helped . . . with [her] . . . wellness" during her PhD program.

Marie's soft-spoken demeanor did not detract from how moving her story was. Getting a doctorate was not something Marie had a "burning passion" to do. Marie's father, an East African man, only really acknowledged "medical doctors" and her mother, an African American woman, did not "regularly talk about" advanced degrees. Because of her family's lack of attention to doctoral education, Marie "wasn't thinking about" a PhD until a former supervisor encouraged her to apply. After applying to over five schools, Marie attended the only school she was accepted into: McMillan State University, a R1 institution.

McMillan State proved to be quite difficult for Marie. She attended a practitioner-based master's program in "education administration" which was not a theory-centered program nor

was it a R1 institution. Subsequently, Marie experienced a "lack of preparedness" at McMillan State because she had never attended a "research one institution" before. Additionally, although Marie had a "great relationship with [her] advisor," she did not receive the guidance she expected from her advisor because her advisor was often busy with research. Marie "didn't know what to expect" from her PhD program, but she knew it was "not gonna be as easy as [she] thought." She did not pass her "comprehensive exams . . . the first time" and had to complete a rewrite for her second attempt at her comprehensive exams. She noted the process of taking comprehensive exams twice "was hard" and managing her "wellness was difficult." Marie also experienced "a lot of pressure" because she wanted to impress her faculty members. Furthermore, Marie encountered some financial challenges that caused her stress. To aid in her academic and emotional wellness, Marie sought therapy, a "writing coach," and "relied on . . . peers" for support and assistance, which helped her significantly. Marie's faith also helped her make it through her doctoral journey, especially when times were hard. She read a "spiritual devotional daily" and would also "try to pray daily."

Maintaining a calm voice and reflective demeanor, Marie shared how she was "very blessed because [she has] supportive family and supportive friends." She explained despite some of the challenges she faced, she loved her program, including her faculty and peers. She felt a sense of accomplishment overcoming some of the academic and personal obstacles she experienced. Although she appreciated her academic experience, she was ready to complete her program. Her parents were also looking forward to Marie's graduation. Her dad, although he initially only respected medical doctors, was also supportive and excited about her journey. Her mom jokingly said "I'm tired. So, you need to get done." Marie's parents viewed her doctoral "journey as an extension of them," and that brought Marie joy and additional motivation.

Despite the challenges Marie encountered, she explained her doctoral "journey really made [her] better" as a scholar and overall person. As she was approaching graduation, she had accomplished things she did not think she would. Marie shared she had received a U.S. grant to attend a year-long cultural exchange and was preparing to leave the country following graduation. Marie's calm and soft-spoken essence as she told her story reflected her "trust [in] God" during her PhD journey and her commitment "to trust and let go" of the things she cannot control. Marie was excited to welcome the new experiences on the horizon.

Joyce's Narrative

Sitting cozy on her couch, with her beautiful long locs wrapped in a messy bun at the top of her head, Joyce joined the Zoom meeting. The ring light reflected in her brown eyes as she peered at the camera to tell her story. Conversation flowed immediately and there was a sense of familiarity between Joyce and me. She stirred and sipped her tea and dived into sharing her experiences. Joyce named she had a "personal interest" in participating in a study on Black women's holistic mental health and wellness because it is important for her to help other Black women "get closer to graduation" and share "tools that will help [others] get through the dissertation process."

Joyce, a British born woman of Jamaican heritage, moved to the United States at the age of nine. Throughout most of her educational experiences, she was in predominantly white spaces but actively sought community with Black people. After completing a master's degree in higher education administration at an HWI, she moved to the Midwest and began working at a "very white school" in a student affairs administration position, which was her "dream job . . . at that time." Joyce figured because she was already at that institution, she might as well complete her doctoral degree. However, because of the institution's location, noticing "what was happening in

the country" and some "personal racial macroaggressions" she experienced, Joyce did not believe it was a "good place for [her] to do [her] research." As such, after being enrolled in one class for one semester, she left the higher education graduate program along with her on-campus administrator job, and moved to the south where there were "better support structures" in place for her.

The southern institution where she began working "did not have a program . . . [in] higher education" which was her area of study. Although there were other institutions in the state that offered her program of interest, she did not want to travel to "a racist area" when she just left a racist space in the Midwest. She took 2 years to determine her next steps and then decided to move from the south to the east coast to pursue her doctorate. She explored different options before deciding to attend L. Hansberry University, an HBCU. While pursuing her doctorate, Joyce worked full-time as a student affairs practitioner at a different institution.

Joyce's HBCU experience was not what she had anticipated. She "expected to be taught by Black faculty" and "to receive more mentorship," but most of the faculty at L. Hansberry University were white and there was a lack of community between faculty and students. This was frustrating because Joyce was intentional about pursuing a PhD at an HBCU. In addition to the lack of community in her department, Joyce experienced poor communication from university faculty and staff regarding institutional policies. The lack of clarity from faculty was "very frustrating" and "did not positively impact [her] mental health" as it caused confusion about graduation program requirements.

Joyce studied Black women's identities in relation to career and professional development. Joyce described her journey to the doctorate as being "up and down" because of the stress caused by her department and completing a PhD during a pandemic. She experienced

"anxiety attacks, right up until graduation." To cope with the challenges in her department, she picked up bike riding, would occasionally go hiking, and got "into coloring." Joyce "sacrificed a lot" to earn her doctorate, but by being ambitious, assertive, and strong-willed, she successfully completed her program in May of 2023, with high honors. She refused to let her doctoral program steal her joy and was intentional about doing things she loved post-PhD.

Kaycee's Narrative

When asked about her hobbies, Kaycee's face filled with joy. She is a self-proclaimed writer and lover of books. This was very fitting, as the Zoom background that framed her was a bookshelf filled with books and trinkets. Kaycee's chin-length natural hair cupped her face, as she explained how she loved "reading" non-academic books "before [she] got so consumed with grad school." She also noted her love for "listening to music," trying out "different types of restaurants," and "writing." Based on her love of writing and knowledge of her experiences in her graduate program, her friends encouraged her to "write a book" to share her story. Instead of doing that, Kaycee opted to participate in my study. She explained being a co-narrator in my study was the "first opportunity that [she's] had to . . . share what [her] experience has been like" in graduate school.

At the time of the interview, Kaycee was a 5th year doctoral student who attended N.H. Burroughs University. She studied sociology and had plans to graduate in May of 2024. Kaycee explained she was not a "typical grad student" because she took time off to work before pursuing her PhD. Her original plan was to get a "PhD directly after undergrad." However, her interest changed from psychology to sociology, so she worked for a few years "in a lot of nonprofits" and then "decided . . . to go to grad school for . . . social welfare policy."

Kaycee comes from a family of educators, and her parents and grandparents deeply "valued education." Even though her family obtained graduate degrees, Kaycee will be the "first PhD in [her] family." She adopted her family's value of education and has been a "really studious" student throughout her undergraduate and graduate career. Coming from a family of educators has helped Kaycee develop discipline to "buckle down" and complete schoolwork when necessary. However, the pressure to perform academically sometimes "contributed to [her] mental wellness" in negative ways. She explained focusing on school so much became "really frustrating and . . . depressing, because [she didn't] have much fun" due to all her studying. Her graduate experience, at times, was very isolating due to the lack of understanding from her peers and family. Kaycee was "the only woman of color in [her] cohort" and "the only person . . . working full-time." Because her peers did not share her identities, she did not feel connected to them. Her family, though education minded, did not have firsthand experience in a doctoral program. She described often feeling like there were "not too many people to talk to" about her unique experience at N.H. Burroughs University. Although there were people around her (her cohort and her family), Kaycee exuded a sense of loneliness.

Kaycee's most salient identities lie at the intersection of her Blackness and womanhood. She noted being keenly aware her racial and gender identities are "what people immediately see." Because of that, it is what she identifies with the most. She also explained how her identity as a single Black woman who "has to work" influenced her experience in her program, contributing to her feelings of isolation. Despite Kaycee defining her graduate experience as a "negative" one, it brought her joy to share her story. She was hopeful her experience could help another Black woman doctoral student. She was looking forward to completing her degree and moving to the next chapter of her life.

Willow's Narrative

Next to a window with closed white blinds, Willow sat snug on her couch in her home. She spoke softly as she introduced herself. It was late and she had just put her 2-year-old son down for bed and did not want to wake him. She wore square, black-framed glasses and her braids were pulled back in a ponytail. At the time of our interview, Willow had recently finished her doctoral degree in higher education at M.W. Stewart College, where she studied the "experiences of African immigrant students" in graduate school. Willow's interest in immigrant students stemmed from her own identities. She was "born in Nigeria, [and] immigrated to the United States when [she] was 11." Because of her immigrant background, navigating "higher education . . . [was] a unique, different experience compared to . . . friends and colleagues, who are also Black, but from different backgrounds." Willow participated in the study because she "fit the criteria," and wanted to "help a sista out" and also share more about her unique experience as an African graduate student. Willow's race, gender, and ethnicity were very important to her, especially her Nigerian identity.

Willow has a background in higher education. She "really loved student affairs" and earned a master's degree in it. She "left full-time work" in student affairs to pursue her doctorate. When pursuing her PhD in higher education, she expected the same "structured community" she experienced in her master's program, but that was not the case. Her expectations were "thrown in the trash" due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. She was only on campus for "one semester" before classes went virtual. In addition to the COVID-19 global pandemic impacting her doctoral program, she had her son while pursuing her doctorate. Despite these unexpected circumstances, Willow completed her program in 4 years and had an enjoyable experience.

As Willow sat on her couch and continued to share her story, she paused and looked in the distance: “I just heard screaming. . . just making sure it’s not my kid, who’s in bed.” Her ability to be attentive to her child during the interview showed her care as a mother and her commitment to contribute to the literature on Black women in higher education. It was also a glimpse into the different aspects of her life she had to navigate during her program (e.g., home, motherhood, and school). We continued the conversation as she shared more about her overall experience. Although Willow enjoyed her PhD program, she did have moments where her “anxiety was through the roof.” Balancing motherhood, the global pandemic, and her coursework were usually what caused her anxiety. Receiving “good feedback on [her] writing” and “faith” is what gave her some relief from the anxiety brought on by school.

Willow possessed an air of determination. Although she experienced obstacles inside and outside of the classroom, she “wasn’t going to quit.” Having her son was the “biggest motivating factor” to completing her program in a “timely manner.” She had a “supportive advisor” and a “support system” which included her husband, family, and friends. Willow relied on “prayer” and physical activity to help preserve her wellness during her program. Additionally, Willow focused on completing specific parts of her program, “not the whole thing,” to help her feel less overwhelmed and less anxious. Being able to “chop . . . up” parts of her academic journey into manageable bits was what helped her focus and move through her program quickly.

Joan’s Narrative

Joan’s wavy brown hair, with blonde highlights, flowed past her shoulders, covering some of the writing on her white t-shirt. Although she wore a black headband that helped to keep her hair from falling in her face, it was still difficult to read the words written across her shirt. Joan leaned forward, moving her hair out of the way, revealing the phrase penned in cursive

black letters on her shirt: Future Doc. It was the "shirt that [she] wore to announce to the world [she] was going into a PhD Program." Joan also wore a black headset she listened through and spoke into during the interview. Although her background was blurred, it appeared she was in an office building. She had just moved to a southern state 2 weeks prior to the interview and was not fully unpacked at home. Her move was prompted by being awarded a fellowship, which gave her an opportunity to teach and provided funding for her education.

Joan was in her 5th year of her PhD program and is a "mental health professional." Specifically, she is "a social worker by trade, and . . . a part time therapist." Her interest in "anything mental health related" and desire to support "Black people and Black women, especially" is what drew her to my study. Joan's educational pursuits had bumps along the way. She had "never been an academically inclined person" and "had a severe reading disability . . . and dyslexia that wasn't diagnosed until [her] third year in college." She never thought she would pursue a PhD. However, "a Black woman intercepted" her and encouraged her to get tested for learning disabilities. After being diagnosed and receiving the proper support, Joan "started to excel in school."

When Joan entered her doctoral program at Katherine Johnson College, she expected it to be manageable academically. She had "done two bachelors . . . and a master's" and assumed her PhD program would not be "any harder" than her previous educational experiences. She "was very incorrect." Although Joan "had already planned to go to school" somewhere else, she was recruited to Katherine Johnson College under the guise of being fully funded, including a housing stipend and tuition remission. Joan is a "spiritual person," so she "prayed about it heavily," and decided that Katherine Johnson College was an offer she could not refuse. However, when she arrived at the institution, there was "no funding." There had been a change

in leadership, and the funding she had been promised was no longer being offered to her. She arrived at Katherine Johnson College "with no apartment, no job, no anything." This situation set the stage for additional stressful experiences in her doctoral program. After a couple of job-related challenges and her "rough start" at the college, Joan developed an "anxiety problem." Then the global pandemic happened and "everything was heavy," mentally and emotionally. After seeking therapy, engaging in some other self-care practices (like going on walks and working out), and completing her coursework, Joan "decided to leave" Katherine Johnson College. Still planning to earn her doctorate from Katherine Johnson College in the spring of 2024, Joan moved to the south for a fellowship for the final years of her doctoral program. It was the best move for her financially and mentally.

Joan identifies as a Black woman social worker. These identities are what drive her work and how she navigates the world. Her focus on community among Black women, and the social worker in her, is what drove her to develop shared spaces for other Black women at Katherine Johnson College. She brought that same energy and spirit to her work as a fellow at her new southern institution where she taught alongside two women of color.

Belle's Narrative

Belle was seated at what appeared to be an L-shaped desk. It was positioned in between two glass doors that led to the hallway, and a brown office door that led to another office space. On risers behind her were two computer screens and a keyboard. Belle appeared to be in a reception area, which made sense as she was currently serving as a "full-time academic secretary at one college" where she worked. Belle had been in that role for nearly 20 years. Although Belle was about to start another position as a postdoc at a different institution, she planned to keep her

administrative “job one for the health benefits.” Plus, her grandma always told her “a bird in a hand beats two in the bush.”

The single most important person in Belle’s life was her grandmother. Although some folks may identify as a daddy’s girl, or a mama’s boy, Belle was a self-proclaimed “grandma’s girl.” Belle recalled memories of sitting at her paternal grandmother’s feet, hearing stories about Black life, and what it meant to be a Black girl and woman in a U.S. context. Belle learned what it meant to show up for other Black people by watching how her grandmother navigated the world. Belle’s grandmother was her inspiration and a driving force behind many of her decisions.

Belle grew up on the east coast to an Indigenous mom, and Black American father. After attending college immediately following high school, Belle “stopped [out of] college when [she] was about 19.” After “drinking and partying” her freshman year, Belle decided she just didn’t want to go back to school. Her grandmother told her if she was not going to go to college, she should at least work at one. Following her grandmother’s advice, Belle “ended up working at colleges” which is ultimately what paid for her degree when she did eventually return to school. When she was around 30 years old, Belle wanted to repay her grandmother for all of the kindness and love she had shown her. Her grandmother told her “Baby, just get a degree for grandma. Just get one degree for grandma.” So, as a “non-traditional college student,” Belle returned to school completing her bachelor’s in 2 years and a master’s in 3 years. After completing these degrees so quickly, Belle contemplated “get[ting] a law degree.” However, one of her professors, who happened to be a white man, encouraged her to apply to PhD programs because she “asks too many . . . questions” for a law degree. Feeling affirmed by her professor, and with his guidance, Belle applied to doctoral programs and “got into every school [she]

applied to." She ultimately chose to attend M.W. Stewart College, where her research "centers around Black women's underrepresentation in academia." She graduated in May of 2023.

Belle's doctoral journey had several challenges that influenced her mental health and wellness. Throughout her PhD program, Belle was physically sick and declared her "body was under siege." She had several bouts with pneumonia during her PhD program but "ain't had it since [she] graduated." Additionally, she had "athlete's foot," her "hair was falling out" and she "discovered that [she had] a hormonal imbalance." While her body was suffering and she was navigating her health, she also had negative encounters with some of the white faculty in her program. She had one particularly challenging interaction with a white male faculty member who deemed her writing unfit for a PhD program. That experience "subsequently colored [her] entire PhD experience." She went on to have other negative encounters with white students and faculty.

Perhaps the biggest blow to Belle's mental health and wellness was when her grandmother passed away after suffering a stroke a few months earlier. When this happened, Belle found it difficult to function and almost "gave up on life." Afterall, her grandmother was her inspiration for returning to education in the first place. In fact, the ideas Belle developed for her "research came from her grandmother's kitchen table." If it was not for Belle's advisor, a Latina woman, advocating for a year of additional funding, she may have not completed her program because Belle "didn't even want to finish it after she died," but she knew she had to for her grandmother.

Despite the many challenges Belle had, she described having had a "decent PhD program" experience. Being in community with other women of color and having a supportive advisor was her saving grace. Her experience in her program also renewed her indestructible

spirit and served as a reminder “the academy can’t break [her].” In fact, after completing her PhD, Belle enrolled in a certificate program in “drug and alcohol counseling” because she “realized . . . how little certified alcohol and drug counselors there are for Black women.” Belle’s life goal is to support and care for Black women, and her experiences in academia will not stop her from doing that.

Arianna’s Narrative

Arianna exuded a warm energy and aura during her data collection interviews. Perhaps the warm aura was due to her pregnancy glow (she was expecting a child at the time of our meetings) or perhaps it was the bright, warm, reassuring smile she flashed throughout the interview. Either way, she appeared excited to share her story. Arianna spoke about how important it was for her to participate in a study on Black women’s holistic mental health and wellness and noted how the narrative about Black women in academia is “we experience racism . . . and all these harmful things.” However, she knows “we’re still thriving, we’re still making it through.”

In May of 2023, Arianna made it through and completed her doctorate in education from McMillan State University. She studied anti-blackness in mathematics education. McMillan was “actually [her] second PhD program.” She entered her first PhD program at a HWI “straight after undergrad” and quickly realized there was “no community for [her]” there. Although her graduate advisor was a Black woman supportive of Arianna, the academic culture and overall student support “was just a very different experience” from what she was used to at her undergraduate institution. Arianna attended an HBCU for her undergraduate degree and hoped she would receive the care, support, and love in graduate school she did as an undergraduate student. During her first PhD program, it did not take long to realize her graduate experience

would not be warm, inviting, or inclusive for Black women. She explained her first PhD institution "just wasn't a safe place" for her, and she realized her passion was in education. For these two reasons, Arianna "left and went into teaching" at a K–12 school. Arianna was in her first doctoral program for less than a year.

After several years, Arianna "was burned out from teaching" and had a nagging feeling the school was not "doing right by Black students." She could not put her finger on it, but at the predominantly Black school where she taught "there was just something that was missing" in terms of supporting Black students. She returned to graduate school, this time at McMillan State University, to focus on "culturally relevant teaching and how [to] . . . infuse that in a math classroom." Arianna felt "very lucky" to be at McMillan, as her cohort was composed of all Black women, who were critical scholars and pushed her to think about "if equality . . . and equity could be possible in education." The critical Black women scholars in her cohort, and the women of color she encountered during her PhD program at McMillan "changed the direct trajectory of [her] research." She became more focused on anti-Blackness and dismantling whiteness in education.

Arianna completed her doctoral program in 5 years and was involved in the Black graduate student association and served on committees in her academic department. During her graduate career, Arianna found it difficult to turn down opportunities. She was a hard worker who struggled to tell people no because she believed her "productivity is part of [her] worth . . . and part of that means . . . overworking." Arianna was self-aware of how her perception of herself influenced her holistic mental health and wellness. She was diagnosed with and suffers from anxiety and depression. She was actively in therapy at the time of the interview and believed in seeking therapy when needed.

Arianna was also aware of and took pride in her social identities. She identifies as a heterosexual, cisgendered Black woman. Although her identity is a source of pride, she was keenly aware of how her inability to tell people no was connected to the overall perception and expectations of Black women. In regard to being presented with opportunities, she explained how although people say "no is enough" she knows "it's not [enough] for a Black woman." Her awareness of identity politics and social inequities are important parts of her academic and personal identities. She has a deep-rooted love for Black people and wants to see Black people thrive. Beyond being an academic, she is a family-oriented woman who was excited about becoming a mom.

Neka's Narrative

Being a PhD student is easy,

It's like riding a bike.

Except the bike is on fire.

You're on fire.

Everything is on fire

And you're in hell.

These were the words written across Neka's shirt as she joined our meeting. I meant to ask her more about it, but like we were old friends, we dove right into conversation. The words on her shirt were a foreshadowing of her holistic mental health and wellness journey during her doctoral program.

Neka's salt and pepper braids were being held behind her ears by a black headset. She cupped her hand to the microphone to help her voice be loud and clear. Admittedly, her Wi-Fi was not strong and subsequently, her sound went in and out during our conversation. Neka

joined the meeting from her home. She sat in front of a white wall, adjacent to the kitchen, with a large palm plant behind her. When prompted to share more about herself, Neka almost immediately shared how mental health and wellness has been a central part of her doctoral experience. At the time of the interview, Neka was a 6th year doctoral candidate in higher education at McMillan State University. Neka explained "during [her] doctoral journey, [her] mental health fluctuated the most" due to her program and various life events. Neka "got married" during her "second year of full-time doctoral classes." Additionally, she "left working full-time to pursue [her] doctorate" and worked a "part-time job as a graduate assistant." When she was finished with coursework, she returned to full-time work and then she got pregnant. Neka took some time off to focus on having and raising a young child. These transitions influenced Neka's wellness, sometimes in negative ways.

Neka identifies as a cisgender, heterosexual Afro-Caribbean woman, who follows "Christian Protestant religious beliefs." Coming from an Afro-Caribbean heritage, education was a family value. Neka's mother was a teacher, and her father was a meteorologist. Her family expected her to follow in her parents' footsteps and "saw [her] as either the meteorology legacy or educator." Instead, Neka earned a bachelor's degree "in business" and then "pursued a masters . . . in urban education." She found she enjoyed higher education and sought out a PhD program. From a young age, Neka knew she wanted to pursue a PhD, even if it was not the same career as her parents. As a child, Neka put pressure on herself to achieve academically. She described herself as always being "very focused, very driven, very self-motivated." This self-imposed pressure is part of what made her doctoral journey challenging because despite her driven nature, her program was just "difficult in a way that [she] did not expect."

At the time of the interview, Neka was in a full-time role as an education research analyst and was also in the dissertating phase of her program. Her immediate supervisor was very supportive and was "a good advocate for [her] mental health" but her supervisor's boss was not. Neka's direct supervisor encouraged her to focus on her postpartum wellness, her newborn baby, and on finishing her degree. Having a supervisor who was understanding and supportive was a "mental help" for Neka. Therapy also helped Neka navigate her mental health throughout her doctoral journey, which took a toll after having her daughter. She "grieved" not being able to complete her degree on her designated timeline. Although she was disappointed that her timeline had shifted, Neka was at peace knowing that she would "finish [her degree] this coming summer."

Iesha's Narrative

The lighting in Iesha's office was harsh, the typical fluorescent lighting one would find in an office building. Iesha sat at what appeared to be an L-shaped desk along a wall in a shared office space. There was an empty chair at the end of the desk behind her. Although harsh lighting typically casts shadows on darker skin, Iesha's features were prominent on screen. Her smooth dark brown skin was flawless, and her face was adorned with a dainty nose ring. Her natural hair was in mini twists, and the front of her hair was pinned back in two sections. She joined the video call from her office, where she often saw clients as part of her doctoral program. Iesha was "a fifth and final year PhD candidate . . . studying clinical psychology" at AJ Cooper College.

Iesha was "still trying to get settled" in a new city. As a clinical psychology student, she was required to complete a residency, which for her was on the west coast. This was another adjustment she had to make in pursuit of her doctoral degree because she had moved to the east coast from the south for her doctoral program. Because of the move to the west coast, Iesha did

not have much time to focus on anything other than school and family. Prior to starting her PhD program, Iesha was learning "how to play the piano" but once she became a doctoral student, she did not "really have a lot of time for hobbies." Her main focus was graduating and being a good wife and mother to her "one-year-old daughter."

As someone studying clinical psychology, Iesha viewed my study on the mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students as "important work." She knew from firsthand experience how difficult a PhD program could be and chose to participate in the study to help explore and understand "how we can not only get more folks in these spaces but retain them once they're in the space." Prior to enrolling in her program, she expected obtaining a PhD "was going to be hard in terms of workload" and knew she "would need to have some system of self-care" in place to graduate with her mental health and wellness intact. Being that Iesha "got married 2 or 3 weeks before . . . the start of [her] program" she was intentional about incorporating wellness practices centered around her husband and her family. Although the wellness practices benefited Iesha's marriage, it "didn't spare [her] from any of the experiences that many Black women have in doctoral programs." For example, being intentional about developing wellness practices—such as bi-weekly date nights and monthly massages—did not shield her from having "a racist supervisor." In some ways, she "expected" Black students would have negative experiences in academia.

Although Iesha described being "stressed and . . . overworked" as a doctoral student, she maintained a sense of wellness throughout her doctoral program. Part of this was because she did "a lot of compartmentalizing" and kept her identity as a student "separate" from the rest of her identities. Her most difficult time managing her wellness was when she was pregnant. Iesha had a "very difficult pregnancy" which was "very traumatic." Iesha's wellness decreased due to her

pregnancy decreasing her ability to function at the intellectual capacity that she was used to. Balancing her pregnancy challenges with her academics was her greatest challenge because she was not prepared to manage both at the same time. However, Iesha felt well-equipped to manage the other challenges she had in her program (e.g., racism from her supervisor, the difficult course load). Minus the "toxic" supervisor, Iesha said she "had a positive PhD experience."

Iesha's salient identities are her Black womanhood and her socioeconomic status. She was reminded of these identities because of her pregnancy and the residency requirement for her program which led her and her family to move to the west coast with little resources. Her most important role is being a wife and mother. Being an academic is not her life or a "central tenet" of how she defines herself. She found joy and meaning in the personal aspects of her life (such as being a wife and mother).

Chapter Summary

As evidenced through the stories of each co-narrator, they all have unique identities, perspectives, and experiences. Although their experiences differ in some areas, they are alike in others. In the next chapter, I present the findings from the study. I start the chapter by sharing images each co-narrator submitted as part of the narrative activity of the study. I then present three to four themes that emerged from the data. Similar to the narratives, I use the co-narrators' own words to illustrate the experiences of Black women doctoral students.

Chapter 5: Findings

To expound on and enrich the literature about Black women doctoral students, I explored the holistic mental health and wellness of this population. Specifically, I sought to understand (a) how Black women doctoral students at Research 1(R1) or Research 2 (R2) institutions in the mid-Atlantic region describe their holistic mental health and wellness, and (b) what contributes to and interferes with the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students during their doctoral programs? Participants of the study were either enrolled in or had recently graduated (within 6 months) from a doctoral program at a R1 or R2 institution in the mid-Atlantic region. The study was conducted using narrative inquiry as a methodology, and with a conceptual framework of Black feminist thought and Hettler's (1980, 1984) six dimensions of wellness.

The co-narrators of this study were introduced in the previous chapter. As uncovered through their narratives, each co-narrator had unique experiences during their doctoral journey, although some of their experiences overlapped. What was clear in the narratives is each co-narrator had experiences inside and outside of academia that contributed to and interfered with their holistic mental health and wellness. Next, I present the findings of this study.

The findings of this study are presented using themes developed during the data analysis process. Each theme directly relates to one of the research questions. The themes were developed by first coding the data, collapsing the codes into categories, and then developing themes (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). For example, I started with an open coding process and codes such as support, community, and faculty interactions were developed. Once I reviewed the data more closely, I created a category for support and community with peers and support from

faculty members. Once the data were in categories, I was able to develop themes and I used the words of the co-narrators to name each theme.

The co-narrators' stories were multifaceted and rich. Because I used narrative inquiry as a methodological approach, I included long quotes from co-narrators that reveal stories about their experiences. Before delving into the themes, I first share the memes/gifs each co-narrator shared about their doctoral journey. Visual data "can expand how researchers engage in knowledge production and provide new opportunities to examine the experiences of students" (Kortegast et al., 2019, pp. 486–487). For this particular study, the images serve as a reference point that reveals the relationship Black women doctoral students had with their holistic mental health and wellness during their doctoral journey.

Memes/Gifs

The images shared, which were submitted by each co-narrator, show a trend in how Black women doctoral students describe their holistic mental health and wellness throughout their doctoral journey. As indicated in the images, many of the co-narrators experienced some type of exhaustion, anguish, fluctuation between joy and stress, and the need to keep moving forward despite what was happening around them. These images are a window into the overall mental health and wellness of the co-narrators, not just a singular moment during their doctoral journey.

As part of the narrative activity of the study, co-narrators were asked to share a meme or gif that represented their mental health and wellness during their doctoral journey (see Figures 2 through 11). The purpose of this activity was twofold. First, it allowed the co-narrators to engage in a light-hearted manner during the data collection process, for a topic that proved to be quite heavy and challenging for several of the co-narrators. Willow noted "that [it] was fun, trying to

find one.” Second, as the researcher, I was able to collect a second data source beyond interviews, which enabled me to better triangulate findings.

Figure 2

Marie’s Image: Cat Typing Vigorously on Laptop

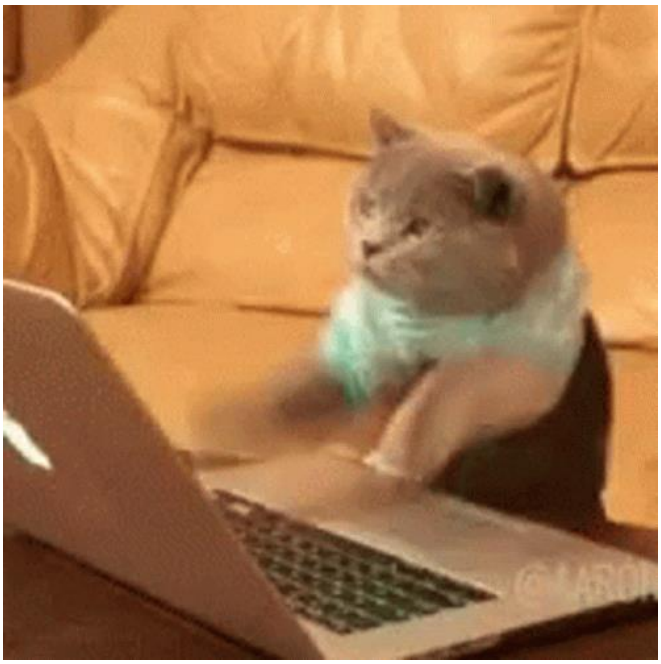


Figure 3

Joyce's Image: A Cartoon Image of a Dog Sitting in a Burning Room, the Caption Reads "This is Fine"

Figure 4

Kaycee's Image: A Before and After Picture of a Child's First Day of School

Figure 5

Willow's Image: Oprah With Both Hands on Her Forehead, Looking Around in Confusion

Figure 6

Joan's Image: A Young Boy Smiling Then Crying. The Caption Reads "I'm Fine"

Figure 7

Belle's Image: A Woman's Hair up in a Bun, the Back of the Hair Being Held up by Approximately 14 Clips. The Caption Reads: A Visual Representation of Me Trying to Hold My Life Together Right Now

Figure 8

Arianna's Image: Yandy (a Reality TV Star) Crying While Also Trying to Smile

Figure 9

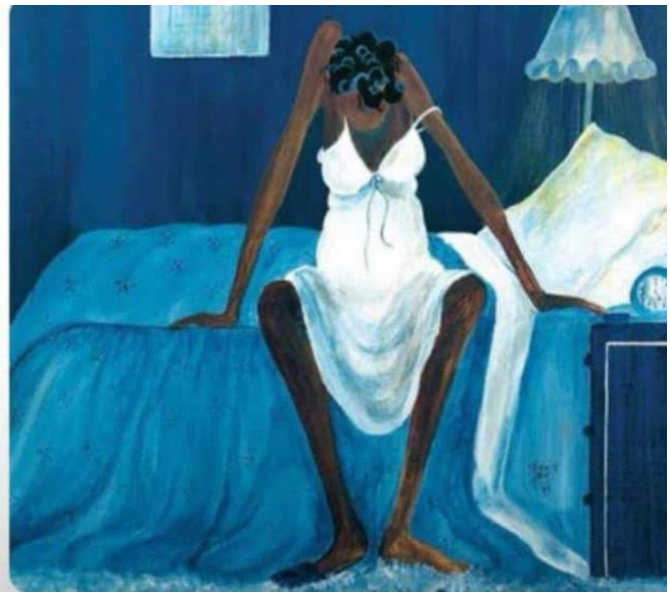
Neka's Image: A Roller Coaster of Life With Different Emotions and Sentiments, Including "So Happy, So Sad, WTF is Happening and Okay We Can Do This"

Figure 10

Iesha's First Image: A Cartoon Image of a Dog Sitting in a Burning Room, the Caption Reads "This Is Fine"

Figure 11

Iesha's Second Image: A Drawing of a Black Woman Sitting on the bed, With Her Shoulders High, and Head Down



A few of the co-narrators had difficulty selecting just one image that represented their holistic mental health and wellness during their doctoral journey. Iesha, for example, could not decide and ultimately provided two images. Arianna vacillated between two images before submitting her final one. Upon analyzing the memes/gif, I found several of the images are similar in that they convey the co-narrators' deep desire to keep moving forward despite the obstacles they faced during their program. For example, when providing an explanation of the image she selected, Arianna explained despite what was happening around her, as a Black woman doctoral student, "you still gotta be put together. Like her eyelashes are done. Her makeup done. Her hair is on point. You just gotta keep pushing through. You smile through the pain and get it done." Similarly, Joan chose an image of a little boy, laughing then crying and saying "I'm fine." Joan explained, "I chose it because it literally embodies what I am and was

doing, crying inside and out. Showing physical, palatable responses that are "I'm not fine," but saying that I'm fine. Trying to hold it together." Neka ultimately chose a gif of a roller coaster going through life's ups and downs, she explained "I was torn between this and the mask. There's like a mask of a smile, in the front facing it seems like you're happy. But underneath you're crying." Although she did not submit that image, her experience aligns with some of the other co-narrators who felt the need to smile through the pain of their PhD journey. Both Joyce and Iesha selected the image of the dog in a burning room, with the caption "everything is fine." Joyce explained:

> it's a lot of . . . shit going on. But we're gonna get through because we have no choice but to finish . . . like everything is on fire and everything is going wrong. Things are chaotic, but you just have to be like I know, we'll figure it out.

Iesha explained acting like everything is fine while in a burning room is the "PhD [experience] in a nutshell."

Marie explained her program required her to focus and keep moving forward, even when she experienced personal challenges. She explained:

> Okay, so this gif is probably my most go to gif for my entire program . . . I think that the reason why I chose this, I was really looking for another one. I was like, I was really trying to think of something else. But I was like I have to send this one because it really embodies, I think, how I feel every day. Like that little cat on the computer, just typin. And there's no stopping. It's just keep going. You keep going and keep going and keep typing. And it's like you're not getting anywhere. So, you just have to keep doing it over and over again. Yes, so I think it's a reflection of my mental health journey, because there hasn't been much time . . . I hadn't really had a lot of time, because I've been so focused on dissertating. And before [dissertating], there was writing papers, there was comps, and there was so many hours that I have spent in front of a computer. And I think with COVID more hours than you want, because now, most of your interviews are virtual. Which is convenient. But it's still you're in front of a computer . . . In some cases working against the time clock. That's what that gif says to me. It's also focused. The cat is very focused. And I think what it takes. I've cut out Instagram. I've cut out social media. I've cut out like hanging out with friends which is sad and lost friends. And because I'm trying to get this finished, and it feels like it takes that much concentration to do in order for me to be complete and as well as possible. Some things, socially, had to go for me to find time and rest. Like physical rest for my body.

Marie described how she had to keep focusing on completing her program, which sometimes meant other aspects of her wellness were neglected. Though she made time for rest, her social life suffered. Marie later explained (which is explored in a later section) she had some academic and personal challenges throughout the program, and she had to keep forging ahead. The sentiment of continuing to move forward was shared throughout several of the co-narrators' image selection and their stories.

Neka provided justification for the image she selected, although she was unsure of which one to submit. She explained she chose the image of the rollercoaster because it provided a more in-depth depiction of what her doctoral journey was like. She indicated:

> There are so many happy moments that often times are unexpected. This journey definitely makes you appreciate the small things and the moments where you can find joy. This journey is also sad and kind of isolating at times.

Similar to Neka reflecting on the joy *and* sadness of her journey, Kaycee explained her image selection reflected her joyful feelings before her PhD program started and the sadness she experienced after her program began. Kaycee explained:

> This particular one references school, and you know you can see she's just so fresh and innocent and eager to learn and . . . ready to experience a good day. And you can see in the after picture she did not have what she expected. It did not look like a good day. Her hair is out of place. She apparently got into some type of tussle (laughter) and [there's] also the seriousness . . . The frown on her face. I definitely can relate to that as well like I'm not smiling as much as I was before this PhD journey.

Other images submitted by the co-narrators indicated they were trying to keep it together amid the challenges of their doctoral program. Willow explained the image she submitted of Oprah in confusion depicted how she often felt " Oh, my God, what in the world is happening? . . . I felt like I was constantly overwhelmed." Although Belle did not express being overwhelmed explicitly, she selected an image of a woman's hair being held up by hair clips. She explained:

> I got all these clips in my hair to hold things together right. It's just hard, period . . . And so all of those little clips you see represent all of these little pieces of my life that overlap but not really are connected in any way. The only connection is me. But I've gotta somehow figure out how to make sure that all of these things are taken care of, too.

The act of trying to keep it together while navigating the ups and downs of a doctoral program influenced the holistic mental health and wellness of the co-narrators. These images serve as a visual representation for the overall experiences of the women in the study and enhance our understanding of the factors that contributed to or interfered with the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students (i.e., Research Question 2). The images indicate that Black women doctoral students experience fatigue, worked hard to keep it all together, and smiled through pain while forging ahead. Saying "it's fine" while crying, or sitting in a burning room, indicates that the co-narrators were experiencing emotionally challenging situations but suppressed their feelings to focus on their academic persistence. When considering the social context of US academia, the images submitted align with the idea that Black women have to be strong and are not allowed rest; we must persist at all costs. While the desire to persist in a doctoral program is understandable, the images indicate that sometimes the co-narrators' wellness suffered because of it. The overall themes of the images align with additional themes uncovered throughout the data analysis process, which I explore later in this chapter. The sentiment that Black women doctoral students must keep going had implications for their holistic wellness which is explored in further detail in the next section of this chapter.

The research questions that guided this study are interconnected, as are the findings. As such, I present the findings by addressing how the co-narrators of this study described and defined their mental health and wellness during their doctoral journey (i.e., Research Question 1) followed by multiple stories and examples of what contributed to and interfered with their wellness (i.e., Research Question 2). An analysis of the co-narrators' definitions of wellness and

their experiences with it sheds light on the complex interplay between individual experiences and broader systemic factors shaping doctoral students' well-being. Quotes that embodied the theme are used as titles, followed by a description of the theme that emerged from the data.

"Wellness for Your Whole Body:" Co-Narrators Definitions of Holistic Mental Health and Wellness

The co-narrators had various conceptualizations of holistic mental health and wellness. Each co-narrator identified the need to take care of the whole self, which included mind, body, and spirit, although during their doctoral programs, they were not always able to experience wellness in the ways they defined it. For example, Joyce defined holistic mental health and wellness as "looking at things spiritually, financially, physically, and psychologically, like all of those different aspects that make up humanity." She then recognized she was better able to focus on her wellness after coursework and her program ended because there was a lack of time and energy during her doctoral journey. When reflecting on her holistic wellness, Joyce explained:

> I've been having this terrible sleep hygiene overall. So it's me making sure like, are you sleeping? Are you eating? Are you drinking? Are you exercising? Things that I would very easily neglect in my program . . . I exercise[d] more after I finished coursework, because I had the time to do it then. To spend 5 hours in class 2, 3 times a week, and then, you know, have to write or read. So, my physical wellness has gone up now that I finished course work. Certainly gone up now that I don't have to, you know, turn in any deadlines to write anything. I need to check in with people because I get energy, even though I'm not like super extroverted. But I like being around good vibes, good spirits. That feeds me. So, if I'm only in my apartment on the weekends reading, writing by myself . . . I'm not feeding that social aspect. I don't know if you've ever played Sims. And you kind of see those different levels. And it would say hunger, sleep, like, that's what I think about when I think about mental health . . . every day, you're not expected to be a hundred percent. But for what you're going through in that moment, do you have what you need, where you're not neglecting something that you have to have? And so it's like a job in and of itself, is taking care of your body, which I think a lot of students–we neglect our bodies, especially our physical health, because we're like we don't have the time to. And it's not even about fitting a certain size. We just don't have the time to exercise, to do those things that keep us well, that then impacts other things in our lives.

Joyce recounted her realization of the importance of paying closer attention to her wellness routines, which she had unintentionally overlooked during her doctoral program. She emphasized basic needs such as nourishment, hydration, and making time for social interaction. Ideally, Joyce would have liked to engage in wellness activities throughout her doctoral program, but the lack of time and energy prohibited her from doing so. Similarly, Marie identified holistic wellness as tending "to your entire being" and also recognizing she was unable to fully do that during her doctoral journey. She shared:

> Physical, how am I balancing that with my mental health, my emotional health, my spiritual health, my intellectual health, occupational health, like all the aspects of my life pretty much. And what does that mean for me? I know that throughout this program my intellectual health is high because you're reading, you're thinking, you're writing all of these things; It's great, and I'm stimulated intellectually. But I will say, my physical health, that was low, just from not having time to cook. And my financial health was low. My mental health got better because I had to learn how to balance that. But that also was because I wanted to be able to write, right. So I couldn't write if my mind wasn't in the right place.

Here, Marie acknowledged how aspects of her holistic wellness sometimes suffered, which influenced her ability to engage in the doctoral process. Marie's physical health was low due to lack of time to adequately tend to her fundamental needs, such as eating. The lack of wellness clouded her mind and impacted her ability to write. Marie did identify developing and maintaining balance were important for her overall wellness. Although not explicitly stated, Marie identified how different aspects of wellness are connected to one another. Similarly, Willow shared holistic wellness is about several aspects of wellness. She described:

> I think about full wellness, mind, body, soul, spirit . . . when I think about wellness—taking care of myself—I do strive towards holistic wellness because I see it. I understand that I'm not one of these things, right. So, if I'm physically well, exercising, I'm working out. But then, like, you know, I'm feeding my mind or allowing weird thoughts to stay that shouldn't . . . For me everything is intertwined. So, yes, that's holistic mental health, holistic wellness is something I strive towards. I don't always get it right, you know. Sometimes I'm in a rut, and that's just what it is. But for me, I think also being a person of faith, and approaching my, like my faith and my relationship with God is, you know,

> something that is very important to me, and I feel like it infiltrates all aspects of my life. I think that grounding also lends to a holistic way of looking at things where it's like I'm striving toward mind, body and soul wellness. And again, it's not always there. But that's the goal that I'm aiming towards.

When examining wellness in its entirety, Willow delineated the interdependence inherent in her understanding of it. She recognized despite her consistent pursuit of holistic wellness, there were occasions when achieving it proved elusive. Willow's conceptualization of wellness further illustrates how Black women doctoral students describe and define holistic wellness, although it is not always attainable.

Kaycee had similar views as Willow and the other co-narrators, as she also defined wellness as "wellness for your whole body. So, it's not just the physical. It is also your spirit, your mind, not just your body." As noticed in the quote, Kaycee shared similar views as other co-narrators when describing holistic wellness, as it requires attention to multiple parts of a person. She further posited:

> A more natural approach is kind of what I associate with holistic wellness. Not really depending on medicine, or even the healthcare field . . . but more so just kind of like finding a natural, more spiritual way to advance your wellness . . . understanding that it's not just access to health care that can improve your wellness. But there's this spiritual aspect as well, and the natural aspect, you know . . . like I used to be able to go outside, get some fresh [air]. I get some sun and feel better. If I'm annoyed with the coworker I used to be able to go take a walk. You know that sort of thing, and it literally does make you feel better. Something that simple as fresh air and sun, makes you feel better.

Kaycee described holistic wellness as more than just western medicine; it is also engaging in activities that make a person feel good. By reflecting on the wellness practices she used to participate in (e.g., going on walks), Kaycee recognized she was unable to do those things as often since being in her doctoral program. Kaycee's understanding of wellness included tending to multiple aspects of her life, including her spiritual and physical needs, which related to how other co-narrators described holistic wellness.

Joan identified the "large facets of wellness" as "financial wellness, physical wellness, and mental health wellness." She believed although her definition of wellness was "not all encompassing of what wellness is; those are the pillars that bleed into each other on whether you're holistically well." Joan believed there were additional aspects that influenced wellness, but the pillars she identified were most important to her. Her definition is consistent with what other co-narrators identified. Joan explained, "if your psychological needs are met, your biological needs are met, and your need to be safe and have shelter and have resources, those needs are met," then a person can be fully well.

Arianna, Iesha, and Belle described holistic mental health as going beyond internal needs, but also involving community and the people around them. Arianna explicitly acknowledged:

> My mental health is also tied to not just to what I eat, but how I physically take care of my body. That is part of holistic mental health. How I take care of the people around me that I love, that is part of holistic mental health. Who I surround myself with, that is holistic mental health.

In this excerpt, Arianna's perspective on holistic mental health aligns closely with that of the other co-narrators, albeit with some nuanced distinctions. She articulated how her holistic mental health incorporates considerations of her dietary intake and physical self-care practices. Arianna also underscored the importance of being connected to her community as an important component of her wellness. Who she is able to spend time with, and how she is able to take care of her family and friends is crucial to her wellness.

Similarly, Belle explained wellness has different aspects, including being connected to the people she loves. Belle shared holistic wellness for her is connected to her own financial stability and physical health, but it is also connected to the wellness of her family. She elucidated:

> Holistic wellness would mean I'm not worried about how I'm gonna pay my rent. I'm not worried about am I eating or other people in my family eating? There's no such thing as holistic wellness for me if my family isn't good, because I don't have the luxury of only worrying about myself. Like yes, I'm not married. No, I don't have children. But I'm a part of a community, a family who pools their resources together to make things happen for each other. And the academy is just unable to see that it's not just me. So holistic means seeing that that little stipend that they give not only does it come to me, but it goes up, it goes out, it goes down, it goes around. Everybody getting a little piece of that check, right? And their judgment on this notion of you have to prioritize yourself first. That is not a luxury I could have ever afforded.

In this excerpt, Belle emphasized the importance of her own financial health and physical needs (e.g., having food to eat), while recognizing her wellness is tied to her family and loved ones. She stressed the fact she cannot be well if the people around her are not also doing well mentally, physically, and financially. Belle went on further to explain "Black women don't have the ability to just worry about ourselves." Arianna and Belle recognized their unique perspectives on individual holistic wellness and also acknowledged its involvement with their loved ones.

Iesha and Neka had unique expressions of holistic mental health and wellness. Although Iesha also mentioned community in her understanding of wellness, she focused on centering joy. Iesha elaborated and shared:

> Some people think about mental health and wellness like, you know, going to talk to a therapist, or, if you need more support, having medication. Or the kind of more formalized mental health . . . but I think for me it's more just like finding the joy in the small things and trying to just find the pockets—which is something I've been working on since I've been in school—is just finding the pockets to touch base with my people. Or to fill in the space to do something and not be so caught up in the to do list of what needs to be done and find those pockets of yes, this needs to be done, but also I can make time for people that matter to me, and things that matter to me, which is easier said than done for sure.

For Iesha, wellness means being able to find time to center joy and connect with others. It can be easy to focus on the tasks that need to be accomplished during the doctoral journey—like Marie mentioned—but Iesha was intentional about finding "pockets" to step outside of her doctoral

experience to find joy. Although her perspective is related to some of the preceding definitions shared by co-narrators, it is unique in that she centered a sense of joy.

Neka described mental health and wellness as the ability to find a sense of peace, even when things may be chaotic around her. Neka went into more depth when she defined holistic mental health and wellness for herself:

> It's easy to think that mental health and wellness just means all is well and that there are minimal problems. But I think for me, an authentic answer, that despite what's going on, there is still an opportunity to not be lost, still find your authentic self, your authentic voice. Even when it's hard, you find resilience . . . despite what's happened [it is] something that is done individually or with the assistance of mental health practitioners. You care for your whole self, despite life's chaos.

In this quote, Neka reflected on the importance of staying grounded, even amidst surrounding chaos. She acknowledged maintaining wellness can be done alone or in concert with mental health professionals, but it is important the whole self is cared for. Neka described authenticity as a key component of wellness. She explained "life will always throw you things, but I think being centered and able to take in whatever's going on, and find a way to show up as yourself" is crucial to holistic wellness. Neka also noted "Anytime I realize I'm not showing up as my whole self, that's when I feel unwell." Being able to show up authentically, as her full self, helped her to maintain a sense of peace during chaotic times, which aided in her wellness.

The co-narrators identified the various components associated with holistic mental health and wellness. The co-narrators discussed holistic mental health and wellness, covering physical, spiritual, and mental dimensions. They emphasized the importance of community connection as a central aspect of overall well-being. Although there was very much overlap in how the co-narrators' conceptualized wellness, there were also several unique perspectives. The overarching commonality was holistic mental health and wellness for Black women doctoral students

consisted of multiple facets. In the next section, I highlight the various factors that contributed to and interfered with the holistic wellness of the co-narrators.

Factors That Contributed to and Interfered With Holistic Wellness

The findings of this study are interconnected. Because co-narrators were asked to share stories about their experiences, it is difficult to disentangle their stories from key concepts and themes. Given the nature of storytelling, and how storylines are related to other parts of the narrative, some of the themes in this chapter overlap. Although I parsed out prominent themes that emerged from the data, there are instances where themes are related to one another or related to a larger story. As such, this section is organized by exploring the factors that contributed to and interfered with the holistic mental health of Black women doctoral students. The data revealed certain factors distinctly contributed to mental health and wellness and others clearly detracted from it, with some areas overlapping between the two.

Factors That Contributed to Holistic Wellness

In this section, I present data on how the co-narrators' holistic mental health and wellness was influenced in both positive and negative ways. I begin by outlining factors that positively influenced the mental health and wellness of the co-narrators, particularly emphasizing the significance of community among Black women and being intentional about centering wellness. This is followed by an exploration of areas where positive and negative influences on wellness intersect, including the impact of relationships with faculty and higher education administrators, and interactions with both Black and non-Black faculty and administrators. I conclude the findings section by identifying clear detractors of holistic mental health and wellness for the co-narrators, including impostorism and pushing through obstacles. Finally, I end the chapter with a chapter summary.

"They Needed the Sisterhood:" The Importance of Community With Other Black Women

Similar to the pilot study I conducted, the importance of community emerged as a theme in this research. Specifically, community served as either a protective factor or risk factor for Black women doctoral students' holistic health and wellness. Essentially, the community the co-narrators developed, or did not develop, with various people in academia had the power to influence their wellness positively or negatively. In this section, I center the importance of connection to other Black women, as this stood out as a major influence on the wellness of the co-narrators.

The co-narrators' positive relationships with other Black women allowed space for them to show up as their full selves, which brought many co-narrators joy and benefited their holistic mental health and wellness. For example, Neka shared how being in community with other Black women had a positive influence on her holistic mental health and wellness. Specifically, she noted "I was not expecting the community . . . of other Black women that happened in this journey, that really helped my mental health journey, along with professional help." She illustrated this sentiment with a story. Neka shared:

> There was one spring semester that my mental health was just . . . so high because I had one specific [class] . . . I think it's the only class in my whole journey that I never missed a class for. It was a class that unofficially the Black women chose to stay after class and just do a check-in . . . and we became so intertwined with each other's wellness . . . just checking in, just connecting, just being able to breathe or acknowledge different journeys we all were on. As a mom, some of us had partners, some were single, some were in different departments and not necessarily in [the education] space. But still, we all were able to, as Black women, connect and just check-in on each other . . . I was meeting with my therapist virtually about 3 days before I had that class. [When I would] meet with my therapist, I was still on this euphoric high . . . She was like, "Oh, what happened?" And I was like, "You know what, I just need a class with all these women all the time, and I would be great. I would have a perfect doctoral journey!" And so I just think back to that semester with just so much joy . . . It was the best class I had not because of the academics, but because of the roster.

Belle also had a similar experience when she was in class with other Black women. She fondly remembers that time during her program:

> I was just happy. I remember every day in that semester. I felt like the sun shined. I don't know why. I just remember damn, this a beautiful semester . . . I was in a class with majority Black women. Like every class I took had 5 or more Black women in it. So that was super dope because it was like three times a week I was having these impromptu group sessions where we would all dump our shit on the table and promise to leave them there, and never, pick it back up again. The classes were good.

Both Neka and Belle experienced a heightened sense of wellness because of their exposure to other Black women during the coursework. Being among other Black women was a safe and healthy space for both Neka and Belle. Marie also noted her relationship with other Black women in her program was important for her overall wellness. She shared, "it has been such a blessing to be a Black woman at [McMillan State University]" because of the community of Black women, both faculty and students, she was able to experience. Marie further indicated "being in community with other Black women that are doctoral students" helped her tremendously in her program, which ultimately influenced her wellness. Arianna shared similar views, as she credited her cohort of three other Black women scholars as what made her experience at McMillan State meaningful. Specifically, her cohort of Black women created a community that was a safe space where she felt supported, challenged with care, and affirmed. As a reminder, prior to attending McMillan State, Arianna was enrolled in a different PhD program. Arianna shared a story about her arrival to McMillan State and the positive influence that community, especially with other Black women, had for her wellness:

> [Another Black woman doctoral student at McMillan State] reached out and was like, "Hey, if you wanna meet before, you know you come to campus while you're making your decision." Then [faculty members] set me up with other Black graduate students to talk about their experience. So, it was like, Okay, I know that I'm walking into a [HWI]. It's gonna be harmful. It's gonna have like these [issues], like it's gonna be racist, because I'm a Black woman. But there's also like, they're letting me know early, "hey, there's places of support that we've set up that are available to you." And I think that was

> different than what I had expected to walk into at [McMillan State]. I think, also being in a cohort of 4 Black women, that was also a signal to me, like, Oh, like, there's something special about this program. Like there's something about this that they recognize the community, and they recognize identity matters. And . . . I knew that that was gonna be important. But I had been without that in my first PhD program. I thought I could be okay without that. And I recognize that I couldn't have survived this program without that.

Arianna's holistic mental health and wellness was influenced in positive ways because she was able to show up authentically, her identity was valued, and she was in community with other Black women. Similarly, Joan explained being in a community of Black women, where she was able to show up as a full-person inclusive and exclusive of her academic identity, was important for her, even in digital spaces. She shared her and a few other Black women used to have:

> A Sunday reading circle. We don't have time to do a book club, because we don't have time to read anything else. In the reading circle, we pick a book, and we listen to the audible on zoom. We listened to like two or three chapters, and we discussed it. We don't have separate time to do all of this. But in this space we can set aside an hour or hour and a half, where we spend the first half hour listening, and then we spend the rest of the time conversing. Then I ask for prayer requests at the end. They show up in that space.

This dedicated time to be in community with other Black women was critical for her wellness at an institution that lacked racial diversity. Additionally, Joan shared her connection to other Black women through her sorority is what helped her manage and navigate the difficulty she experienced when she first arrived on campus. This community was particularly impactful for her when she arrived on campus after finding out her fellowship, which was supposed to include housing, did not materialize. She discussed:

> I literally had to lean on the shield. I'm in a sorority, and the local chapter has an older member, who . . . has . . . a huge house, and was like you can just stay with me. And she took me out to dinner just to welcome me to the area . . . I stayed with her for almost two months, between a month and a month and a half, until I found a place.

Although Joan's sorority sister was not a student at the institution, it reminded Joan the importance of "practice[ing] sisterhood" with Black women who are and are not members of a

Black-Greek lettered organizations. Following her experience of not having housing when she arrived to campus, Joan reflected and shared:

> It would have been a different ride if she wasn't able to scoop me up . . . I would probably [have] had to go back home . . . I feel for people who can't fall back on [an organization]. The space I created has AKA's, Zetas, and Deltas and non-Greeks in it, because it wasn't enough of us to be splittin' the crowd. They needed the sisterhood. They may not have pledged into, but they needed desperately. We just all had to band together.

Instances where Black women doctoral students were supported by other Black women proved to be rewarding and fulfilling experiences. Marie also had a positive experience with a Black staff member at her institution. She reflected:

> I think that for me it also looks like talking to Amara . . . who is East African. Being able to go to her and her bringing me injera dora wot to campus when it's Easter time . . . she has brought me a whole pack of injera. I still have some of her Tupperware, even though I moved . . . having other Africans here has really helped. The relationship that I have with Amara has been one of the things that I look forward to the most on campus . . . I'm getting emotional. Even though I'm not home, I feel like there's a part of me that is at home when I see her, and when I could talk to her, and she tells me things and when she brings me . . . food . . . that was the biggest thing that I think really made me feel like I'm really loved. And it's not because I'm a student at [McMillan State], right. It's because we share this knowledge about our origins. So yeah, she means a lot to me. I think that this campus has influenced my wellness, that part of being a Black woman has influenced my wellness because it's another Black woman . . . who has poured into me and poured into my life.

Similar to Joan's experience with her sorority sister, Amara was not a student at Marie's institution. Amara was part of the support staff at McMillan State University. Having Amara show up for Marie in a way that centered her racial and ethnic identity helped Marie to feel loved, cared for, and seen, which ultimately had a positive influence on her holistic mental health and wellness.

As evidenced throughout this section, the co-narrators experienced heightened levels of wellness when engaging in community with fellow Black women. The cultivation of positive relationships in this demographic proved pivotal for their overarching well-being. Having a safe

space where they could show up authentically enhanced the co-narrators' experiences and ultimately their wellness. In the ensuing section, I elucidate additional ways the co-narrators were intentional about fostering their wellness.

"Finding Those Pockets:" Intentionally Choosing Wellness in the PhD Journey

In addition to community, learning how to find and center their well-being was an influential factor for the holistic mental health and wellness of the co-narrators. Some co-narrators were intentional about identifying ways to engage in wellness centered practices, and other co-narrators made decisions about their experiences that inadvertently influenced their wellness. In this section of the dissertation, I highlight instances when the co-narrators experienced high levels of wellness.

Co-narrators tended to experience high wellness when they were not engrossed in the daily tasks of their programs and were able to take breaks. Joyce shared she felt high levels of wellness when she "didn't have to do anything for L. Hansberry University." Arianna also shared her wellness was highest when she "could take a break from grad school with [her] community." Arianna elaborated further and shared seeing her peers take breaks helped give her permission to do the same:

> There's this perception that people give off of like, oh, I'm always reading. I'm always doing research. I'm always in the lab . . . And it was like, no. I'm going to spend time with my family. [And my cohort sister would say] I just had a kid, I'm taking the weekend off because I'm giving time to my daughter. And so that . . . also helped my mental health, because, okay, you don't always have to work. It's okay to take breaks. And not just okay, but you have to take breaks, and this is not your life. This can't be all of who you are. And I think because of my community, I was able to see that, because we also found time for each other to take breaks, to just be.

Not only did being in community "help [Arianna's] mental health a lot," it also reminded her of the importance of taking a break from her doctoral program. The ability to "just be" was important for her overall wellness, and reminded her there was more to life than her PhD

program, such as family and time with friends. Additionally, Arianna shared "just doing things that made [her] happy" was a part of her developing a sense of well-being. Willow also shared the importance of taking breaks. She described how she, too, had people in her life who allowed her to disconnect from the PhD experience. She shared "I leaned on my support system, my family, my husband, my friends, who were great at letting me vent. Or like just going out to brunch and not talking about this, having a break." Disconnecting from the PhD process was critical for the co-narrators' well-being and reinforced the idea there was life outside of academia.

Iesha shared similar thoughts around there being more to life than the PhD journey. She explained how obtaining her doctoral degree was just one part of her life. Other areas of her life helped her put that into perspective. Iesha reflected:

> I think [motherhood] gave me a different perspective . . . In that everything is such a big deal in PhD, and none of this stuff compares to my kid. I'm still very much a career woman, don't personally want to be a stay-at-home mom. And at the same time, it's like, none of this stuff is as important. Nothing you're asking me to do will take precedence over what my kid needs. Like there are real life things going on outside of this little academic bubble. So, I think it gives you–it gave me in terms of wellness–I think it gave me a different perspective in terms of how much I was willing to work. How much I was willing to not care about deadlines. I know that sounds bad. And I'm in a space this year where I can't do that as much . . . But at the same time, . . . I think it was good for me mentally to have that perspective shift of: I could just *not* do this . . . Like my coworkers here, stay late, and I'm like I can't stay late and also I don't wanna stay late. And it'll get done when it gets done. And will anybody die? Probably not. You know, if somebody's at risk of dying, I'll probably stay late. But 9 times out of 10, you gonna be okay. Yeah, I think . . . that perspective shift is good . . . it's like just a real life perspective shift (laughter). Like you think all this stuff is so important. And there's other things that are important, too.

In this quote, we see motherhood played a role in Iesha recognizing there is more to life than her PhD work. When Iesha is referring to work, she is referencing her lab work or externship, which are both requirements for her program. Having a child helped her change her perspective on what was important in life. In this quote, we see Iesha became less rigid with deadlines and allowed

herself flexibility when completing assignments. She worked at a pace that aligned with her schedule. She also set boundaries related to the time spent engaging in work. Shifting her perspective to allow for other important roles in her life to emerge, like becoming a mother, helped with Iesha's overall sense of wellness. This also connects to Iesha's earlier definition of holistic wellness, where she described "finding those pockets" of joy during the doctoral process. Iesha explained other ways that she finds pockets of wellness:

> I always try to have a mentor and have a mentee . . . That's one of the things that fulfills me, is to have that in some regard . . . Those are the kind of things that bring me joy outside of work. So I try to keep those things in mind, too, because, again, like I said, none of this—I don't wanna say none of it matters. I think my work matters, but it only matters to a point of what you do to wrap it into your bigger purpose, and I feel like my purpose is, yes, my work is a part of that. But it's not my entire purpose. And so, yeah, I think the mentoring

Having a purpose outside of her identity as a PhD student helped Iesha to feel holistically well. Being connected with people outside of her journey (e.g. her child, her mentees) and finding areas outside of the PhD program gave Iesha a sense of purpose and brought Iesha joy and balance.

Relatedly, Joan also found a sense of joy and purpose by mentoring and connecting with other Black students. She described what she calls "the second shift" which is "where you help all the other Black students that are younger than you, that are looking up to you." Joan was intentional about supporting Black undergraduate and graduate students at Katherine Johnson College. In addition to mentoring undergraduate students, she took it upon herself to organize wellness retreats for Black women doctoral students. Joan shared:

> I decided that me, being a Black doctoral student . . . was me being a crusader for every other Black doctoral woman on the campus. We had to build some type of network and connection where we write together, and we present together. I created a self-care retreat where, on the weekend, we got massages and facials and went to a museum and did meditation and did yoga. Because I needed it, selfishly. But then I was like, "Y'all know

> y'all need it too." We all shared that space together. We had our little towel wraps on our head and was like we need this for us.

Joan gained a sense of joy and purpose by creating an opportunity for other Black women doctoral students to focus on and center themselves. She "took pride in the second shift" where she was able to support other Black students, specifically other Black women. Although the second shift is connected to Joan's identity as a doctoral student, supporting other students gave her greater purpose beyond her identity as a PhD student. She was able to serve as a connector for her community and it positively influenced her wellness.

Additionally, Joan felt a greater sense of wellness when she made decisions that centered her needs. Joan shared about the financial difficulties she had throughout her program. Once she decided to take out loans, she felt relief. She commented:

> I think my wellness was at its highest. I had finally broken down and said, "You need to get out loans. Cause you are not living, you cannot live–you're 30 something now, and you cannot be eating ramen every day. You are over 300 pounds now. Because you've been trying to eat what you can afford." I said, "You know what? You just go ahead, break down." It released something. Not having to scrip, scrap, scrape. And be able to . . . go to the farmer's market and get fresh vegetables or whatever. I began to pay my bills on time. I began to eat better and work out. I began to seek out another option for therapy that was feasible for me. The University then began using Talkspace. They made it available to all . . . enrolled students.

Joan illustrated how making the decision to take out student loans helped her lead a more balanced life. She was able to eat healthy, pay her bills in a timely manner, and participate in therapy. Deciding to seek out additional funding through loans helped to lessen Joan's financial burden and also provided the means to focus on other health related practices, such as healthy eating, working out, and seeking therapy.

Other co-narrators shared ways they tended to their wellness. Specifically, Marie, Joan, Neka, and Arianna all described seeking or continuing therapeutic relationships to help manage their wellness. A few of the co-narrators spoke about how they intentionally found or had a

Black woman therapist. Neka shared how she "always had Black or Afro Caribbean of origin [therapists]. Those are who I gravitated toward for my therapy. . . . Those were who I intentionally selected." Like Neka, Arianna reflected on intentionally seeking out a Black woman for therapy, saying:

> I was also really intentional. Previously when I had been in therapy, it was just like, I'll find whatever therapist can take me. [But now] I was intentional about finding a Black woman that I could talk about [identity] issues with, that understood Black family dynamics.

Belle also noted "how important it [was] for [her] to have a Black woman therapist." For Neka, Arianna, and Belle, finding therapists with the same racial and ethnic background was important for them. Sharing identities with their therapists helped them to feel better understood and supported. Belle also noted how her talk therapist encouraged her to try different therapeutic modalities to help her maintain her holistic wellness. Belle shared:

> [I go to] therapy like three times a week . . . I have a regular talk therapist. I have a movement therapist . . . basically my Black woman therapist–shout out to her–said that Black women's trauma is so big you gotta do more than talk therapy. She was able to position with my insurance company for me to get this like movement therapy . . . And then my other one is Yoga related, so I can work on my mindfulness. And shot out to [my insurance company], for tending to the mental health wellness of their clients. Cause I hear a lot of people sayin', my insurance don't do that.

Having access to different forms of therapy was helpful for Belle. She was grateful her talk therapist suggested multiple forms of therapy and was equally grateful to her insurance for financially supporting her therapy options.

Although Joan and Marie talked about being in therapeutic relationships, they did not disclose if their therapists shared their racial and gender identities. Joan explained, "when everything shut down, [she] started seeing [a therapist] virtually who was a Black woman." However, that woman left Katherine Johnson College because "she was being pulled so heavily. And they refused to hire another mental health professional that could help her carry the load."

Joan saw that therapist through her private practice and "paid out of pocket . . . once or twice" but that got to be too expensive for her. She did eventually seek and find a new therapist but, again, the identities of that therapist was unclear.

What was abundantly clear was therapy helped sustain several of the co-narrators throughout their journeys. Marie shared how her "therapist helped [her] find an emotional balance" and helped her to "realize what [she] could control and what [she] couldn't." Arianna also shared she started therapy because she "wanted to be better" and she "didn't want [her] anxiety to be what always led [her]." Therapy helped the co-narrators to learn about themselves and how to navigate challenges inside and outside of academia.

Although not all of the co-narrators spoke about therapy specifically, many spoke about engaging in practices that centered their wellness. Joyce shared how she "joined a bike club during the pandemic" to help with her wellness. Marie shared in addition to therapy, she started "getting back into some hobbies, things that [she] enjoys doing which are important for [her]." Willow shared that she is "a person of faith . . . and [she] never had to practice that more than . . . in the past few years." Her doctoral program required her to lean into practices that centered her wellness. She shared:

> Like prayer, like, you know, and just implementing those practices to like, make me feel better, especially at the times that I felt really overwhelmed. So journaling, prayer, movement, like going on walks when I could go outside. Like I really learned.. out of necessity, I learned what I needed to do to take care of myself, because I had to.

Willow was able to re-engage in practices that made her feel well. Like some of the other co-narrators, she discovered the necessary measures to cultivate a sense of well-being for herself.

As illustrated in this section, it was critical for the co-narrators to find pockets that made them feel whole and well. Participating in activities such as therapy, taking breaks, mentoring others, and engaging in spiritual practices facilitated the co-narrators' prioritization of their

wellness. In the next section of my dissertation, I explore factors that both contributed to and interfered with the co-narrators' well-being.

Positive *and* Negative Contributing Factors to Holistic Mental Health and Wellness

The previous stories amplifying the joy Black women felt when connecting with other Black women largely centered on their connections with peers. However, several co-narrators also shared the experiences they had with faculty members that positively or negatively influenced their wellness. In this section of my dissertation, I highlight how relationships with faculty and higher education administrators influenced my co-narrators' wellness, in both positive and negative ways. I start by highlighting the challenges Black women doctoral students experienced with Black women in leadership roles, followed by describing interactions with supportive Black and non-Black faculty that had implications for their wellness. Each section illustrates the crucial role of supportive relationships with faculty in helping the co-narrators navigate challenging experiences with other faculty members or higher education leadership, ultimately impacting their overall wellness.

"All Skin Folk Ain't Kinfolk:" Interactions With Challenging Black Faculty and Administrators

Although the co-narrators shared positive, meaningful connections with other Black women peers in their program, their encounters with other Black women at the institution were not all positive. When the co-narrators had negative experiences with other Black women, they were typically faculty members or administrators. In this section, I highlight the positive and negative ways interaction with Black women in faculty and administrator roles contributed to and interfered with the wellness of Black women doctoral students.

As previously noted, Joan's funding fell through which had a negative impact on her overall wellness. What was not shared earlier was the decision to rescind her funding was partly made by a Black woman administrator at her institution, the vice president who served on the chief diversity officer's team. Joan shared a story that described what happened:

> I was recruited to [Katherine Johnson College]. It wasn't on my radar . . . I had never been until I got recruited there. I got recruited by, at the time he was their Chief Diversity Officer . . . I listen to, "If you come, if you get accepted to [Katherine Johnson College], we will make sure that you're a Justice Scholar. We'll pay for your tuition. We'll pay for your living expenses, etc." That's all I needed to hear, really . . . A year or so went by. Time for me to start doing my applications. I've been to this place before, and I met some people. It seemed alright. Everything they showed me seemed in order. So sure. I'll give it a try. I'll apply there, too. Get accepted . . . Get there, the chief diversity officer is no longer with the university. There's a new chief diversity officer, [a Black woman], and she didn't care about whatever I was promised at all. She was pretty much like 'appreciate you coming, good luck to you.'

After living with her sorority sister for a couple of months, and conducting an impromptu job search, Joan landed her own apartment and job at a hospital. She did eventually receive funding to be a justice scholar, but it was a fraction of what she was expecting because she "wasn't qualified for very much funding because [she] had an . . . income now. Apparently, it's income based."

After being in her job at the hospital for about a month, Joan left and sought new employment because she "felt like [she] had to choose between [her] job and [her] ethics." When she left, she ironically obtained a position in the office with the new chief diversity officer, where she was originally denied her scholarship. She worked in the office of the vice president as a graduate assistant for the vice president (who worked closely with the chief diversity officer) for about one semester before realizing it was not a good fit. When describing why the graduate assistant position was not a good fit, Joan stated:

> It was very heavy on me, because I realized that there was things that I'm being asked to do that was well beyond the job that I had originally taken. I'm co-teaching a class at night and doing all these other things. Going to these events. It was way more than my 20 hours which is illegal. I decided to look for another option.

When Joan obtained a new role, she informed her immediate supervisor, who "announced [it] in the all-staff meeting, without [Joan] knowing . . . the vice president was shocked." The decision to leave caused some turmoil for Joan. The vice president was not pleased at Joan's departure and said to her "Well, it would have been nice to know that you're leaving." Joan described what happened in the months following her departure, saying:

> In the fall, I'm waiting for my justice scholar stipend to roll in, because it's like the money that was going to pay for my books . . . it just never comes. Some of the other scholars already got their money and all that kind of stuff. There was one other scholar that was in the same boat as me, and apparently, he made comments at [the vice president's] state of the diversity address. She opened it up for questions and he asked her a direct question, and she didn't like that. She cut both of our funding down from over 10g's, over 15, 20g's to $500 . . . I'm reaching out. Nobody is reaching back. This is the place that I just finished working. I request a meeting with her. She refuses. Then she eventually said that she had 15 minutes for me, and that she didn't want to meet with me in person. She wanted it to be a phone call. And so, I took the 15 minutes. I said, "I did not take my happy tail from [my small town] to [Katherine Johnson College] for this. You could have at least gave me a notification, so that I would find another way to pay for my books . . . I got recruited here as a Justice Scholar. That's the whole reason why I'm even here, and so to have me and this other scholar who, you know who I'm talking about, be the only two people, because you have some type of personal issue or problem, or whatever is unacceptable. It's unacceptable" I said, "Honestly, it's really only your demographic of you being a Black woman; this is the only thing that's protecting you. It's the only thing. . . ." To be in a space where you have no family, no friends, no anybody. When I was working for her, my dad came to visit. She shook his hand; we'll take care of her. We'll look out for her. My dad is very serious. When he shakes someone's hands, he considers it to be like an agreement, like a bond, like we've exchanged some energy here. He was already afraid of me being there just because it's a not-so-great place for Black people. But to know the person that was supposed to be an ally and making sure your daughter's okay to be a Nemesis. It was a lot. It was a lot. I'm now living under the poverty line, trying to make bills . . . I don't have my living stipend from this program, and just doing what I can to get by.

After the stress from this experience, Joan "developed an anxiety problem." She did not "trust anybody" at her institution and did not feel mentally, emotionally, or financially "safe." The fact this situation happened because of a decision made by a Black woman in leadership seemed to cause Joan more grief. She was expecting the vice president to be an ally and advocate for her, but that did not happen. The situation caused Joan an immense amount of stress because she felt betrayed, alone, and was left in a very difficult financial position. Given this experience was one of Joan's first interactions at the institution, it left a stain on her experience.

Although Willow did not have the same experience as Joan, she expressed a similar sentiment about being disenchanted by having challenges with a Black woman faculty member. Willow highlighted:

> I was at the very end of my program, and I had a very challenging committee member who just kind of took it upon herself to be a pain. And she was a Black woman, which was even more disappointing in many ways, because she was the only Black woman on my committee. And she, just, you know, really made—even from responding to my request to meet or like scheduling my defense, little things. Like everyone would be quick and just be super, and she just would, like I would feel like I was chasing her. Things like that. And then she, her feedback, was very outside of the scope of my work, and she just did not want to understand that her feedback was interesting, but this is not what this exact study was about. Thankfully, my actual advisor was super supportive, in what I was doing and championed it. But this committee member was a pain. And I literally was crying right after my defense, because of the way she approached that meeting . . . that was hard. That was hard. Because, you know you put your all into this. This is your years of, maybe not blood, but like sweat and tears for sure. And it was, it's really challenging.

Willow expressed how difficult that situation was for her mental health and wellness because she "had never dealt with" the lack of support from another Black woman before. She felt the faculty member was being difficult for no reason and made her dissertation review process unnecessarily challenging. Luckily, Willow received support from her advisor which made the situation easier to navigate.

Some of the co-narrators also expressed dissonance around either assigning meaning to their negative encounters with other Black women, or even sharing the negative experiences with others. Willow explained "it was just a very challenging thing for me to distinguish between the energy she had, and what was actually the truth of what was happening." Willow was unsure why her committee member was engaging the way she was, but Willow believed it had something to do with both of them being Black women. She went on further to explain the interaction with the faculty member caused her to shift her approach in working with people who share her identities. Willow determined she is "not gonna anticipate support or assume support because we look the same."

Although Joan did not attribute the behavior of the vice president to her racial identity, she did mention she did not reveal to others what she experienced with the vice president *because* she was a Black woman. Specifically, Joan shared she did not share with non-Black women the wrongdoing she experienced at the hands of another Black woman because she wanted to protect her. She explained:

> I decided that I was not, not while I was there, going to allow another Black woman, doctoral student to go through what I went through. I forewarned them about the Vice President. With all due respect, I just said, "Listen, obviously you've never heard me say anything about this publicly" Mainly like I said, is because of her demographic. It's very difficult for me, even though it's rightfully so, for me to openly, publicly speak against another Black woman that's in this higher-level position. Not because I'm scared, because I ain't. But mainly because it's just such a bad representation. She takes hits, I'm sure, all day, every day from multiple different directions. Whether she earned them or not. I just couldn't make myself a part of that.

When Joan mentioned she did not want to share "publicly" what she experienced, she meant she did not share with non-Black women what she endured. Joan only talked about what happened between her and the vice president to other Black women in an effort to help them better navigate their academic process, and even then she was reluctant to do so.

The aforementioned stories highlight some of the challenges the co-narrators had with Black women faculty and administrators. The negative encounters that both Joan and Willow had with Black women leadership at their respective institutions impacted their overall experience, which in turn influenced their wellness in negative ways. Although most of the co-narrators indicated that they had positive experiences with other Black women, it is important to identify that having shared racial and gender identities does not always equate to affirming encounters. Willow quoted Zora Neale Hurston and explained that she learned during her doctoral journey that "all skin folk ain't kinfolk. And I know it for a fact now! I have heard that. But I know it."

"My Advisor . . . Was Super Supportive:" How Relationships With Black Faculty and Non-Black Faculty and Administrators of Color Can Influence Wellness

Earlier I highlighted the importance of community among Black women, and also noted some challenges the co-narrators encountered with Black women faculty. In this section, I highlight the nuanced relationships between the co-narrators and faculty and the importance of faculty support. Some co-narrators reported having challenging experiences with faculty that caused them stress and how having a supportive advisor or faculty member made the situation easier to navigate. This is demonstrated in several of the co-narrators' stories. Other co-narrators identified overall positive relationships with their faculty, which also influenced their holistic wellness.

Iesha described a difficult racialized experience she had with a non-Black faculty member that was ultimately assuaged by her advisor supporting and understanding her. She illustrated the following story, sharing:

> We had a clinical supervisor who supervised the externs, and as a part of my research assistantship, she also supervised me . . . she and I did not get along . . . we just were clashing, but I felt like she used a lot of racially coded language towards me. I felt eventually that she was being racist . . . we had a falling out where we both spoke our

> minds (laughter). And I put it on paper so there would be a trail, and there was an HR reckoning, and it just, none of it was great. And so that was very stressful for me, not because of the confrontation, but because I was a first-year student, and I was Black, and I was trying not to ruffle feathers, especially not as soon as I got there (laughter). So that felt a lot stressful for me because . . . I just wanted to have a smooth transition into grad school, and it in a lot of ways was smooth. But that particular aspect of it was not smooth at all . . . [We] had a follow-up Zoom Meeting to hash it out, and fell out even harder, and I felt like, she said some more racially coded things towards me, and so I immediately requested a meeting with my PI, who was her boss, who's everybody's boss. And told her, "listen, we're not getting along. I'm not gonna take any more meetings with her unless they're recorded, because I don't trust that she will tell the truth. And here's what's been going on." And my PI, I feel—it's complicated, but in that moment, I felt that she had my back. And what she did was because it was Covid, and we weren't seeing cases in person, she told me I didn't have to meet with this supervisor for supervision anymore. And I didn't have to see cases with her. And so that continued, really, I never saw another case with her . . . I did feel supported in that moment. I was able to get some space between us.

In this story, Iesha identifies a racist encounter with a lab supervisor and how another faculty member, her primary investigator, intervened to manage the situation. Engagement from Iesha's PI lessened her stress, which helped her maintain a sense of wellness. Iesha went on further to share:

> [That situation] stressed me out my first year. It felt very stressful going to lab. I did not want to go. I actually only went if I had a patient on my schedule. Otherwise, I worked from home because I didn't want to have to run into her . . . I had to pass her office to get to my desk, and I just didn't want to deal with her.

Although Iesha stated she did not "develop anxiety or depression because of" of the negative encounters with her supervisor, she did acknowledge how having support from her PI and creating distance from the negative supervisor allowed space for the stress not to fester into deeper issues.

Iesha was not the only co-narrator who expressed encountering problems with non-Black faculty members. Arianna shared a story about how her mental health was both positively and negatively influenced by relationships with faculty in her department. Arianna started off with an advisor, Dr. Smith (a white man) who was not supportive or academically engaged with her

work. She then connected with another faculty member in her department, Dr. Jones (an Asian woman) who supported her in a way that made her feel seen and heard. She ultimately switched from being Dr. Smith's advisee to Dr. Jones's. Arianna shared the story, saying:

> I turned in my first comps, and I got really . . . great feedback from Dr. Jones, and she was like, really supportive. And Dr. Smith was like, I agree with everything that Dr. Jones says. And at the time I was like, damn! I need to switch advisors. I need to switch advisors. Like Dr. Jones is checking on my mental health. She is introducing me to people when we go to conferences . . . So, I turned in my second comps, and Dr. Jones only sent her feedback to me 'cause she knew that he was gonna do the same thing where he was like, 'I agree with everything she says.' And so he sends me an email like a Friday afternoon and was like, I read your comps. I have some questions. I'm gonna take some more time before I give you my feedback and grade. I remember being pissed. Like I was hurt and pissed off because it was like you could have just taken the extra time you needed to give the feedback then. Why are you sending this email? What is the necessity of this email? And the questions he was asking, it was like he hadn't even read my work . . . That was a big blow, because . . . you didn't even take the time to read my stuff. You didn't even take the time. And at this point you've been my advisor for the last 3 and a half years. Like you don't know my work, you don't know? And I remember I called Dr. Jones crying. She was like, this is what we're gonna do. And again, it wasn't like a 'this is this is what we're gonna do in terms of the work.' It was like a 'this is what we're going to do for Arianna.' I want you to close the computer. I want you to take some time. I think your work was good. I want you to take some time and focus on you. That helped my mental—so while I was hurting in this one place, Dr. Jones was like, I'm focused on you as a person. And so, she helped me. Then she was like, we'll pick this back up on Monday. Take the weekend. This is your weekend. If he didn't want to give feedback, then you don't have to get feedback right now . . . And then, on Monday we talked again. She was like, 'All right. You're gonna respond to him like a reviewer to the few comments that he had.' And I did that. That was a hard time, but also a time where I saw that this person, [Dr. Jones], really loves me, for me. And that's when I switched advisors . . . So there was a lot of different things [going on]. It was hard having him tell me 'I'm gonna take more time because I don't know what the score I'm gonna give you.' But then good, because I called Dr. Jones, and she cared about me as a person. And then also good, because I stood up for myself, and I was like I need to switch advisors . . . Dr. Jones needed to be my advisor this whole time. And I think Dr. Jones has loved me as a person, and not just as a student.

In this story, Arianna illustrates how challenging and supportive relationships with faculty can influence wellness. She described switching advisors as a "positive thing that . . . affected [her] mental health" and also recognized having an unsupportive advisor detracted from it.

Arianna further explained how having the support of her advisor (Dr. Jones) allowed her to not focus on her dissertation defense after the loss of her mother. Arianna expressed:

> Even when my mom passed, I had told [my advisor] . . . should we just keep [the defense]? She's like, don't. She's like all you have to worry about is your family. I will email your committee. I'ma take care of it. Just take your break . . . I didn't realize how much I needed that. Cause if it had been on me I'd have been like, all right, so I'll have it to them by next week. And she was like, no. We're not doing that. You are going to take your break.

At the encouragement of her advisor, Arianna was able to step away from her academics to focus on losing a parent. Having supportive faculty helped Arianna center herself in a way that helped her wellness.

Belle also expressed how interactions or relationships with faculty influenced her wellness. She shared a story about a challenging experience she had in the classroom with white men professors, and how her advisor, a Mexican woman, helped her get through it. She recalled:

> So, the first semester we had a class; it was a higher ed leadership course, and the course was taught by three white men. So, you already know how this is going. It was fall 2016, the worst of times. The assignment was about leadership, or some . . . I forget what the fuck assignment was about. But I had wrote this thing up, right? And I'm like, "Yeah, I killed this shit. Like I did that! Ain't no way I'm not getting an A on this." Not only did I not get an A, one of these muthafuckas used my paragraph as what *not* to do. And I remember that was my paragraph . . . a faculty member at M.W. Stewart College calls them spirit murderers. They murdered my spirit because I was an English major. So, I wrote very creatively, not very matter to the fact . . . My advisor was super supportive and really understood the trauma that I was experiencing . . . I think I got through it because she was like a therapist, I would go in her office. I would cry like, "Oh, my God, I don't belong here." And she'd be like, "Neither do they." It wouldn't be like "Oh, you belong here, too." It would be like no, neither do they. So what? But they're here. So just do what you gotta do . . . my adviser would be like, "Belle, writing is a muscle. Everything you write is going to be a piece of shit. The magic happens in the editing. That's where the magic happens" And she goes, "You just got to edit." Write the . . . piece of shit, edit, and then send it to someone and have them look at it and tell you whatever . . . But yeah, I got through it, and I got a 358-page dissertation.

In this story, Belle highlighted how her experience with her white male professors negatively influenced her wellness. However, having a woman of color advisor who affirmed her, served as a protective factor.

Iesha, Arianna, and Belle underscored how having faculty help them navigate challenging situations with other faculty influenced their wellness. This was similar to Willow's story shared earlier. Although the racial identities of Willow's advisor (a white woman) and the challenging committee member (a Black woman) differs from what Iesha, Arianna, and Belle shared, Willow's story aligns and reinforces the idea of how having supportive faculty can critically influence wellness. Willow shared an additional instance when her advisor was supportive, stating:

> I had an advisor who got it. She wasn't like out here trying to belabor the point or like, you know, solve the world's biggest problem. So, [for] my dissertation she was just like, find your niche. Write, do a good research study. Write it, and you will continue to flush things out on the other side when you're done, and you're out of this pressure that you feel right now. So thankfully, that was huge because a supportive advisor really helped.

Willow described how her advisor lessened her stress during her dissertation process. Having a supportive advisor who did not add to the pressure of the doctoral process was meaningful for Willow.

Marie, Joyce, and Kaycee also highlighted the importance of faculty interactions on wellness. Joyce and Kaycee spoke about challenging situations, and Marie shared feeling very supported by the faculty in her department, a sentiment shared by Willow. These juxtaposing experiences also indicated faculty relationships and interactions can contribute to *and* detract from Black women doctoral students feeling holistically well. Marie shared how her relationships with the various women of color faculty (e.g., Black, Asian, and Latinx) in her program enhanced her overall experience and her wellness. She highlighted:

> [The] faculty . . . are all women of color. There's a sense of respect that I have for them that I want to do well. I think that though they don't say they have high expectations when you look at their portfolios it makes you feel like okay, I have to bring my A game with this because they are on point and doing the best that they can . . . And so yeah, I ain't just gonna present no trash to them . . . Because I just think when you have Black women and women of color in your corner, it's like, you don't want to be disrespectful, or anything like that. And I don't think that they [would] see it as disrespect, but . . . respect is . . . important [to me]. So, I think that has made an impact on my wellness because it's not necessarily to impress them, but I wanna give them my best work . . . [The Black women faculty] have let me be on [their] research committees . . . All these Black women, they have championed for me in different ways. It hasn't been like let's sit down, let me be your mentor, for the whole part while you're here. It's been, I don't know how to say it, but like it's just been little things along the way. It doesn't have to be huge. And I think sometimes when we think of mentorship, we think of this long-drawn-out thing that happens. But I think they're just small bits of hope and champion me, and [that] has given me wellness throughout my journey.

Here, Marie described how working to live up to the high expectation of the women of color faculty in her department influenced her wellness in positive ways. She specifically highlighted the Black women in her department made space for her, understood her, and informally mentored her, which helped positively influence her wellness throughout her program. Although she did experience some challenges in her program (like not passing comps), the support from her faculty members helped her navigate her program and left a positive impression on her wellness.

Conversely, Joyce and Kaycee did not experience supportive faculty members who championed them. In fact, Kaycee felt her faculty were actively trying to derail her progress in her program. Kaycee shared the following story that had implications for her wellness, saying:

> My first semester, I didn't really expect the full course load to be so time consuming. So, I was exhausted. But I still felt like I could do the work. I didn't feel like I wasn't made for this, right? Like it was tiring, and it was way more work than I expected. But I still was somewhat okay. Second semester, I had to do my first statistics class—the first one of the two that's required for the program. And I just remember struggling through that statistics course and I had taken statistics in undergrad. I was TA my . . . junior year for statistics one, which I had taken sophomore year . . . And I got an A in Statistics 2 that year, my junior year. So, you know, I'm thinking that "Yeah, I'm very well prepared. I've already done all this work." And it was, it was challenging. It was very, very

> challenging. And I ended up getting a . . . C. There were two other classes where I got a low B . . . So, I ended up feeling relieved that I passed. Right? Because a C is technically passing (laughter). And so just, you know, with everything else that I had . . . trying to balance work with my full-time load like I'm just glad I got out of there. Because I got low B in my other two classes. And the third one was my statistics class, where I got a C. All 3 of those professors had a meeting with me, with the department head to tell me that they were concerned about my ability to do the work in the program, because if you get two Cs, you have to leave the program or something, and I got one. And then the two other professors, which I got Bs, they said, well, it was a low B, she could have gotten a C. It was too close to a C. And I'm just like . . . That really seems to me kind of academically dishonest, because you don't have a true concern about my ability to do the work. My statistics teacher had a concern that was true, and among the three, she was the main one who said, but I'm not concerned about her ability to do the work, because she is probably going to do just fine next semester when she has to take the second level of statistics. Because she is a very, very, very, very hard worker . . . And I just felt like, maybe I don't . . . Maybe I don't belong here because it really shouldn't be this hard. I'm fully understanding that it wasn't supposed to be as easy as I thought it was going to be (laughter). But I didn't think that it was supposed to be that hard, and I didn't think that I was ever going to be in a position where I had to kind of defend my right to remain in the program.

There are several things happening in Kaycee's story. First, Kaycee was balancing a lot, as she was working fulltime and also taking a full course load. Second, unlike some of the other co-narrators, Kaycee had minimal support from her faculty. It was only her statistics professor who did not have major concerns about her academic ability. The other faculty members made Kaycee feel ill-equipped to be a student in the program. She did not have another faculty member to affirm or support her through that difficult situation, as some of the other co-narrators did. Third, Kaycee briefly touches on how that experience made her question whether she belonged in her program or on the PhD journey at all. This experience had implications for her wellness. She indicated:

> I haven't officially been diagnosed with anything, but I know anxiety when I feel it, and it has definitely brought on sooo much of an anxiety problem in me. Especially after that first year. Getting through that first year just really kind of broke me.

In this quote, Kaycee illustrates how the lack of confidence that the faculty members had in her ability to be successful in her PhD program, had implications for her wellness. The challenges Kaycee experienced in the classroom increased her anxiety and decreased her sense of wellness.

Other co-narrators shared stories of how faculty members voicing concerns about their academic abilities had an impact on their overall experience. Similar to Belle's story about her writing being publicly criticized, Joyce went through a similar situation. Joyce explained during the first semester of her first year, she received a very low grade on a paper. Joyce reflected:

> My first day of class was not pleasant. I drove home in tears . . . I think it was like the first couple of weeks when I got my first grade back, I got an F+. And I said, what? And it wasn't that I really earned the F+. He gave . . .he gives everybody an F+ or sorry, the highest . . . some people did get like a C+, but he gives everybody a very scary grade to like, I don't know whip—it's academic hazing. It's all bullshit, to whip you in shape to be like well . . . and what it was, was the class was intro to doctoral writing. And I'm like, great. I'm going to need this because I'm going to be writing. Well, I got a degree in journalism, and so–I also write professionally [in] emails. I know how to write. I just did not know how to write from a research perspective, from a scholarly perspective. And there's a better way to introduce that to a student coming from a different discipline than to give them an assignment and then you grade my assignment and give me an F+. And then I'm driving home in tears like there's no way that I can even get through this semester, yet alone 72 credit hours of work to get my degree. I just won't make it, because I can't get anything lower than a B.

Both Joyce and Kaycee experienced stress from the negative encounters they had with faculty. Neither of them had a supportive advisor or faculty member to get them through those troublesome moments. Although Kaycee and Joyce did not directly attribute their stress and anxiety to the absence of faculty support, it became evident in other co-narrators' accounts having support from fellow faculty members enabled them to navigate difficult interactions with faculty more effectively. Kaycee, having to deal with a challenging interaction with three of her professors on her own, and feeling like she did not belong, negatively influenced her wellness.

These narratives help to reveal relationships with faculty have the potential to influence the wellness of doctoral students, for better or worse. *How* professors engaged with the co-

narrators impacted their experiences and sense of well-being. Co-narrators who shared negative experiences with faculty, particularly those without support from other faculty members, appeared to feel a heightened sense of lack of belonging within the academic community. In other words, support and guidance from faculty members lessened the stress and anxiety that co-narrators experienced, which contributed to a stronger sense of wellbeing.

In addition to faculty interactions being a contributing faculty to the co-narrator's wellness, there were other items that emerged as contributing to or detracting from the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students. In the next section, I outline other factors that influenced the holistic mental health and wellness of the co-narrators.

Detractors From Holistic Mental Health and Wellness

Co-narrators shared stories of their experiences in academia, which revealed factors that were contributors to a sense of well-being, and those that detracted from it. Although there were some areas of overlap, there were also clear distinctions. In this section, I share two themes that emerged as factors that interfered with co-narrators experiencing holistic mental health and wellness. First, I discuss impostorism and lack of belonging in the academy, followed by how co-narrators negotiated wellness to complete their PhD.

"The PhD Program Is Good About . . .Letting You Know You Don't Belong:" Impostorism and Lack of Belonging in the Academy

As noted in the previous findings section, some of the co-narrators experienced a lack of belonging, and identified this phenomenon as experiencing impostor syndrome. In this next section, I talk about how the co-narrators experienced impostorism. Before delving into the data, I briefly remind the reader of the difference between impostor syndrome and impostorism, which was explored in the literature review). Impostor syndrome is a phenomenon where women doubt

their skills, abilities and sense of belonging (Clance & Imes, 1978). It is often accompanied by the idea others will deem them as frauds and realize they are not worthy or capable of occupying the space they are in (Clance & Imes, 1978). This term has been extended to include individuals with other marginalized identities. Impostorism, on the other hand, identifies systemic structures that have consistently told people with marginalized identities they do not belong in certain spaces, and those feelings are internalized (McGee et al., 2022). Although some of the co-narrators described experiencing impostor syndrome, this section is titled impostorism to shift the narrative from internal shortcomings, to one that recognizes how systems (e.g., sexism, racism, ableism) push people to the margins and make them feel like frauds and like they do not belong.

As indicated in several co-narrators' stories, negative encounters with others influenced their wellness. Those encounters also had the power to influence their sense of belonging and their belief in themselves, which ultimately influenced their holistic mental health and wellness. For example, several of the co-narrators identified impostorism during their doctoral journey. Willow shared:

> I start the program, and for the first time in my life I experience what I had heard people talk about, impostor syndrome. I had never experienced impostor syndrome [before]. I felt like as a master's student, I was killing it. As a professional, I was killing it. I never felt how people often spoke about not feeling they belonged in spaces. No, I was always very comfortable. But . . . I am now in . . . my first semester, first two semesters of PhD course work. And I'm in this qualitative research class, and they're just talking in this jargon . . . like epistemology, phenomenology. And just like talking, saying things that could be said in actually understandable language. But just like using academic language. And I was just like, I'm writing down the words . . . Okay, let me go back, and I guess I'm supposed to know what that means. (laughter). So, I was—so that's step one of this like, okay, alright, I don't feel like I belong in the space, because I don't know what the hell y'all are saying. I don't know these words that y'all are using . . . and then like it just, the overwhelm continues. It wasn't necessarily like the difficulty of the work or anything. It was just like, you know, trying to now speak differently, write differently, articulate myself differently.

Willow shared she had never experienced feelings of impostorism until she entered her PhD program. These feelings were brought on by her peers and professors using academic jargon she was unfamiliar with, and added to her feeling overwhelmed and inadequate. She expounded on this feeling by sharing:

> Sometimes feeling like if I didn't say the right thing, or if I didn't articulate something the right way, I was going to be seen as less intelligent or un—not unworthy, but just like, I don't know what the hell I'm talking about. Like I need to be able to spit the authors and cite the language . . . I'm not the person who is going to just be spilling out authors names to you. But, like I'm familiar with the work, but I'm not going to remember [names]. So, like I remember a few conversations I was just like, Oh, shit. Let me just be quiet. Just say something really quick and stop before I expose myself as the person who doesn't know her stuff.

Willow silenced herself and disengaged from conversations during class for fear of being seen as unintelligent. She sometimes felt inept in the academic setting because of her peers' familiarity with concepts or knowledge of certain researchers. Marie alluded to a similar experience during her doctoral program and explicitly named impostor syndrome. She described:

> There are multiple ways that I face impostor syndrome . . . I think the [one] way is professionally, and I think the last way is probably intellectually . . . professionally, I am a girl from a city that is very country and even though it's growing like my family is very Southern. And we aren't, I don't want to say not articulate, but we are . . . You just hear in my voice the Southern drawl. You can hear all those things . . . And so, I think that plays into McMillan State and a lot of times it's so over the top professional. I'm definitely from a place where . . . it's been nice to be at home because you go in the grocery store, and people are like, "hey, how are you?" I'm like, "I'm good." You know, have an actual conversation . . . So, I feel imposter syndrome because I can be, once you sit down and talk to me one-on-one, I'm very open. But I'm still from a place that's very, even though people don't consider [my home state] the south, it's very Southern adjacent . . . I think that impacts a lot, because the way I talk, I think I'm just not as articulate as I want to be professionally. Intellectually . . . It just blew my mind with like the things that people knew and how they knew how to put things together. Like I had never—I've written papers, but like I had never done my own personal research. So doing this whole process, I just intellectually didn't feel like I was up to speed, and I just did not feel ready to make my points. I didn't know how to argue the literature. I'm like, what is we talking about? We gonna make an argument about the methods. I don't understand. So, stuff like that, like. I just. I don't know I learned so much, but at the same time I feel so behind.

Going into her program, Marie did not feel as well-spoken as her peers professionally or academically. She also struggled to understand concepts her peers appeared to have knowledge of. These two things combined contributed to her feelings of impostorism. Although Marie did not explicitly indicate how this influenced her mental health, a lack of belonging exacerbated the academic challenges she experienced during her program.

Arianna also entered her program and experienced feelings of impostorism. Arianna explained:

> Just . . . feeling like people knew more than what I knew. But I was expected [to know] . . . [There were] people coming in like, 'Oh, I know this researcher.' Like citing people. And I'm like, how would I know to cite these people?

Rather than feeling inadequate for not knowing specific authors, Arianna shifted her perspective by questioning why she should be expected to know specific authors in the first place, especially as a novice researcher and new doctoral student. She went on further to describe one of her courses as a "violent space" which contributed to her lack of belonging. She highlighted:

> In that first-year course, you talk about what is good research, what's rigorous research. And then we read articles from 3 Black women, like 3 different articles from 3 different Black women, and those were like examples of what's not good research cause they're qualitative . . . but it was like there's a very clear message here. Like there's a very clear message . . . And [a different professor] tore my work up. Like tore my work up. And that was also hard. I went from someone that I thought was a good writer, to being like I don't know if what I'm saying is making sense. So, like violent in those ways. . . . So, Ebony McGee has some work on impostor syndrome versus impostorism . . . Her idea of impostorism is that the way the system is structured and set up is that it makes you feel like you don't belong. And so then it makes sense why students of color, women, go into particular places and that feeling of 'I'm a fraud' when like you're one of few. So if you're not seeing other people that look like you, they're also *doing* things and *saying* things to make you feel like a fraud.

Arianna's experience in a hostile classroom environment contributed to her questioning her abilities and feeling a lack of belonging. Additionally, Arianna acknowledged there are structural systems that send messages to Black women doctoral students they do not belong in those

spaces; one professor overly criticizing Arianna's work and another professor using Black women's research as poor accounts of research are examples of that. Although Arianna knew the academy was constructed in a way that made Black women feel like outsiders, she still experienced feelings of impostorism.

Similar to Arianna, when Belle reflected on her experiences, she knew the academy was not designed to support or encourage Black women. She shared her sentiments when she expressed:

> Like they're not teaching you anymore. You've got to come in with 95 publications; be ready to publish 1,000 more papers. Every paper you write in every class needs to be a publication. Just unrealistic ass shit. I internalized it all my first year, because the one thing that the PhD program is good about doing is letting you know you don't belong here, right. Particularly for me, because I come from [my hometown]. I come from a very blackity Black Black ass family that do Black ass shit. And if I try to up-sell or up-tone my voice, or change the language that I used, Imma get roasted for it, right. So how I talk with my quote unquote Black accent, the language that I use, the Black English vernacular that comes across no matter if I'm here, church, school. It's something that PhD Programs don't want me to have. They don't want me that way . . . But I'm so comfortable with how I am. I'm not changing that.

Despite Arianna and Belle understanding the systems they were in did not welcome Blackness, they still experienced impostorism. As evidenced in the quote above, Belle internalized messages she received about not being good enough, specifically about her writing. As noted in the theme about relationships with non-Black faculty, her advisor's support sustained her through challenging times with writing, but not before she internalized some of the feedback. Belle shared:

> My first semester, those two faculty members, every time they got a chance it was like, "Oh, you write like shit." Never with any feedback on how I can improve either . . . It was always . . . "We want you to succeed, but you gotta give us better than some of this shit." I remember my first paper [a professor] gave me a D. So after that I was just scared to write. Like, girl, I only wrote when I had to for class papers. Other than that, if someone tried to get me to write an email–now, granted in my day to day job, I was doing it . . . But if it had something to do with M.W. Stewart College and people wanted me to write something, I wasn't doing it. I can't tell you how many opportunities I missed

> because I was scared to respond to an email. I missed a lot. I missed a lot of opportunities because of how–I guess people say it's impostor syndrome. But I don't think it was impostor syndrome. I think it was I went there thinking I was going to be taught something, but they expected me to already have it and I didn't want people to know I didn't have it, right? So people always like, "Oh, you had impostor syndrome!" No, I never had doubts that I could do it. I just didn't know *how* to do it the way they expected me to do it, because no one taught me what their expectations were.

In this story, Belle acknowledged she had not been taught an academic writing style, yet she was still afraid to share her work with others. Although Belle's statements contradict each other a bit, it was clear the negative feedback she received about her writing influenced her thoughts on whether she belonged in the academy. She went on further to identify she was "'very insecure about [her] writing. PhD or no PhD." Developing an insecurity about her writing contributed to her negative experiences in the academy, which influenced her overall well-being.

Kaycee also experienced impostorism moments which negatively influenced her mental health and wellness. She described how the negative interactions she had with faculty contributed to her belief she did not belong in her program. Specifically, she shared:

> Even outside of those really tough experiences where leadership in the department made it their mission to make me feel like I don't belong there. Even outside of those experiences I definitely felt [impostor syndrome] independently within myself. Like, am I really supposed to be here?

In this quote, Kaycee identified feelings of impostorism existed separate from and in addition to the negative encounters she had with faculty members. Interactions with her peers and her social location also contributed to a lack of belonging for Kaycee. She shared she was the only Black woman and woman of color in her cohort, which was challenging for her. She explained although she "formed a huge sense of community" with people in her cohort because of a "difficult statistics test" and "comps," she still felt "separated from that community" because of their different racial backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and her status as a single Black woman. Kaycee did not feel understood by her peers because of their different identities, which

fostered a disconnect from her community, where she questioned whether or not she belonged in the academy. She further illustrated the isolation she experienced from peers and how that influenced her perception of if she belonged in her program, sharing:

> They are either financially stable, that they don't have to work. They are not single; they're married. So, they can have financial support. They can have . . . like if they don't have time to do the laundry, the husband and the kids can do it. I don't have anybody to run errands for me. So, in the middle of this week-long statistics test—I know I keep coming back to that, but it's literally ingrained in my brain probably forever—but in the middle of this week-long statistics test, I still had to go to the grocery store. I still had to do laundry. I still had to clean the kitchen; you know. So yeah, I don't think anybody else has to do that. Like I said, they either live with their parents, or they live with their partners or husbands, or they are just able . . . I don't know, but they don't have that type of pressure where they're relying on just themselves. So, it's where we are in life. It's also financial reasons. Again, like I *have to* work. And I don't really know of any people who had to work . . . And again, it kind of reinforces like, am I supposed to be here because you are you supposed to be some place in life where you do not have to work so that you can devote all your time to your PhD. Program? Like, if I am not able to do that, am I supposed to be here like it goes back to that as well? It's also definitely rooted in an identity. Absolutely. There are only . . . let's see none of my cohort—I'm the only woman of color in my cohort. I would say in the program, there's only a handful of people of color . . . So, there are very few people of color, and it is more difficult for *us*. It just is . . . So, so yeah, it's definitely rooted in identity. Two times because I am a woman and because I am a woman of color.

Kaycee's inability to connect and form meaningful connections with her peers, due to differences in identity, influenced Kaycee's holistic wellness in a negative way. The lack of community Kaycee experienced underscores the importance of Black women being in community with one another (which was highlighted in an earlier finding), and how peers can potentially impact Black women doctoral students' experiences. Additionally, because Kaycee was at a different point in life than her peers were, she second-guessed her belonging in academia. She elaborated further on how the challenging encounters she had with faculty and the lack of community amongst her peers culminated into low wellness and a lack of belonging, saying:

> I don't know what type of category of mental health that should fall under but that's also a thing that has really just kind of decreased in my level of wellness over time, and I was

> never—I was always a humble person. I never expected to be the best . . . that's just not me, but I also never fully expected to not be good enough.

Kaycee experienced a lack of belonging and not feeling good enough which contributed to low wellness. As explained in the following quote, she, like Belle, associated the lack of belonging as part of the PhD experience. Kaycee explained her lack of belonging and internalization of imposter syndrome "comes from this PhD experience itself." She continued to share:

> And I don't think it was until I entered into this PhD program that I'm like, Okay, well, the way you're teaching is probably not appropriate. But you're right. I don't belong here like that. I just, I never really would put everything on me and internalize, put everything on myself and internalize things until I got to this particular school.

There was something about Kaycee's unique PhD journey that made her internalize the idea she did not belong. This not only colored her doctoral journey, it also interfered with her ability to feel holistically well.

Although most of the co-narrators had bouts of impostorism in the classroom setting, Neka reported experiencing impostorism as being associated with the dissertating stage in her doctoral journey. Neka described:

> I didn't feel imposter syndrome per se in the coursework, because coursework has expectations. You have your curriculum. You have your syllabus. Depending on the professor you have a very clear rubric to follow . . . But, this "you are the expert of this topic" is where I think I was like, "But I don't know nothing." Yeah, I know more than my advisors, who aren't specifically looking at this topic. But I don't know if I'm . . . I feel like I'm being a fraud, acting like I know about this.

Being seen as the expert on her topic created feelings of self-doubt for Neka. She went on further to explain she would "get stuff back from [her advisor], and he's just like 'Neka, this is exceptional'" but her " imposter syndrome and the self-doubt" would still kick in. Neka would often engage in "overcompensation . . . to try and quell the negative feedback" in her head. Although Neka described being an high-achiever throughout her academic career, the PhD journey triggered an insecurity when she was perceived as the expert.

As indicated throughout the findings, pervasive feelings of impostor syndrome and/or impostorism contributed to co-narrators' wellness in negative ways. What these stories also elucidate is the idea the academy can be unsafe spaces for Black women doctoral students. Experiencing unsafe intellectual and emotional environments, coupled with internalized feelings of impostorism is a recipe for low wellness. Despite these challenges, the co-narrators continued to persist in their programs. In the next section, I highlight additional stressors that the co-narrators persisted through and the ramifications on their holistic mental health and wellness.

"What Is the Benefit of . . . Being Productive, If You're Literally Killing Yourself?": Negotiating Wellness to Finish the PhD

In this section, I address and explore how the co-narrators persisted through various life events and how that detracted from their holistic mental health and wellness. This theme was also highlighted when describing the co-narrators' meme and gif selections. The act of pushing through or continuing on, despite what was happening in their lives, had deleterious effects on their wellness, and at times was an indicator of low wellness. Overall, the co-narrators reported feeling exhausted, having anxiety and feeling pressure to continue focusing on their doctoral degrees. Exhaustion and persisting despite the challenges of academia were indicators of poor wellness. Kaycee shared that, during her most difficult moments, both personally and academically, she just had to "push through." Other co-narrators may not have expressed pushing through explicitly, but it was evident in their stories. For example, Iesha shared that, although she had a child during her doctoral program, she did not take any maternity leave. The quote below expounded on Iesha's experience. She shared:

> I had a very difficult pregnancy that really put me on my butt . . . I've never experienced anything like that. And so that . . .was hard and traumatic on its own. And then, coupled with the fact that I didn't take any formal time off during pregnancy or after, really. I think that period of time was just a lot of grind and nausea and difficulty and brain fog.

Here, Iesha also described the compounding challenges she experienced including grinding in her program, pregnancy symptoms, and not taking formal, dedicated time off from her program. Despite having a challenging pregnancy, Iesha felt unable to take any parental leave. There were several reasons why Iesha did not take leave during her pregnancy or afterwards which are explained in the following story. She described:

> We don't have formal parental leave. That's just cut and dry. And in order to take formal time off, I would have had to lose my health insurance. However, I did negotiate under the table. I had a very supportive PI who believes in having babies, and the PhD. And I had unofficially, 6 weeks off from research. But it wasn't really off, because I was still writing my IRB. I wrote a dissertation grant. So, it wasn't really off. I was still working, and we had externship interviews when my kid was, I think, one week old, maybe 2 weeks. I remember—my husband travels for work—my best friend had to come over and hold her while I was in the other room doing interviews . . . I remembered them trying to hold me late [at work] and I needed to leave to pump. So, I didn't really have time off, like I tell people I had 6 weeks off, but I wasn't really off and then I went back in person at 8 or 9 weeks to clinical. So that's the reason . . . and also because of the trajectory of how psychology programs work. If I took too much time off, I would have been at risk at having to stay in school an additional year, which I know in and of itself is not a bad thing, but because I had a kid I didn't . . . We have to match for Residency, and then my specialty has to match again for post-doc fellowship, and I . . . didn't want to prolong being away from my immediate family for an additional year. And so then I figured, the quicker I get done, the quicker I can have a chance to go back home. So that's part of it, part of my own doing. And then part of it is because during pregnancy I was so sick that I was in hospital for, on and off, for a couple of months. And I wasn't able to work, and so . . . I had lost that time, and so I didn't want to lose more time. So it was self-induced in a lot of ways, and if I could do it again, I don't know that I would do it differently, because I'm a PhD student. But if I was in my real career, like thinking to the future, if I ever have another kid, I would not work again during that time. I would take that full time off, during pregnancy and time after . . . But I don't know that I would do [things differently] honestly, because you're not making money. It's opportunity cost, right? Stay in school extra year? I don't really wanna do that, you know, but I probably should have done it. I probably should have. But you know.

In this story, we see despite a challenging pregnancy, Iesha did not take official parental or academic leave for practical reasons. Although Iesha did have a supervisor that helped her to negotiate unofficial time off, she continued to work throughout her pregnancy and immediately following giving birth to stay on her self-identified timeline. During her 6 weeks of informal

time off, Iesha worked on research projects and conducted interviews for her externship. Because her husband travels frequently for work, Iesha had to rely on her friends to help her navigate being a new mother *and* focus on her doctorate. This experience took a toll on her overall wellness, and she described it as a "real low mental moment" during her doctoral journey. Although Iesha vacillated between whether or not it was beneficial to take any leave and just press forward, she weighed her options and ultimately decided finishing her program quickly was a priority. She did not want to sacrifice her degree completion timeline, even though she desired spending quality time with her family. She viewed her stress as self-imposed, and not a function of the academy, because she wanted to adhere to her graduation deadlines. Iesha persisted, even after a significant life event like childbirth, because achieving her goals sooner would enable more time with loved ones in the future. This was a sacrifice she was willing to make. Other co-narrators also expressed how they focused on their academic persistence during challenging times.

During Belle's doctoral journey, she experienced several challenges, including physical illnesses (like pneumonia and hormonal imbalances) and losing her grandmother, who was her closest confidant. Despite all of this, Belle noted how she continued to focus on her academics. She shared the following story, explaining:

> My body was falling apart because it couldn't take the notion like, Oh, shit! My grandmother is a grandmother. Like she's old! It was at that moment I'm like, "Oh, my God! My grandmother's 78 years old." It was like it was all hitting me for the first time, like I'm [a] 3 year old and I just can't make sense of what's happening. And because of that, I stopped sleeping as much and then the workload at school. I don't know if it got more [challenging] or if it was because I was dealing with more emotionally. But I was taking four classes that semester. I remember one being a higher ed law . . . or history of higher ed. It was just a lot. By the third week of school, I couldn't breathe. I couldn't walk, and I have a bathroom in my bedroom. I couldn't get out of my bed and walk to the bathroom without feeling like I was gone die. But yet I was still going to class, girl. Got my ass dressed and went to class! Until I passed the fuck out in class and had to go to

> [the] Health Center where they diagnosed me with pneumonia. A pretty bad case, too. Lungs was filled to the gills.

Similar to Iesha, Belle continued to focus on her academics even amid physical and emotional distress. Belle was dealing with the emotional trauma of recognizing the mortality of her grandmother, and was experiencing physical limitations brought on by an unknown illness (which was later diagnosed as pneumonia). All the while, Belle was persisting past her pain and still trying to focus on school. She further explained focusing on school while she was experiencing challenges took a toll on her mental health, making it her "worst semester" regarding her wellness. Belle shared that part of her decision to focus on her education came from her peers. She highlighted:

> Most of my cohort aren't people of color, but they would always be like, "Oh, you should just come to class." And I live 45 min from [campus] . . . And they was like, "Oh, just come to class. You only gotta be here for like two and a half hours." So not my dumb ass, not dummy dumb, not boo boo the damn fool, get in her goddamn car one day and drive down there to the point that my cousin had to drive . . . with her friend, to get me off the side of the road, to drive me back home, because I couldn't make it. Boo boo the damn fool prioritizing the PhD over my own health.

Belle felt pressure from her peers to prioritize her academics over her health, although she recognized in hindsight it was foolish and somewhat dangerous. Because Belle mentioned the racial makeup of her cohort, it appears she is assigning meaning to how People of Color and white people think differently of taking care of the body while sick. While Iesha forged ahead in her program due to her desire to complete her degree quickly, Belle pressed forward because she did not want to be judged by her peers and focusing on school distracted her from her health challenges. Belle acknowledged:

> Mentally, all I could do was focus on my PhD program. All I thought about was my PhD Program. It consumed every part of my thoughts. All the readings, everything consumed it. I worried about what they thought of me bein' sick. I worried about my cohort members thinking that I was bullshitting; that I was trying to get an easy way out.

Belle ignored her waning health and focused on her PhD pursuits. In some ways, this was a coping mechanism to deal or not deal with other challenges in her life, and in other ways it was because of her concern with what her peers may have thought of her. Either way, Belle continued to focus on her academic journey and move through her program.

The idea of continuing to persist despite life's challenges was not unique to Belle and Iesha. Other co-narrators shared the same sentiment. Arianna gave a reason as to why she thinks this happens to herself and to other Black women. She shared "a lot of times as Black women, we kind of push through, even when we know it might not be to our benefit because you don't want anyone to see you as weak . . . and that's just kind of what you do." Arianna recounted a time that she did this in her own doctoral journey, recalling:

> My mom passed away [in early] March. I was supposed to defend [my dissertation] March 22nd, and I was still gonna be teaching [for my fellowship]. And in my mind, I was like, you just keep doing it. Like I need to finish this dissertation. And I need to finish this class.

Even after suffering a devastating loss, like losing a parent, Arianna was still hyper-focused on her dissertation defense and teaching. Her friend pulled her to the side and told her "It's not a good look for you to keep teaching this class and trying to finish this way. It's okay to take a break." But, Arianna figured "I signed up for this. This is what I'm supposed to do. There's a timeline." Arianna took heed to her friend's advice and ended up taking a break from teaching. She explained that, had it not been for her friend, "[she] would have finished teaching that class . . . the funeral [for her mom] was on Saturday [and she] was ready to go back to work and teach that Monday." Arianna would have kept pressing forward even as she was experiencing one of the most difficult times in her life.

Arianna talked about another instance when she was overwhelmed and perhaps depressed, and it manifested physically to a point where she was no longer able to just push through. She stated:

> We went home, and my blood pressure was so high I had to go to urgent care. And that's how it showed up. It was like my feet are swelling, literally my body is telling me it needs to take a break, because I don't know how to.

Although Arianna was very aware of the fact she needed to take a break for mental and physical reasons, she continued to persist. She reflected and shared, "What is the benefit of continuously being productive, if you're literally killing yourself?" And, although she knew that continuing to persist during challenges was harmful physically and emotionally, she kept doing it unless someone (a friend or advisor) convinced her not to.

Not all the co-narrators were as explicit about how they kept going amid life's changes. For example, Neka shared that she got engaged, "plan[ned] a wedding," got married and eventually got pregnant during her doctoral journey. Although she did not talk about pushing through specifically, she indicated in her gif that she kept going even with the ups and downs of life. While Neka acknowledged that her holistic wellness was not good during her graduate program, she remarked about how and why she kept going, indicating:

> No matter all those emotions, you know you can do it. Allowing you to persist. We can do this. We'll make it. This will not kill us. This keeps allowing, for better or for worse, the roller coaster to start over and not hopping off of it.

Here, Neka described that despite the challenges she faced on her journey, she was committed to continuing her academic pursuits. Neka reflected a positive disposition related to continuing her doctoral journey even amidst life's highs and lows.

The co-narrators had varying experiences as they persisted through their doctoral journey. As evidenced in the shared stories, life happenings created obstacles for matriculation, and even

more so for their wellness. Pregnancy, childbirth, weddings, physical illnesses, and loss of loved ones were a few of the impediments to holistic mental health and wellness. Despite these challenges, the co-narrators kept pushing forward on their doctoral journeys, which were sometimes indicators of low wellness. They were committed to making academic progress, and sometimes at the expense of their holistic mental health and wellness.

Chapter Five Summary

In this chapter, I highlighted how the co-narrators described and defined their holistic mental health and wellness. Through the use of memes, the co-narrators were able to assign a visual image to how they experienced wellness during their program. As indicated in the image selections, many of the co-narrators experienced exhaustion, stress and the pressure to smile through a challenging doctoral journey. These images provided additional support for how the co-narrators defined their wellness and what contributed to and detracted from it during their doctoral studies.

The co-narrators described several facets when reflecting on the meaning of holistic mental health and wellness, including physical, spiritual, emotional, financial and mental wellness. Some co-narrators described neglecting certain aspects of their holistic mental health and wellness due to the demands of their doctoral program, or because of life in general. Because of the academic environment at each respective institution, the co-narrators sought connections with other Black women. Some of the co-narrators were intentional about seeking out opportunities to center joy and wellness. As the data indicated, relationships with faculty influenced the co-narrators academic experiences and their overall wellness. Co-narrators experienced a greater sense of wellness when their advisors and faculty members provided them with support and encouragement, and assisted them in navigating challenging situations. Co-

narrators experienced lower wellness when they encountered impostorism and experienced a lack of belonging at their institution. Lastly, I explored how the co-narrators negotiated their wellness for the sake of completing their doctoral degree.

In the final chapter of my dissertation, I offer my thoughts, rooted in literature, around the experiences of Black women doctoral students and their holistic mental health and wellness. I then offer suggestions for practitioners and educators who work with this population. I also offer implications for practice and future research.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Implications

In Chapter 5, I highlighted the various experiences that Black women doctoral students had during their doctoral journey, and how those experiences influenced their wellness. In Chapter 6, I revisit the literature related to Black women in academia to frame my discussion and implication sections. More specifically, Chapter 6 is organized in four parts. First, to refamiliarize the reader with the study, I share a broad overview of my dissertation, which includes the problem statement, purpose statement and research questions. Second, I provide a summary of the literature on Black women in academia, an overview of the conceptual framework and the methodological approach. Third, I establish a connection between the research questions, the findings, and the larger body of literature about Black women in academia. Additionally, I connect the findings to the conceptual framework to discuss applicability and practicality of my research. Lastly, rooted in the findings of the study and the literature on the topic, I offer my recommendations for future research, future practice, and suggestions for Black women in or considering a doctoral journey.

Dissertation Overview

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to develop a deeper understanding of the factors that influenced Black women doctoral students' mental health and wellness during their doctoral journey. Using Black feminist thought (Collins, 1986) and Hettler's (1980, 1984) six dimensions of wellness as a conceptual framework, and narrative inquiry as a methodological approach, I sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Black women doctoral students and recent alumnae at R1 or R2 institutions in the mid-Atlantic region describe their mental health and wellness while pursuing their doctoral degree?

2. What contributed to and interfered with the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students and recent alumnae during their doctoral programs?

Findings revealed myriad contributing factors that influenced the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students. The nine co-narrators of this study shared the highs and lows of their respective experiences, giving insight into the joys and challenges Black women in the academy encounter. The joys and challenges Black women doctoral students experience are discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

Background and Problem Statement

When I embarked on this study, I knew there was a need to uncover the experiences of Black women doctoral students and our holistic mental health and wellness. Various news outlets were covering stories about two prominent Black women athletes, Naomi Osaka and Simone Biles, who took breaks from their careers, because of their desire to focus on their mental health (e.g. Fendrich, 2021; Lane, 2021; Leitner, 2021). More stories emerged about Black women in higher education who had emotionally unsafe experiences at their institutions, which resulted in vacating their roles earlier than anticipated (e.g. Flaherty, 2020; Jabali, 2024; Moody, 2024; Turman, 2024). These very public stories about Black women's experiences across different professions made me reflect on my own graduate education and how my mental health was influenced. Although I encountered challenges on my doctoral journey, I also had many moments of joy. My personal interests in amplifying the voices of Black women and presenting a balanced view of our experiences grew, and I decided to explore the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students.

The literature is rich with stories about the difficulties Black women in academia face. Researchers found Black women doctoral students experience challenging academic

environments which can impact persistence (Grant, 2012; Griffith et al., 2017; Shavers & Moore, 2014a, 2014b; Winkle-Wagner, 2009), intentionally silence themselves and/or create different versions of themselves to aid in the navigation and survival of their doctoral experiences (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Shavers & Moore, 2014a, 2014b; Walkington, 2017), and may experience confrontational relationships with advisors (Barker, 2016; Ellis, 2001). Other researchers asserted Black women doctoral students may lack access to quality mentors (Bertrand Jones et al., 2015; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Woods, 2001), and may experience racialized and gendered microaggressions from faculty and peers (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Lewis et al., 2013; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). These studies did not center the joy Black women experience in the academy, nor did the researchers address how negative encounters may influence wellness.

As I sought to find research that revealed the breadth of the Black woman's experience in doctoral education, I discovered a paucity of literature about the topic, especially as it related to the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students. As seen in the previous paragraph, literature available about Black women doctoral students often centered our pain and not our joy, and framed our mere existence as a problem (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). The lack of research and literature about Black women doctoral students, coupled with the negative framing of our existence contributes to an incomplete understanding of our experiences. In this qualitative research study, I sought to understand the factors that influenced Black women doctoral students' mental health and wellness during their doctoral journey. I was intentional about centering holistic mental health and wellness because oftentimes the experiences of Black women in academia are viewed through a deficit lens (Gallimore, 2022). Exploring the wellness

of Black women doctoral students holistically allows for an understanding of the things that allow us to be well, and the things that do not.

Summary of the Literature Review

In Chapter 2, I provided an in-depth review of the literature relevant to Black women doctoral students. My literature review was created with three major sections: graduate student wellness, Black women in graduate education, and the mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students. In this section I reorient the reader to the literature by providing a summary of my literature review.

Graduate Student Wellness

There is a mental health crisis in the U.S., and graduate school students are not exempt from it. Graduate students experience heightened levels of mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression (Eisenberg et al., 2007; Hyun et al., 2006; Nagy et al., 2019; Woolston, 2020; 2019; Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). There are several stressors that graduate students experience during their doctoral education including financial challenges (Byrom et al., 2020; Charles et al., 2022; Fitch et al., 2011; Posselt, 2021; Woolston, 2019), managing challenging relationships with their supervisor, advisor, (Byrom et al., 2020; Charles et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2017; Gin et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2023; Juniper et al., 2012; Lovitts, 2002), balancing research with other academic commitments (Gin et al., 2021; Woolston, 2019), the competitive culture of graduate programs (Bekkouche et al., 2022), and navigating online learning (Chirikov et al., 2020). The consequences of ineffectively managing stressors caused by graduate school can have harmful and long-term effects on students including poor academic performance (DeRoma et al., 2009), leaving doctoral programs prematurely (Bekkouche et al., 2022; Lovitts, 2002), moderate to severe mental health challenges (Evans et al., 2017), and even worse, self-

harming behaviors or suicide (Bekkouche et al., 2022; Garcia-Williams et al., 2014; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2022). Although this research may sound bleak, all hope is not lost. There are several factors that enable graduate students to maintain a positive sense of well-being, including supportive academic and social environments (Charles et al., 2022; Hyun et al., 2006; Tompkins et al., 2016), positive relationships with advisors and supervisors (Byrom et al., 2020; Griffin et al., 2023) and mentoring relationships with faculty (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Gaston Gayles & Kelly, 2004; Gayles & Kelly, 2019; Hyun et al., 2006). Unfortunately, most of the research available on graduate student wellness often did not delineate between master's and doctoral students (Evans et al., 2017; Hyun et al., 2006; Oswalt & Riddock, 2007), nor did researchers differentiate based on social identities.

Black Women in Graduate Education

The unique social location of Black women influences our experiences in higher education, particularly in graduate school (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). Black women graduate students reported feelings of isolation (Bacon, 2014; Dortch, 2016; Dortch & Patel, 2017; Gay, 2004; Miller, 2017; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Winkle-Wagner, 2009); a heightened sense of awareness of social identities (Griffith et al., 2017); pressure to change who they are to fit in (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Winkle-Wagner, 2009); managing feelings of impostorism (McGee et al., 2022); and experiences with racism and sexism (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Griffith et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2004). While data are available about the overall experiences of Black women in academia, the research does not separate the experiences of master's and doctoral students, making it difficult to identify the unique experiences of Black women doctoral students. Additionally, although the research has indicated that Black women experience challenges in academia, we also experience joy and

affirmation, which is understudied in the larger body of research about Black women. The positive and negative experiences Black women encounter have implications for our wellness.

Mental Health and Wellness of Black Women Graduate Students

Given that graduate students are at risk for mental health challenges, and researchers assert that women and men of color have more mental health challenges than their white and/or male counterparts (Eleftheriades et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2014), Black women doctoral students are doubly at risk for experiencing challenges with well-being. The existing research on Black women graduate students predominantly overlooked the mental health and wellness concerns of this group. The findings in the present study supported literature that states students with marginalized identities are at risk for greater mental health challenges, and adds specificity regarding Black women's experiences. Findings related to the mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students is discussed in greater detail in the discussion portion of the dissertation. Much of the literature centered on proactive factors that help Black women navigate institutions of higher education, such as building community with other Black women (e.g. Bacon, 2014; Cook & Williams, 2015; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Merriweather & Howell, 2022; Young et al., 2023). Prior literature highlighted the pervasive impact of toxic, racist, and sexist academic environments on Black women's academic journeys, hindering success (Shavers & Moore, 2014a, 2014b), while leaving out how Black women find joy even in harmful environments. Although Black women continue to persist amidst arduous academic environments, there remains a gap in the literature regarding how our mental health is affected by our experiences. My research addressed that gap, while also highlighting the ways that we not only survive the academy, but also find fulfillment and resilience during our doctoral journeys. The exploration of the existing literature regarding the mental health and wellness of Black

women doctoral students guided me to adopt a conceptual framework that prioritized both wellness and the unique experiences of Black womanhood.

Review of Conceptual Framework

I used Black feminist thought (Collins, 1986) and Hettler's (1984) six dimensions of wellness to better understand the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students. Hettler's (1984) six dimensions of wellness was created to understand and explore the areas of wellness that are important for college students. The model consists of the following areas of wellness: social, occupational, spiritual, physical, intellectual and emotional (Hettler, 1984). The model does not account for the social context or social identities of students. For that reason, I coupled Hettler's (1984) dimensions with Black feminist thought (Collins, 1986). The core tenets of Black feminist thought are self-valuation and self-definition of Black women, interlocking nature of identities, and the importance of culture for Black women individually and in relationship to other Black women (Collins, 1986). Black feminist thought positioned Black women as experts of our own experiences and acknowledged the power of dialogue and community for understanding Black women (Collins, 1986). Combining Black feminist thought and Hettler's six dimensions of wellness as a conceptual framework, allowed me to center and honor Black women's voices as they shared stories related to their experiences and their holistic mental health and wellness.

Methodology and Methods

The conceptual framework is also intertwined with the methodological approach of this study. In this study, I used narrative inquiry to answer the aforementioned research questions. Narrative inquiry is a formalized process of storytelling which allows researchers to unearth the complexities of the human experience within a social context (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin &

Huber, 2010; Creswell, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1995; Squire et al., 2013). The central focus of narrative inquiry is to illustrate the stories of participants. Narrative inquiry aligned with exploring the experiences of Black women doctoral students for several reasons. First, there is a rich tradition of storytelling and dialogical communication in Black communities (Collins, 1989; Jørgensen & Largacha-Martinez, 2014; Kelly et al., 2022). Second, Collins (1986, 1989) asserted a key component of Black feminist thought is communal dialogue, where Black women can be in community and communication with one another. Third, narrative inquirers encourage researchers to present a full picture of participants using their own words to describe their experiences (Polkinghorne, 1995). Thus, narrative inquiry was the most effective methodological approach to help me understand how Black women doctoral students defined and described their holistic mental health and wellness.

To connect my conceptual framework to my methodology, I referred to participants in the study as co-narrators. I chose this term because the co-narrators helped to create and tell the stories of this study; without them there would be no stories to tell. Identifying them as mere participants did not sufficiently capture the significance of their role in the research. Additionally, researchers using Black feminist thought and other forms of critical research are encouraged to co-construct knowledge with those engaging in their study (Collins, 1986; 1989; Creswell, 2003; Hickson, 2016; Jones et al., 2014).

I used purposive criterion sampling to recruit individuals who met the criteria of the study (Creswell, 2009; Jones et al., 2014). In addition to criterion sampling, I used snowball sampling (Krathwohl, 1991) by asking co-narrators to share information about the study with their peers. Recruitment for the study began in June 2023, and data collection was completed by August of 2023. Eligible co-narrators of the study met the following requirements: (1) identify as a Black

or African American cisgender woman, (2) be a current PhD student who has completed coursework at a Research 1 (R1) *or* Research 2 (R2) institution or recently completed a doctoral program within the last six months at a R1 or R2 institution, and (3) attend/attended school in the mid-Atlantic region. R1 and R2 institutions were selected for their high levels of research engagement. I had a goal of 8 to 12 co-narrators, and there ended up being nine. At the beginning of data collection there were 10 co-narrators. However, after the first round of interviews it was discovered that one of the co-narrators did not meet all the criteria to participate in the study, and she was withdrawn from the study. Her data were not included in the final data analysis.

Initially, I planned to ask co-narrators to write a narrative about their experience, but opted for the gif/meme submission to be mindful of the time commitment of writing a narrative. The gif/meme submission served as visual data that allowed the co-narrators to participate in a lighthearted manner, while also providing a means to triangulate findings. I also decided against a focus group as a means of data collection, to align with the hectic schedules of doctoral students. Instead, I added a secondary interview as a data collection method. As such, the final data collection activities included completing a demographic survey, a narrative activity (i.e. submitting a gif/meme that captured the co-narrator's mental health during their doctoral journey), and two 60–90 minute interviews. Co-narrators were also asked to participate in optional member-checking. Two of the co-narrators decided during the interview process that they did not want to engage in member-checking, while the seven remaining co-narrators chose not to respond to the member-checking requests.

Discussion

My research has contributed to the growing literature about Black women doctoral students. My research has filled a gap in that there are very few studies that examine the holistic

mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students. In the forthcoming section, I highlight how my findings connected to the conceptual framework. Specifically, I address components of Hettler's model that co-narrators highlighted in their definitions of wellness, what wellness dimensions can be added to enhance a wellness model for Black women doctoral students, and how the ethic of care and the dialogic process (which are components of Black Feminist Thought) were honored throughout the study. Next, I highlight how the literature aligned with the findings of this study and I identify where the data diverged from the literature. Finally, using the co-narrators' voices, I share implications for researchers, future research, and practice. I also specifically address Black women doctoral students as they consider how to be holistically well.

Findings Connected to the Conceptual Framework

In this section of the Discussion, I explore how the findings connected to the conceptual framework. I outline how some aspects of Hettler's six dimensions and black feminist thought align with the findings of the present study, and what can be added to better address wellness for Black women doctoral students.

Holistic Wellness of Black Women Doctoral Students

Hettler (1984) identified six central tenets in his wellness model: social, occupational, spiritual, physical, intellectual and emotional. Hettler (1984) asserted, for a person to experience optimal wellness, each of the six interdependent dimensions of wellness must be nurtured and recognized as influencing one another. My study has contributed to the literature around Hettler's six dimensions of wellness in that the co-narrators identified many of the same dimensions when defining wellness. The co-narrators named spirituality, physical health, intellectual and social wellness as aspects that comprise wellness. Willow specifically shared

how holistic wellness should focus on "mind, body, soul and spirit." The co-narrators understood and acknowledged how various components of wellness influence one another. For example, Arianna talked about how her physical health is impacted by her emotional health. Marie acknowledged that while her intellectual wellness was good because of her academic endeavors, other parts of her wellness suffered. When one area of wellness is not thriving, it is difficult to be well holistically. Some co-narrators leaned into certain aspects of wellness (like spiritual or social) to help them persist through the doctoral journey, which is connected to intellectual and occupational wellness.

The two dimensions of Hettler's six dimensions of wellness not mentioned were emotional and occupational wellness. Although the co-narrators did not explicitly mention emotional and occupational wellness, that does not mean they were not ever present. Emotional wellness was embedded in the discussion of the co-narrators' feelings about their experiences. They each acknowledged and identified how their experiences made them feel, which is a component of emotional wellness. Co-narrators also spoke about their satisfaction with their part-time or fulltime jobs, a component of occupational wellness. Although these two dimensions were not specifically identified, they are intertwined with the four other dimensions of wellness, because career ambitions (occupational wellness) and experiencing and managing a range of emotions (emotional wellness) is part of the doctoral process.

Hettler's Social Wellness Dimension and Black Feminist Thought

When overlaying Black feminist thought with Hettler's dimensions of wellness, social wellness was rooted in being in community with people who affirmed and supported the co-narrators, especially other Black women. The intentional community the co-narrators developed with other Black women was an act of self-preservation and allowed them to persist at their

respective institutions. It served as a protective factor for the co-narrators' wellness and was consistent with the literature about the importance of Black women relationships in graduate education (Cooks & Williams, 2015; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Gaston Gayles & Kelly, 2004; Gayles & Kelly, 2019; Hyun et al., 2006). Black women develop fictive kinship bonds (Cooks & Williams, 2015) and a culture and community with one another that allow a meaningful experience (Collins, 1986). Engaging with other Black women in a safe and supportive space allowed the participants to experience community, safety, and joy in a way that contributed to their persistence in the program. Marie, Belle, Neka, Joan, and Arianna acknowledged that being connected to other Black women was essential to their academic experience and brought joy to the challenges of their academic journey. Connection to a community of Black women scholars contributed to higher feelings of wellness and overall satisfaction in their journey.

Financial Wellness as a Component of Black Women Doctoral Student Wellness

One area of wellness that is not included in Hettler's (1976, 1980) model but should be considered for Black women doctoral students is financial health and wellness. Graduate students encounter stress stemming from the financial burdens linked to pursuing an advanced degree (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Yusuf et al., 2020), and this was the case for the Black women doctoral students in the present study. Many of the co-narrators (i.e., Marie, Kaycee, Joan, and Belle) spoke about how the financial burden of being a doctoral student influenced their overall experience and their wellness. Because holistic wellness is influenced by all aspects of life, when a person's financial wellness is low, it has the power to influence their mental, emotional and sometimes physical health.

Financial challenges were so pervasive throughout the co-narrators' experiences that I assert financial wellness should be considered a dimension of wellness for Black women doctoral students. Hettler's (1976, 1980) model indicated the interdependent nature of each of the dimensions of wellness, as was the case for this study. For the co-narrators, financial wellness was connected to other dimensions of wellness, ultimately influencing their holistic wellness. As the co-narrators shared, without financial wellness, they were unable to eat healthily (i.e., physical wellness), be fully engaged academically (i.e., intellectual wellness), and, in some cases, have access to therapeutic services (i.e., emotional wellness). Adding financial wellness as a component to the model allows for a recognition of the need for and the importance of financial health when pursuing a doctoral degree. Financial wellness extends beyond just having money to support an educational pursuit. A focus on financial wellness also includes understanding how to effectively manage money, navigate financial challenges, and understanding how and where to seek financial resources when needed.

My findings aligned with emerging research on Black women and wellness. Mosley (2023) also introduced financial wellness as a chamber (or dimension) of wellness for Black women and those seeking holistic healing and wellness. In her work, she outlined and identified that financial wellness must be a component of holistic wellness in a racist and capitalistic society, especially for Black women (Mosley, 2023). Similar to Hettler, Mosley (2023) also stressed that each aspect of wellness for Black women overlaps, and one area of the wellness influences another.

Perhaps Hettler (1976, 1980) did not include financial wellness in his six dimensions of wellness because his model has somewhat of an internal focus. Hettler's model stressed the importance of people being attuned to their own needs spiritually, emotionally, physically,

intellectually, occupationally, and socially. He also asserted that individuals actively work to understand and meet their needs. Although Hettler's model appears to have an internal focus, the dimensions of Hettler's model requires individuals to consider their wellness needs in relationship to the overall environment. Adding a financial wellness component may feel like a departure from the model because finances is often seen as an external entity due to its association with money. However, I argue that including a financial component contains an internal aspect in that it entails personal learning and growth towards achieving financial stability. Mosley (2023) asserted that financial wellness is a part of holistic wellness and should be incorporated into wellness and healing models. Additionally, my research expanded on Hettler's model by incorporating a dimension that can play a huge role in how and if a person is able to experience holistic wellness.

My research expounded on the literature because it applied Hettler's (1976, 1980) wellness model to the doctoral student population, and I identify how other dimensions of wellness should be included for Black women doctoral students. My work has bolstered research on Black women, emphasizing intentional engagement in wellness practices, and aligned with emerging literature on Black women's wellness (e.g., Mosley, 2023). Furthermore, my study has enhanced current literature and research on Black women doctoral students as the combination of using both Hettler's six dimension of wellness and black feminist thought allowed me to uncover and contribute to research that acknowledges that financial stress is a concern for Black women doctoral students.

Highlighting an Ethic of Care and the Dialogic Process

All interviews were conducted via an online platform (i.e. Zoom). Digital spaces have a reputation for being cold and limiting personal connection. However, that was not the case for

many of my interviews. Perhaps because Black women recognize the Blackness and womanhood in other Black women, there was an understanding of a somewhat shared experience even virtually. Each participant entered the space with a warmth and affinity toward Black people, and particularly for other Black women. All participants had their cameras on. I developed a connection with each co-narrator and the interview process felt more like an extension of the supportive Black women communities that we either experienced or longed for during our doctoral journeys. In moments of joy, we laughed together; and in some moments of sadness we cried together. I acknowledged the humanity of their experiences and trusted them as the experts of their stories (Collins, 1986). Developing the narratives also involved an ethic of care. When crafting the narratives, I sought to humanize the co-narrators by describing their appearance, and capturing the essence of their stories.

Both Black feminist thought (Collins, 1989) and narrative inquiry (Squire et al., 2013) highlight the dialogic process of research. As I engaged in discussion with the co-narrators, I trusted them as subject-matter experts. Concepts for emerging findings were discussed with the co-narrators because, for Black women, workshopping ideas often happens in community with other Black women (Collins, 1989). In fact, Arianna's mention of impostorism prompted me to revisit my literature review and language. For example, several of the co-narrators described experiencing impostorism or impostor syndrome. Co-narrators shared bouts of impostorism as a result of being expected to know things that their PhD program was supposed to teach them. Unfamiliarity with academic jargon, harsh feedback on academic writing and lack of knowledge of leading researchers in their field all contributed to the co-narrator's experiences with impostorism. It was clear that some of the co-narrators did not actually feel like impostors per se, rather it was the academic environment that brought on those feelings or they were not being

taught appropriately. Arianna pointed to the work by McGee et al. (2022), and explained how systemic structures were not designed for people with marginalized identities, thus making Black women feel like we do not belong in certain spaces. Arianna's mention of McGee's work prompted me to include that article in my literature review and reframe how I named that section of the findings. Updating my literature review and changing the language used regarding impostor syndrome is but one example of the dialogic process in which narrative inquiry and Black feminist thought suggests researchers engage. Furthermore, as talk about Black women doctoral students continues, educators must be mindful of language and put the onus of responsibility on larger structures, rather than internalizing messages that Black women do not belong. Honoring Black women as co-narrators and constructors of knowledge is a component of Black feminist thought (Collins, 1986, 2000). By respecting the co-narrators in this way, I was able to learn from and with them. The co-narrators challenged my thinking on several things, including the example on impostorism and extending grace and love to skinfolk who aren't kinfolk.

Additional Highlights of Black Feminist Thought

Core tenets of Black feminist thought (Collins, 1986) emerge very clearly in the data and in the data collection process. Black women in white spaces often experience isolation (Shavers & Moore, 2014a, 2014b and being an "outsider within" (Collins, 1986, p. S14). The co-narrators in this study experienced a lack of belonging and feelings of impostorism. The co-narrators experiencing a sense of isolation can be attributed to the outsider-within notion, in that Black women are made to feel unwelcome in academic spaces, contributing to negative feelings and a lack of belonging (Liu et al., 2023; Shavers & Moore, 2014a, 2014b). Despite feeling unwelcomed and experiencing challenges, several of the co-narrators were still intentional about

seeking and finding joy, which contributed to their wellness. The act of centering and seeking joy aligned with the self-valuation and self-definition tenet of Black feminist thought (Collins, 1986). Specifically, it indicates how Black women resisted stereotypes about Black womanhood and identified what joy and wellness looked like in their lives. Additionally, the co-narrators expressed how they learned to honor their own voices and experiences. Both of the aforementioned tasks is a function of Black feminist thought.

Though not always explicitly discussed in the findings, the co-narrators each shared the importance of their identities of being a Black woman. In addition to race and gender, co-narrators were keenly aware of how their intersectional identities influenced their experiences. Specifically, the co-narrators named how their socioeconomic status, combined with their other intersectional identities influenced their wellness in harmful ways. Not having access to adequate funding for graduate education or having to work during their doctoral degree created challenging experiences that ultimately influenced the wellness of the co-narrators. The interlocking nature of the identities (a component of Black feminist thought) influenced the wellness related experiences of the co-narrators in the study, and how they coped with challenges.

Another feature of Black feminist thought is to trust the knowledge of Black women. As shared in the above example with Arianna and the concept of impostorism, I trusted the voices and experiences of the co-narrators. Trusting Black women's voices is also evidenced in the forthcoming section where I share recommendations for faculty and staff who wish to support this population. My knowledge and the co-narrators' knowledge of Black women is interdependent, creating a unique opportunity for me and the co-narrators to engage with one another about the experiences of Black women. Put a different way, the two levels of knowledge

from the researcher and the co-narrators rely on each other (Collins, 1989) and allow an opportunity to engage in dialogue that fosters a climate where all Black women can redefine ourselves, validating and exploring our unique perspectives (Collins, 1989). Engaging in dialogue that redefines Black women is part of the essence of Black feminist thought, as it allows for an exchange of knowledge that uplifts and honors the voices and experiences of Black women.

Black Women's Identity as a Source of Joy

Literature about Black women in academia often centers our identities as a problem (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). Specifically, research continues to emerge on how the racialized and gendered experiences negatively impact Black women doctoral students' experiences (Dinsmore & Roska, 2023; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Lewis et al., 2013; McGee et al., 2019; Miller & Roska, 2020; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016; Wallace & Ford, 2021). Focusing solely on the difficulties Black women experience in academia due to racism and sexism perpetuates a deficit approach and fails to paint a complete picture of our experiences (Gallimore, 2022; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021). My research uniquely contributes to the body of work on Black women doctoral students, as it shares both our joy and our challenges. Additionally, my research uncovered that our identities as Black women are often a source of love and support for other Black women. Many of the co-narrators in this study discussed how being in community with other Black women gave them joy and added meaning to their doctoral experiences. In addition to my research expounding the literature on Black women doctoral students, it also aligned with the tenets of Black feminist thought that asserts the importance of Black women's culture (Collins, 1986). The culture and community among Black women is critical for our success.

Next, I provide a summary of the preceding sections. The conceptual framework, which integrates Hettler's six dimensions of wellness and black feminist thought, resonated effectively with the current study. The data not only confirmed certain points of alignment but also uncovered opportunities for further exploration and expansion. First, community was an integral part of Black women doctoral students' experiences and served as a protective factor for their wellness. Second, Hettler's six dimensions of wellness can be enhanced for Black women doctoral students by including a financial wellness component. Third, an ethic of care and the dialogic process is critical when conducting research with and for Black women. Additionally, the self-definition and self-valuation component of Black feminist thought manifested in the co-narrators' stories and experiences. Lastly, Black women's connections to one another served as a source of joy during their doctoral journey.

Findings Connected to the Literature

In this section of the discussion chapter, I address how the findings of this study are connected to the larger body of literature about Black women in academia. First, I discuss relationships with Black faculty, administrators, and with advisors. I conclude with how Black women persist at the expense of our mental health.

Relationships with Black Faculty and Administrators are Important

There is extant literature on the importance of same-race and same-gender mentoring and advising relationships between students and faculty (Bertrand Jones et al., 2015, 2013; Patton & Harper, 2003; Pope & Edwards, 2016; Shavers & Moore, 2014a). My research has contributed to this literature by confirming that same-race and same-gender faculty and administrator relationships with doctoral students are important for Black women. My study also expounded on the literature by acknowledging same-race and same-gender faculty and administrators'

relationships with doctoral students are not always indicative of support. As described in the "all skinfolk ain't kinfolk" findings section, some of the co-narrators had stressful and challenging interactions with Black women faculty or administration, which influenced their wellness. I explore this phenomenon in greater detail in the forthcoming section.

Although Black women were sources of support and love for the co-narrators, not all interactions with Black women contributed positively to the co-narrator's wellness. To be clear, the co-narrators found joy and safety when connecting with other Black women who seemed to care about other Black people. When the care or concern for Black people was absent (with Black and non-Black students, faculty, or staff), the co-narrators experienced challenges that sometimes had implications for their overall wellness. It is important to recognize that shared identities are not the sole factor for Black women doctoral students when developing relationships with faculty and administrators. I argue that what matters in faculty and administrators same-race and same-gender relationships with students is genuine concern, care and respect for the students.

Admittedly, as the researcher, I struggled to decide whether to include the negative encounters Black women had with other Black women, as I did not want to center or perpetuate a narrative that Black women were not supportive of one another. However, in a webinar, hosted by the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education, about the wellness of Black women in the academy, scholar Nadrea Njoku explained how Black people and other people of color can embody the construct of white supremacy (Haywood et al., 2024). She noted:

> Johnetta B. Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall say in their book, *Gender Talk,* there are race secrets that [Black people] keep, and we should not keep race secrets . . . I think we protect our sisters and brothers sometimes because we want to keep those race secrets, and we should not if they are harming us. (as cited in Haywood et al., 2024, 53:38)

In other words, Black women should name people who harm us, even if they share our identities. The Black women who created challenges for the co-narrators did not seem to care about their holistic wellness, or about them as individuals. Not everyone with shared identities will share the fictive kinship bonds or sense of community that exist within Black women spaces.

The same internal conflict that I had about sharing the challenges that co-narrators had with other Black women, emerged in the data of the present study with Joan. She reflected that the main reason she did not voice complaints publicly about the Vice President who took her funding, was because the Vice President was also a Black woman. Ultimately, I chose to include it because one, it was a part of the co-narrator's experiences; two, there is power in naming the challenges Black women face; three, I believe the inability to be honest about our experiences is a function of whiteness and the white gaze (i.e. we do not want white people to see us as divided). Lastly, this finding has added nuance to the literature (e.g. Bertrand Jones et al., 2015, 2013; Patton & Harper, 2003; Pope & Edwards, 2016; Shavers & Moore, 2014a) about same-race, same-gender relationships with Black women doctoral students and faculty. Additionally, the negative encounters with Black and non-Black faculty or administration was but a small part of the larger story. For the most part, Black women thrived when they could be in supportive community with one another.

Advisor Relationships

Advising relationships are of critical importance for graduate students (Austin, 2002; Dinsmore & Roksa, 2023; Ellis, 2001; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Griffin et al., 2023; Maher et al., 2020). The findings from this study supported and extended that assertion, which was consistent with the extant literature. Relationships with advisors proved to be a critical factor in the co-narrator's experiences and their holistic wellness. Several of the co-narrators shared how they

encountered challenging situations with faculty members during their program (e.g. disengaged or negative committee members, racist lab supervisors), and having their advisors' support helped them to navigate their challenges, and feel well in the process. Co-narrators who had positive advising relationships reported their advisors helped them by introducing them at conferences, engaging in motivational conversations when the co-narrators were experiencing self-doubt, guiding them through difficult encounters with other faculty, and advocating for them. In this particular study, *how* advisors advocated for and supported the co-narrators made a difference in their journey, and mitigated stressful situations. These findings indicated, regardless of the racial identity of the advisor, what is most important, is an advisor who supports, trusts, and guides their doctoral students. While advisors have the ability to influence doctoral students' experiences and wellness (Dinsmore & Roksa, 2023; Griffin et al., 2023), they also have the power to help doctoral students feel well.

Black Women's Persistence at the Expense of Our Mental Health

Many of the co-narrators experienced different life events that interfered with their doctoral journey. Although the co-narrators were intentional about experiencing and finding joy, they were also intentional about continuing to move forward during challenging times. As reflected in some of the gif/meme selections, the co-narrators chose to smile through pain. Pushing through challenges is connected to the idea that Black women must wear academic masks to survive academia (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Shavers & Moore, 2014a; Walkington, 2017). Several co-narrators shared they continued to focus on their PhD journey even during major life events like childbirth, weddings, loss of loved ones, and academic challenges. This desire may be connected to the pervasive stereotypes of Black women being magical and strong. As noted earlier in the literature review, labels often employed to validate

Black women's identities fail to encompass the psychological or emotional strain that many Black women endure. Specifically, the prevalent narrative of the strong, magical Black woman perpetuates the notion that Black women's resilience is limitless (Patton & Croom, 2017; Walker-Barnes, 2017; Watson & Hunter, 2015). Labels like "strong Black woman" and "Black girl magic" may be why some co-narrators felt obligated to push forward, even when they were not doing well mentally, physically, or emotionally. It was clear the portrayal of strength exacted a significant toll on the co-narrators and compromised their holistic mental health and well-being (Walker-Barnes, 2017).

In summary, the findings of this study both affirmed and departed from the literature. In my research, I emphasized the significance of same-race and gender relationships among Black women doctoral students and faculty/staff. Additionally, my findings contributed nuance to the discourse on same-race and gender relationships between faculty/administrators and students. They suggested that while race and gender are crucial factors, meaningful connections also hold significance. Additionally, I discussed how the findings in this study affirmed the fact that Black women thrive in community with one another. Several of the co-narrators expressed the importance of their relationships with other Black women. Furthermore, the data of the present study aligned with the literature that cites the importance of advising relationships. Lastly, I discussed how Black women's presentation of strength can be harmful and how it is related to the strong Black woman archetype and the masks that Black women in academia wear. In the next section of the dissertation, I discuss the implications for researchers, future research and practice.

Implications for Researchers, Future Research & Practice

In this section of the chapter, I provide implications for researchers, future research and practice. All implications are rooted in the data; many of them are direct suggestions from the co-narrators. Before I delve into the implications, I take a point of personal researcher privilege and directly address Black women in or considering doctoral journeys. First, I share suggestions from the co-narrators and follow with a personal statement to Black women in academia.

Messages from the Co-Narrators to Black Women Doctoral Students:

The co-narrators were each asked what advice they would give Black women doctoral students currently pursuing or considering a PhD, related to holistic mental health and wellness. Below I used the co-narrators' own words to share with Black women doctoral students suggestions on how to thrive holistically during the doctoral journey. I opted to include this in the implications section, and not the findings, to amplify the fact the co-narrators were scholars within their own rights and were experts in knowing what Black women may need.

Joyce shared that Black women doctoral students should develop a plan to manage challenges based on how they best manage stress. She stated:

> I think it depends on how you manage stress, so like when there's a conflict with me, I need to fix it immediately. And there's some people that are like that. There's some people that are avoidant. Fixing it immediately, if you're in that bucket, I would say, write out all the possible outcomes, write them out, talk them out. Figure out what needs to happen. 'Cause then you can visualize how you're gonna get through it. If you're avoidant, then you may want to figure out a plan as to okay, you may not want to deal with it today, but at some point when you gonna pick this up . . . and it's okay to be still. You don't have to be busy reading, writing, or working on your dissertation. You can also—and this counts, and this started to click really in the last 6 months. It counts when you're in the car, and you're just thinking, or you're talking to somebody about something random. It just makes sense. Like those times still count as work. So, you should not feel guilty that you're not technically, traditionally, in front of a laptop with a book open or something like that. You're still working on your dissertation by thinking, and I feel like we discount the thinking of it, and we only look for the action.

Joan had several suggestions on how to manage stress, which included setting boundaries and actively engaging in therapeutic relationships. First, she shared:

> I need you to set your boundaries now, firm with the people closest to you and with yourself. And it‘s not an easy thing. So it‘s gonna take time. . . . Set your boundaries now and hold them firm. Set your boundaries with yourself and stay in therapy. Not even if you have any specific issues to address just as a temperature test to see how you‘re doing. How you‘re going. That somebody from the outside is assessing you. To alert you if you‘re starting to slip away into whatever direction or spiral down. . . . if you‘re not checking in with somebody on a regular basis then you can go from up to down and not even realize it. . . . Therapy doesn‘t work if you don‘t work. And realizing that for sure. I know all therapists aren‘t created equal. But the thing is that if you‘re not feeling like you‘re doing anything in that space, even if you‘re not being authentic and opening yourself up and being truly vulnerable. If you don‘t feel like you can be vulnerable in therapy then you to get another therapist. . . . Find a space like that.

Her second suggestion focused on community. She continued:

> Get with some like-minded folks. And find a regiment like meeting up with these people and pick your own time. Whether it‘s weekly, bi-weekly, whatever, but regularly. So that you all can share space and build community. Even if you’re just writing in the same room and not even talking to each other. Or even if you’re in a zoom room and not talking to each other and just writing or whatever. Just commune, connect. Isolation is excruciating. This process can be very isolating especially when people don’t understand what you’re doing. You get tired of explaining it. . . . just find your people and connect with them all the time as much as you possibly can. That is within your boundaries for you to still be productive.

Joan’s third suggestion focused on faculty and staff relationships. She shared:

> Put your committee members on rotating meetings. . . . Because even if you were stagnant for a week and a half. Those 3 days before you meet with that committee member you will get some work done. It will inch you forward because of the accountability that you’re putting in place. . . . Choose your committee members wisely. And if one’s not working out and they’re causing turmoil, it’s better to have one hard conversation than to totally tank your process in your program. And so if it’s not a win, then it’s a “L” okay. You might have to take the “L” so that you can move on and win. Let somebody go. That will release yourself to be mentally well as well, when you’re not in constant worry of this person. If someone is intimidating you to the point where you feel like you’re being bullied, that’s not it. That is not it. We all have to pay our dues but no one should feel bullied. And to know the difference. Find a good mentor, more than one, if you can. Find someone who’s doing what you want to do and doing it well and keep them close and check-in with them and let them know how you’re doing. It could be

> at your institution, or it could not be at your institution or it could be somebody that's not in your field at all. Just somebody that really wants you to win. That you can be honest and open with. . . . Also, hold your administration responsible for providing you with the things that you need. Ask for them. Be loud about it. You brought me here. You recruited me here. And you didn't give me the tools to succeed. I need this, this, this, this this and more. Make them move their feet.

Her final suggestion focused on how to tend to overall wellness as a Black woman doctoral student:

> If you're a spiritual person, then connect to that higher power on a regular basis. And it doesn't have to be you physically going into a church or anything. If you wanna nap or you wanna meditate or you wanna whatever. Then whatever it is that looks like to you. Then do that. Get yourself on a sleep, hygiene regimen. . . .There's no TV in my room, no devices in my room. There's no laptop in my room. My room was only for sleep and meditation. . . .When I was rested, I did good work. Take care of your body. Drink your water, move around, connect with nature.

Willow also suggested that Black women find the things that center them. She started off by encouraging Black women to consider if they really want to pursue a PhD and to be prepared for the stress that comes along with a PhD journey. She explained:

> Make sure you really want to do it. . . . It puts a strain on your mental health and wellness. Everyone—I can only speak from my experience. But I've never met anyone that was like, 'Oh, yeah, that was a walk in the park,' like no. It's going to push you and strain you, regardless of what you have going on in your life. . . . Go work first, go, get some experience. Go do some life stuff first, and then give 5 years, 4 years whatever. No timeline whatever. But give yourself the opportunity to figure out who you are. Because when you, if you just go straight from school, school, school, school, then like, maybe you're just not gonna be able to handle when things through this process are distressing, and really try to steal your joy. Whereas for me, like I could always—yes, I was disappointed when I had a challenging committee member, but at the end of the day I knew that this person's opinion is not my story. It is not. It has no like—I had the emotional intelligence, and I had gone through some stuff to be able to help me combat those things, whereas if I was, this was my whole life, and I didn't know anything else that probably would have been really disastrous for me . . . you gotta figure out how to take care of yourself, what that looks like for you, What is important. I had to really learn what was important to me, cultivate my time around that, set those boundaries. . . . Finding community as we've already talked about. And realizing that your work is not your worth. You're not the entirety of this process. This is a product that you're putting out . . . You are a whole lot more than this PhD process. And yeah, find yourself. Know

> yourself. Hold on to your community through it. Those are the things that I would tell another Black woman. And take up the space that you need to in your program . . . Don't allow people to shrink you.

Marie also mentioned the importance of community for her mental health and wellness. She urged Black women to "Find your safe place. For me, finding a safe place was the most important thing." Similar, Arianna reminded Black women to center community in the PhD process. She stated:

> Reach out to your people. . . . Sometimes you need to reach out to people, not in your program that are unbiased. . . . Reach out to people outside of your program, but also have people in your program that you can be part of your community and village. And if you can't find people in your program, find people in your field, find people in other graduate programs. But you have to have your community.

As was common throughout the findings of this study and the literature, community was important. Iesha also reiterated the importance of community. However, she mentioned it as a protective factor to dealing with racism within the academy. Iesha shared:

> So, part of it is, I think, leaning on your community and part of it, which probably just my perspective is going in with low expectations. Which I know is probably not the best. There might be more adaptive ways to do it. . . . More often, what I hear and what I've tried to tell mentees, is these kinds of [racialized] experiences that I think most of us will have at any academic institution, because none of them were designed for us. And so, I think some of my friends . . . were kind of blindsided because they didn't expect that. . . . And like for me. I wasn't shocked. It didn't suck any less, but I kinda had a framework that I think didn't lead me to doubt myself. I was confident in pushing back, even though it was still stressful. I didn't feel like, oh, I'm doing something wrong. I felt like, 'oh, naw! You outta line! You got me bent!' (laughter) And so I think, just having that understanding and not letting that stop you cause when it happens it's not as jarring. You're not as shook by it. It's still stressful, but you know, maybe, what to do. You have a frame of reference of like what to do next. . . . So I think just kinda expecting it. And then if it doesn't happen, excellent, love that for you. . . . that's probably not the best advice, but that's my advice, and then have a community, for when it does happen (laugher) and ways to take care of yourself when it does happen, so that you don't let them push you out.

While Iesha talked about community as a tool to protect Black women doctoral students from the trials of academia, Neka mentioned it as something that can sustain Black women throughout their journeys, saying:

> First to remember that this is a portion of their life. It is going to be a big portion of their life, but it isn't their life. Find ways to continue to connect with themselves outside of it. Because if you let your doctoral journey do it, it will consume you very easily and very inconspicuously. All of the sudden you're just like, "Wait, how is everything I'm thinking, living, breathing, doing all of these things that have to do with my doctoral journey?" Finding ways to still connect with your community that existed prior to the journey. Hopefully, they will be the community that will see you through and see you on the other side as well. And the way you show up for your community . . . changes so dramatically because of the doctoral journey. And giving themselves the grace and space to grieve that. Of not being that friend, not being that aunt, not being that person for everyone. But still knowing that your community understands. Find ways to connect with them; when you can't show up, be honest.

In addition to community, Neka suggested that Black women seek out therapy if they are financially able and if their institution's counseling center can support it. She suggested:

> Another thing I would say regarding mental wellness is if finances are possible, or if the caseload at your institution's mental health center allows, find a practitioner that you can connect with as authentically as possible with your most salient identities. Because that has been very instrumental for me. To take a step back or to actually have someone else question the roots of intrusive thoughts, or the circumstances that might be feeding the self-doubt or whatever they're experiencing. Community, mental health, still remembering who they are.

Third, Neka suggested physical activity to assist with holistic wellness. She encouraged Black women to engage in physical activity when possible. She shared:

> If they can, find ways to move their body. I know for me walking and running those times that I did it and do it consistently, not necessarily specifically for a weight loss regimen. But sometimes your writing improves. . . . But if they can find a way to move their body, go outside, connect with nature. If that's something that speaks to them, then still do those things, even if it's for a short 5 minutes or something. Because it really will help them.

Neka concluded her suggestions by revisiting her ideas of community, specifically for Black women who may be navigating other identities, such as being first-generation students. She said:

> When I spoke about community, I spoke about the pre-existing community, but also be willing to develop community, if possible, within your institution. Because there is so much knowledge that being in community at your institution or with other doctoral students across the nation can have. . . . There are many of us who are first generation college students. But many of us are also first generation. And then like, you don't realize it, but then you realize, "Oh, you are third generation, doctoral? It's like you have classmates that come with family members who understand, who already have expectations of how they will contribute to the family that are more aligned. And here you are overwhelmed cause you the first in your family to do it, boo! So, they don't know, like you don't know. And so just being able to find community because there are some things that you can only truly discuss, or people will only fully understand you because they are also living it or have lived it. And so I think that's really important, as Black women, to find community in women, especially other Black women who have journeyed the doctoral space.

The co-narrators want Black women to understand the importance of not being on the doctoral journey alone and to take care of ourselves in the process. Kaycee also recommended that Black women focus on taking care of ourselves and going to places where we are loved. She joked that for Black women, feeling loved may only be at an HBCUs. She elaborated:

> Go to an HBCU! (laughter). . . . To be less facetious, not necessarily going to a specific HBCU, but go where you are loved. Go where you will be supported. There are schools all over that really want to do the work of fighting these disparities and opportunities, and those places who really want to do that will start to do the work in terms of how they recruit and how they treat their students. Go there! That's what I would say. That's what I would say first, and again, it doesn't have to be an HBCU, but . . . [laugher] . . . yeah, that's what I would say.

In addition to seeking out spaces where Black women feel loved, Kaycee encouraged Black women doctoral students to focus on and prioritize health during the doctoral journey. She shared:

> And take care of yourself. Definitely prioritize your health, do not feel like you have to push through. That's all I've been doing for the past 5 years, is just pushing through, pushing through. I will eat when this is over, I will sleep when this is over, I will start to

> have fun again when this is over. I'll have kids when this is over. Do not do that. . . . Do not do that! Take care of yourself while you're doing it. Take time off if you need to . . . I would definitely say, prioritize your health over your timeline because goals will get there, you know. My mother keeps telling me well, somebody who gets their medical degree at 50 years old. What do they call that person? Doctor!

Kaycee identified that regardless of when or how you finish, you will still be a doctor, so be mindful of your journey.

In Belle's reflection she urged Black women to persist if they can, and to do so in a way that honors themselves and other Black women. She explained:

> Survive, sis. Persist. Cause I know it ain't easy. And I'm not mad if you can't persist, right. I'm not mad that you can't. I'm not judging if you can't, 'cause they don't make it easy. But persist and do it in a way that you could be proud of yourself in a real way. . . . Don't forget to learn. . . . I learned a lot of stuff in my doctoral program, but I learned a lot about opportunity hoarding. Cause academia is good for opportunity hoarding. . . . I just don't know. I want people to get PhDs. I want people to get EdDs. I want people to get whatever doctoral degrees they want to get. But I want them to get it with some integrity, too. . . . Don't forget why, like the work that the people went through, that looked like us to be able to have this kind of access. Don't give those white people the fuckin' satisfaction of thinking they broke you. . . . That's what I would ask Black people or Black women coming into PhD programs. Just like what I found in my dissertation data. You owe somebody. You got to pay down a debt that someone paid for you. Now you gotta pay it for somebody else. . . . You're paying back the people who paid your debt by paying it forward to someone else. Don't forget to do that. Don't forget to lift as you climb. Fuck the schoolwork, all of that other stuff. Do it so that when you look back, you don't feel like you gave them too much. Other than that, persist.

Belle encouraged Black women to do their best to survive the academy, and to remember to bring other Black women along with them. Each of the co-narrators shared their ideas on how Black women can survive the academy, and there was some overlap in their suggestions. Based on the suggestions from the co-narrators, I compiled a list of key takeaways which are reviewed in the next section.

Key Takeaways:

Several recommendations for Black women in doctoral programs emerged from the co-narrators' suggestions. I synthesized the suggestions and developed five key takeaways and recommendations for Black women doctoral students. The key takeaways are addressed to Black women directly:

1. **Engage in self-reflection and boundary setting.** Learn about yourself and what you need, before and during your doctoral journey. Developing self-awareness allows you to better understand your needs. Set firm boundaries with yourself and others, particularly in terms of workload and personal well-being. Engaging in self-reflection and setting boundaries will help you navigate academia more successfully.
2. **Seek therapeutic support.** Always prioritize your mental health. If possible, engage in therapy as a means of self-assessment and support to ensure ongoing emotional well-being, even in the absence of specific issues.
3. **Develop your village and community of support.** Cultivate a supportive community of like-minded individuals to share experiences, provide mutual encouragement, and combat feelings of isolation often experienced in academia. For the co-narrators, this community often consisted of other Black women, however, find whatever community affirms, loves, and supports you.
4. **Engage in self-care and holistic wellness practices.** Incorporate holistic wellness practices such as spirituality, adequate sleep, physical activity, and connection with others to promote overall well-being amidst the rigors of doctoral study. Define what self-care means for you and engage in the things that make you feel whole and well. Take breaks as needed.

5. **Recognize your resilience and advocate for yourself.** Recognize the importance of resilience in the face of adversity, maintain authenticity in your journey, and advocate for yourself by asserting your needs and holding institutions accountable for support and resources.

I distilled these recommendations from the larger data. These recommendations capture the significance of self-care, community support, and resilience in navigating the unique challenges of doctoral education as a Black woman. These are not prescriptive, rather they are a starting point for Black women in academia to consider as they begin or continue the doctoral journey. The key takeaways, developed based on the data, align with the available research on Black women doctoral students, emphasizing the importance of centering Black women's wellness (Cook & Williams, 2015; Lewis et al., 2013; Patton & Croom, 2017; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010).

Implications

In the subsequent section of my dissertation, I identify implications for research and practice. The implications include suggestions for researchers, faculty, staff and practitioners who work closely with Black women doctoral students.

Implications for Future Research and Researchers

As literature about the mental health and wellness of graduate students emerges, information about Black women doctoral students remains sparse. As researchers seek to understand the graduate experience and mental health and wellness, Black women's voices deserve to be present. In fact, not including Black women contributes to the erasure of our presence and experiences in literature and may unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes about our strength (Watson & Hunter, 2015; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2022). The first implication for researchers

is that it is crucial to include Black women in the discussion about mental health and wellness. Our unique experiences because of our social location and intersectional identities can contribute to a richer discussion around wellness in graduate education.

The second implication for researchers is to engage in an ethic of care when conducting research with Black women. Notice I intentionally said *with* Black women, as researchers should be collaborative in their research practices and approaches with Black women. Respect us as subject matter experts on our own experiences. Honor our experiences. It is my belief I was able to get such rich data from participants, because beyond having shared identities, I created an emotionally safe environment for the co-narrators. This safety was provided by empathizing with and affirming the co-narrator's experiences, encouraging them to be their authentic selves, creating space to discuss their joy and pain, and offering an opportunity to engage in data collection in non-traditional ways (i.e. collecting memes and gifs). Future researchers who hope to better understand Black women doctoral students should recognize that we are more than the negative experiences we encounter in academia. Black women need a space to talk about our wins and our losses. This is part of an ethic of care because it recognizes Black women as whole human beings, and not just a collection of our negative encounters. Additionally, researchers should provide opportunities to engage in creative, nontraditional data collection methods, like visual data or creative writing opportunities. The use of nontraditional data collection processes allows different avenues to explore student experiences in an in-depth manner (Kortegast et al., 2019).

Scholars engaging in research with Black women should also include Black women in the data analysis process. In this study, none of the of the co-narrators engaged in the member-checking process. While the reason for this was unknown, future researchers can be intentional

about using the interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the codes, themes and categories emerging from the data. For example, future researchers can share high-level codes or categories during the second interview (or a focus group) along with questions that emerged about the data. Involving the co-narrators in the analysis process during data collection would allow for real-time member checking during the second interview, and not require an additional layer of engagement outside of the interview process. Researchers can also send co-narrators lingering questions in between the interview for continued engagement. Sending interview transcripts after both interviews have concluded may have been what contributed to the lack of response.

Lastly, one of the boundaries of this research was the co-narrators were located in a particular region in the U.S. Future researchers should consider expanding the research to include Black women doctoral students across the United States to develop a fuller picture of our experiences.

Implications for Practice

Similar to the recommendations for Black women doctoral students, I used the co-narrators' own words to provide recommendations for practices. Co-narrators were asked what they would tell faculty or administrators who are interested in promoting healthy mental health wellness amongst Black women doctoral students. I compiled their responses below and synthesized their responses into a list of key takeaways.

Many of the co-narrators suggested the faculty and administrators provide opportunities for Black women to connect with other Black women. Willow shared:

> I don't have ideas of like specifically what that space can look like. It can look like lots of things, right. It can look like virtual communities. It could look like connecting students. Not just assuming like, Oh, you're a Black woman . . . and you guys should be friends. But also, maybe affinity spaces where people, Black women, and other people who identify differently can gravitate and find other people who, you know, identify similarly to them. But it's needed! . . . I feel like we talk about success in higher education, and

> Black women like, you know, we're gonna do it all. We're gonna excel. We're gonna be Black excellence, Black girl magic. . . . But are they well? Are they traumatized on the other side? And that's what I found, a lot of us are. . . . But there's no space for us to say it, because in our families, in our, you know, it's like, 'Oh, this go be great! Get the degree you did it, PhD. Everybody clap for her.' Meanwhile she needs to go to therapy to recoup from what she went through. But if I had a space of other Black woman peers—And I think this is important, too. Like, even outside of my program, I would love to connect with doctoral students across the university. Like there's a place to connect there, too. If there was a space where I could just let my guard down, and be like man, I'm struggling in this way, like is anyone else? From people who are also going through similar things, I think, for sure, that would have helped. Or even offering mental health services, counseling mental health services, making sure that you know there are diverse representation of therapists and counselors, you know, who maybe can come in and do little small groups. And . . . I don't know, like even offering those things. I just want academia and academic departments to think about well-being.

In Willow's suggestions, she urged institutions to think about creating safe spaces for Black women and other students of color. She also recommended that institutions adequately staff therapy centers so that Black women can seek help as needed. Similarly, Neka shared Black women communal spaces are important. She indicated:

> I think for better or worse, if [faculty or administrators] can help to create the community, be it peer-to-peer mentoring, or advisor to advisee, or faculty to student mentoring. But again, that's putting more work on Black women in terms of mentoring. I'm not saying a white man can't mentor a Black woman, not saying that. But there is also a different mentoring dynamic when it's a Black woman to a Black woman. So if they can help create space, structure, even if it's physical space that is dedicated to that, that would be beneficial. . . . Being able to create space, even if it's physical. Even if at the beginning of this academic year, like the creative space. If they have that opportunity to say, "Okay, this is going to be a Black woman on XYZ time" and date there's lunch provided just for people to kind of do like a mixer or something like that, so that students can connect with each other and form a community. Maybe it's once a month, maybe it's once every two months, or something. . . . I'm not trying to put more on [the Black women faculty]. Those are amazing Black women who are already doing too much. So, developing the Black men, developing the white men that are in these spaces, to be able to find a way to connect on a more personal level like, "Okay, how are you? Great? Let's jump into work."

Neka recognized Black women faculty and administrators already have a heavy load, so institutions have to be creative in how to cultivate community among Black women. Toward the

end of Neka's statement, she encouraged faculty and staff to get to know students and develop personal relationships. This connected to Marie's suggestion on how faculty and administrators can support Black women doctoral students. Marie shared:

> Spend time getting to know one thing about your students outside of their work or find a connection with them outside of their work. We know you're busy, but I think when you can connect with them on a human level, [that helps] . . . I would also share with them like share the resources. I think one thing that [my advisor] does that's really helpful is, she'll just be like "here. FYI, FYI, FYI." I'm getting all of these emails about stuff that I was like "Girl, I'm not doing all this stuff." But then I realized, oh, no, she's sharing this so I can expand my mind. It might not be something I need. But then, two weeks later, somebody else is like, "Yeah, I'm working on this project on, like LGTBQ issues." And [my advisor] shared it. And I'm like, "Oh, my advisor shared this. Check it out" So it doesn't just help you. It helps the community of scholars.

Marie suggested that faculty and administrators get to know their students personally and also share opportunities for professional development. Sharing resources with students can help faculty give access to students who are unfamiliar with the academy. Joyce also indicated professors should check-in with doctoral students on a personal level, because they need it. She recommended:

> Check in, what's going on. We do that so much on—and this is what pisses me off about a higher ed program. We preach this so much for undergraduate populations. But when it comes to graduate populations, because we think that we're adults, we think that we don't need the same support structures. And I would argue that we actually need it more because we're in career changes. We're trying to like, validate ourselves as professionals. We are really constructing what it means to be this person. And we're going through a lot versus just trying to get to 25 as an undergrad. We need more support here. And I think a lot of administrators think that we have it all together, and some of us are still pretending.

Joyce reminded administrators that Black women doctoral students are figuring it out and need the support from faculty to do so. She suggested faculty check-in on students; getting to know them can help students navigate the doctoral journey a bit better.

Kaycee and Joan both suggested that faculty and administrators be intentional about creating holistic wellness opportunities for students. Kaycee urged faculty and administrators to be intentional, suggesting:

> Create an opportunity for students to take care of themselves. Create an environment that promotes wellness and health. Foster healthy environments. Create opportunities where students aren't making themselves physically and emotionally unwell to achieve their goals. . . . I will say, it seems like people can come up with all kinds of grants to do their own research so they can go on sabbatical to fund their own little research projects. Find a few grants that are gonna give you some money to promote the health of your students. I'm sure they're out there. Give that same energy towards helping your students that you would give towards helping yourself and your own research and your own book that you want to sell.

Kaycee strongly invited faculty and staff to be thoughtful about creating opportunities for wellness and backing it with resources. Similarly, Joan also recommended that faculty should be responsible for creating wellness opportunities for students and holding them accountable for practicing wellness. She shared:

> Create a level of accountability where your students feel like it's necessary to have to do that as part of your accountability plan, just like it is with your writing plan. That you're holdin' them accountable for. Like don't just check-in with how their writing is going, how their data collection is going. Check in with their mental health. And you want proof. I want to see the receipt. You got a massage. I want to see the receipt. I want to hold out to the same level of accountability of doing their work as they are taking care of themselves. . . . So create that space for your doctoral students. Curate self-care retreats. Curate whatever. The same way you make us go to writing retreats and everything else like that's what it is. Hold it as the same par. . . . None of that writing stuff exists, even matters if we're barely hangin on. None of that stuff is gonna get done. Or it's gonna be poorly done. Hold them to the same level accountability for their self-care as you do for their writing.

In the two excerpts from Kaycee and Joan, they identified how faculty are responsible for creating wellness for students as much as they are responsible for teaching students.

Marie and Joyce encouraged faculty and administrators to be mindful of student needs. Joyce specifically encouraged faculty to believe Black women, be vulnerable with students and provide support as needed. She noted:

> I would say believe me, support me if I bring something to you. Right. Don't ask for additional evidence, because it already took a lot for me to even open my mouth and be here in this conversation. Not to say that you must grant every request, but understand what it took for me to be in this space where I'm vulnerable. And I need help. It doesn't always have to be tough love. . . . Because we already have it tough enough in life. You know what I mean? We're just trying to make this thing work. And you got some of the keys. How did you get through? Also, Professors don't talk enough about their own journey. You don't talk about the fact that you failed your Comps. Tell that piece. Don't just talk to me now as a tenured professor. Tell me about when you did not get tenure, you know, so they don't talk about the weaker moments, the challenging moments. You did not tell me that you did not pass your defense. My chair did not pass his defense. Also, not the first time, but also his defense was around a picnic table outside. So the condition is very, very different. You know these are older professors, from different parts of the world. . . . Set the right expectations here. Life is hard already. You should already make the assumption that I'm battling everything, which I am. If you know anything about Black women and oppression, I am. I just make it look easy and I make it look like it's not bothering me today. So, I just need you to be receptive when I'm asking for help. Don't tell me to go look for the answers. I need you to look with me. Can we hop on a zoom call? And "yeah, I read that, but I don't get it." So, I need to dig into your teaching bag and help me understand it.

Joyce asked for faculty and administrators to be understanding of the unique needs of Black women doctoral students, and to not make the doctoral experience worse. Marie added administrators should also be understanding, specifically related to schedules. She requested:

> Be more flexible with your doctoral students, their schedules, their time. If you can, give them time off that they weren't expecting. I think that a lot of times we don't take that into account. One thing that was really helpful for me was having a more flexible, graduate assistantship that prioritized my doctoral journey.

Being flexible with student schedules, giving more time off, and helping doctoral students navigate academia is important for the success of Black women doctoral students.

Arianna and Iesha encouraged faculty and administrators to do their own personal work to better support Black women doctoral students. Arianna suggested:

> [For faculty] I think critical reflexivity [is important]. Work on understanding their positionality. And not only how it impacts them as a researcher, how does it impact you as an instructor? How does it impact you as an advisor? How does it impact the policies that you support? The procedures that you're willing to go full force for...if I'm let's say I'm a white woman professor, and I'm showing up to class and I haven't been critically reflective of my positionality as an instructor, I may be doing things or saying things that are harming my Black women students, which is affecting their mental health. But if I'm more mindful of it, I've been pretty reflective, I recognize I say certain things that maybe I shouldn't be saying or do certain things that maybe I shouldn't be doing. Then I'm keeping that in the forefront of my mind. Now they're gonna make mistakes, just because, as an instructor, you're gonna like—even I tell my students this, even as far as I've come on my journey of being a critical educator, I still make mistakes. That is just part of I'm socialized in a world that protects whiteness, that reinforces whiteness and reproduces anti-blackness. So I'm constantly having to think of those things. So they also have to constantly think about those things. So like, who is on your syllabus? Why are particular people on your syllabus? And we talk about these people in your syllabus? Is it just like an add on like, Oh, and this is our diversity week. Or are you really integrating these readings? Or recognizing like sometimes—like for me, I am a cisgender, heterosexual woman, so like sometimes when I can, I try to bring in speakers, like when we're talking about gender expansiveness, I try to bring in speakers. Because that is not my experience, and I recognize that there's things I can do or say in that place to make a mistake, that I need to learn, so I will invite speakers to come to class, to speak, so that I can learn along with my students. And I think part of that in that space, that's critical reflectivity. Also, as you're thinking about admissions like, what is your? Especially now that we're not doing, your admissions cannot include race. So then, what are you now looking at? And how are you making sure that you're still racially being equitable in accepting Black women into your program.

For Arianna, faculty members and administrators should be aware of their social identities and how those identities influence decision making and classroom instruction, and how faculty are showing up as educators. Participants indicated the onus of responsibility was on faculty to be critical and thoughtful in their approach to supporting Black women doctoral students. Similarly, Iesha encouraged faculty and administrators to turn inward when supporting Black women doctoral students:

> One thing that comes to mind is just being, doing the internal work of being okay with different people from different walks of life. Meaning, maybe everybody doesn't share the same amount of information about their personal life at work. Some people might. Some people might not, and it doesn't mean that they don't like you, or that they don't want to talk to you, or that they don't like their job. But there are different cultural beliefs around workplace behavior and reasons to be cautious even for sharing or showing your full self. . . . But, like, you know, maybe they don't want to do whatever activity a lot of white people like to do after work like, maybe I just have different interests. And that's okay. It don't mean that they don't like you. Like they would rather go home to their family and not watch the Bachelorette with you like, and that's okay. And so not penalizing people for approaching interactions differently if their work is not giving you a reason to penalize them. And then, other than that, I would just say, you know, it's hard for me to give specific advice cause I feel like we're also different. But I just feel like there's a lot of experiences that you're more likely to have when you're Black and a Black woman, and so just kind of being aware of that when you ask people to do different things or . . . Like even moving out here. . . . I think the expectation is you move out here, and everything's fine—because it's been done for years—and everything's fine and you're ready to see a million patients a week. People have real life stuff going on, like people are real life trying to adjust. And maybe they didn't come from a rich family, who just paid for their move. And I'm not saying—some Black people might, and that's cool. I love that. I'm just saying there are certain experiences you're more likely to have or resources you're less likely to have based on those identities. And so it's just kind of being tuned in to additional stressors that could be there, I think.

Iesha implored faculty to do the personal work to be better suited to engage with and support Black women doctoral students. She encouraged faculty and administrators to recognize students have various identities that influence how they show up in the workplace and in academia. Being aware of those differences can aid faculty in better understanding and supporting Black women doctoral students. Iesha's last point touches on financial resources and the different financial abilities of students. Financial challenges came up throughout the findings sections and Belle suggested institutions provide financial support for students. Belle specifically said "If they don't give you money, they don't believe in you. Go where they believe in you. . . . You're just a diversity number. And if you're gonna be a diversity number, make them pay you for it."

Key Takeaways for Implications for Practice

Based on the findings and the direct suggestions from the co-narrators, I developed a list of key takeaways for faculty and administrators. The audience for this particular section is for faculty, administrators and staff who work with Black women doctoral students and are interested in how to provide adequate support.

1. **Create and support safe spaces for Black women doctoral students.** Faculty and administrators should establish virtual and perhaps physical spaces where Black women doctoral students can connect with peers who share similar experiences and identities. Encourage the formation of affinity groups and provide resources to facilitate community building. Protect this space. If possible, try not to overburden Black women faculty with developing and managing these spaces.
2. **Prioritize mental health services.** University administrators should ensure therapy centers are adequately staffed with Black women therapists who can provide culturally sensitive support. Perhaps, on-campus counseling centers can offer small group counseling sessions for Black women in academia and provide Black women doctoral students with helpful mental health resources.
3. **Be authentic and build personal connections.** Faculty, staff and administrators should take the time to get to know students on a personal level beyond their academic work, in an authentic way. When possible, faculty, staff and administrators should share resources, opportunities for professional development, and offer support and advice in navigating the doctoral journey.
4. **Promote holistic wellness amongst students.** Faculty, staff and administrators who consistently engage with Black women doctoral students should create opportunities for

students to prioritize their spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional well-being, by being flexible with student schedules, creating wellness programs, and encouraging the prioritization of self-care.

5. **Engage in critical self-reflection.** Faculty and administrators should engage in critical self-reflection regarding their own identities, biases, and how these things influence the wellness of students through their interactions. Faculty and administrators must create equitable practices in the classroom setting and beyond to ensure safe spaces for Black women doctoral students.
6. **Create opportunities for funding.** Faculty and administrators should work to create opportunities for students to receive funding, to lessen the financial burden and strain of graduate school.

Some of the key takeaways aligned with the literature on how to support graduate students (Byrom et al., 2020; Charles et al., 2022; Griffin et al., 2023; Hyun et al., 2006; Tompkins et al., 2016). However, my work has added to the larger body of literature in that it specifically addressed the needs of Black women doctoral students.

Before I conclude this dissertation, I am compelled to address Black women specifically in the next section, I pen a note to Black women doctoral students and those considering the doctoral journey. I hope my words are helpful not just for doctoral students, but Black women in general.

A Note From the Author to Black Women on or Considering the Doctoral Journey

After engaging in this research, it is important for me to directly address Black women doctoral students. I have always been a spiritual person. I have seen God in all facets of my life: in the bird that chirps outside my window when I sit down to write; in the face of my son who

brings me ineffable joy; and in the existence of Black men and women—especially, Black women. Our intelligence, beauty and grace are unmatched–though many try. We are whole human beings, living full lives, and moonlighting as superheroes. But even superheroes need to take off their capes and tend to themselves.

Throughout this dissertation I refer to the pursuit of a doctoral degree as a journey, because indeed it is one. It is not a linear journey. It has deep chasms, hills, mountains and rain and sunshine. As you traverse the terrain of academia, I pray you will take breaks along the path to bask in the beauty of your accomplishments. I pray you take time to rest, to breathe deeply, to feel deeply, to find your community and engage in the things that sustain you. Some journeys have the power to break you, and I hope that you do not give academia—or anything for that matter—the permission or power to break you.

When I think of Black women, I think of the song by Hezekiah Walker (2002):

I need you, you need me

We're all a part of God's body

Stand with me, agree with me

We're all a part of God's body

It is His will that every need be supplied

You are important to me, I need you to survive. (Verse 1)

Although I acknowledge not all Black women are religious or spiritual, I am convinced God exists in every Black woman. We are forgiving and giving to others; we show unconditional love to so many people and we show up for the people we love. I pray that you also see the God in other Black women. I hope you give to yourself the way you give to others, because it is necessary for your survival. And I need us to survive and thrive.

Remember that you belong in every room you enter. You are there for a reason, and it is not a fluke and you are not a fraud. Remember you are deserving of joy, that you are enough and that your body needs rest. Remember there is no award for being overworked and exhausted. Practice self-care consistently. Beyond getting massages and manicures, engage in self-care that will heal your spirit and make you feel whole. Make note of stories of Leslie Lekko, Dr. Candida Bailey, and Dr. Claudine Gay so that we do not repeat them. Also make note of Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka, who recognized they deserved a break and took one. They enjoyed life, had babies, got married and came back still the amazing women they were before they left. When the doctoral journey has its ups and downs, remember there are people rooting for you, including me. I end with another lyric by Hezekiah Walker (2002): "I pray for you. You pray for me. I love you. I need you to survive. I won't harm you with words from my mouth. I love you. I need you to survive" (Verse 4).

Conclusion

In this study, I explored the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women doctoral students and recent alumnae. Guided by Hettler's six dimension of wellness and black feminist thought as a conceptual framework, I explored the factors that contributed to and interfered with the holistic wellness of Black women doctoral students. Using narrative inquiry as a methodological approach, I uncovered the stories of nine co-narrators who identified the joys and challenges of pursuing and completing a doctoral degree. The co-narrators identified needing to be in community with other Black women to survive the academy, described finding pockets of joy to focus on holistic wellness, recognized that same-race and same-gender relationships are not always indicative of support, indicated that supportive advisors helped navigate academia and wellness, experienced impostorism and a lack of belonging, and identified how they

negotiated their wellness in pursuit of the PhD. My research has contributed to the larger body of literature on Black women doctoral students, graduate students, and mental health and wellness. More research is needed to further explore the breadth and depth of Black women doctoral students' holistic mental health and wellness. Specifically, researchers should continue to seek to develop practices that center the needs and voices of Black women doctoral students.

Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Email invitation Subject Line: Dissertation Study- Holistic Mental Health & Wellness of Black Women Doctoral Students and Recent Alumnae
Greetings,
I am Joakina Stone, a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland in the College of Education, and I need your help. I am conducting my dissertation research on the experiences of Black women doctoral students and their mental health and well-being. I am writing to inquire if you (or someone you know) are interested in participating in this qualitative study. Eligible participants in the study will meet the following requirements:

- Identify as a Black, African American, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latina and/or African cisgender woman
- Be a current PhD student who has completed coursework at a research one (R1) or research two (R2) institution ***or*** recently completed a PhD program within the last six months at a R1 or R2 institution
- Is/was considered a fulltime student (enrolled in at least 9 credit hours) when enrolled in coursework
- Attend/attended school in one of the following states/cities: Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C.

Participation in this study includes:

- Complete a demographic survey to indicate interest and eligibility (10 minutes)
- Respond to one narrative activity on mental health and wellness (10 minutes)
- Two individual interviews (60 to 90 minutes each)
- Member checking process (optional)

Participants will receive a $40 Visa or Amazon gift card after completing the demographic survey, narrative prompt activity, and two individual interviews.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete the demographic questionnaire, which can be FOUND HERE. If you have questions, please contact Joakina Stone at JoakinaStoneResearch@gmail.com. I welcome you to forward this email directly to potential participants that you think may be excellent candidates for the study; they are welcome to contact me directly.

Appreciatively,
Joakina Stone
PhD Candidate, College of Education
University of Maryland

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

RECRUITMENT FOR DISSERTATION STUDY

BLACK WOMEN DOCTORAL STUDENTS &ALUMNAE & MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to develop a deeper understanding of the factors that influenced the holistic mental health and wellness of Black women during their doctoral journey.

Participant Criteria

- Identify as a Black, African American, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latina and/or African cisgender woman
- Be a current PhD student who has completed coursework at a research one (R1) or research two (R2) institution or recently completed a PhD program within the last six months at a R1 or R2 institution
- ·Is/was considered a full-time student (enrolled in at least 9 credit hours) when enrolled in coursework
- Attend/attended school in one of the following places: Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, & Washington, D.C
- Participants must be at least 18 years of age

Participation in the study includes:

- Completing a demographic survey (10 minutes)
- Responding to a narrative activity before interview (10 minutes)
- Two individual interviews (60 to 90 minutes each)

COMPENSATION FOR THE STUDY INCLUDES A $40 GIFT CARD
FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT JOAKINA STONE @ JOAKINASTONERESEARCH@GMAIL.COM
AFFILIATED WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY, PLEASE COMPLETE THE DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY HERE

Appendix C: Demographic Survey/Questionnaire

Survey was administered through Qualtrics via the link below, which has now closed
https://umdsurvey.umd.edu/jfe/form/SV_egq5NpXZDUi3hA2

Joakina Stone is a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland, College Park. She is thankful for your interest in participating in her dissertation research study on Black women doctoral students and holistic mental health and wellness. This questionnaire is to gauge eligibility and interest and to collect demographic information. Please complete this form in its entirety and to the best of your ability. Data from this questionnaire will only be used if you are selected to participate in the study. All other data will be destroyed. Joakina will email you if you meet or do not meet the requirements to participate in this research study.

This survey should take no more than 10 minutes to complete.

1. Please confirm that you are not a bot. (Captcha question; respondent will have to check a box to ensure they are not a robot).
2. What is your first name?
3. What is your last name (or family name)?
4. What is your email address?
5. What is your age?
6. Do you identify as a cisgender Black woman?
   Cisgender is when a person's sex and gender align (e.g., born female and identify as woman).
   In the context of this study, Black refers to persons of African descent, residing in the United States, including Black people who are from the diaspora, including African, Caribbean, Afro-Latinx, African American, and/or Black. Black does not include South Afrikaans of European descent.
   1. Yes
   2. No (If no, they will be taken to the end of the survey)
7. Is/was your PhD program located in one of the following cities/states: Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C.?
   1. Yes
   2. No (If no, they will be taken to the end of the survey)
8. Please select the item below that best describes your current academic status:
   1. I am a current PhD Student
   2. I am a recent graduate of a PhD program (recent graduate means you have graduated within the last 6 months)
   3. I am not a current PhD student and/or I am not a recent PhD graduate (I graduate more than 6 months ago) (if they select this option they will be taken to the end of the survey)
9. Please select the statement below that best describes/described your academic status during your doctoral program.
   1. I am/was a fulltime doctoral student (i.e., before dissertation writing, I was enrolled in at least 9 credit hours per semester)

    2. I am/was a parttime doctoral student (i.e., before dissertation writing, I was enrolled in less than 9 credit hours per semester) (if they were a parttime student they will be taken to the end of the survey)
10. Is your university/college considered a Research One (R1) or Research Two (R2) institution?
    1. Yes
    2. No (If no, they will be taken to the end of the survey)
11. Have you completed your PhD coursework?
    1. Yes
    2. No (If no, they will be taken to the end of the survey)
12. **Additional Demographic Questions & Informed Consent**
    Based on your responses, you are eligible to participate in this study. Please review the informed consent document linked below before completing the remaining parts of the survey. After reviewing the informed consent document, please indicate your agreement with the document by selecting one of the choices below. After you make your selection, you may be asked a few more demographic questions.
    https://drive.google.com/file/d/13WiINhXZnWHFfaYdOp7D9lKSvyxaRdpN/view?usp=sharing
    1. I agree
    2. I do not agree (If no, they will be taken to the end of the survey)
13. Please list your country of origin below. (Examples include but are not limited to USA, Canada, Nigeria, Brazil).
14. Please list below the full name of the institution you attend/attend for your PhD program (please do not use acronyms).
15. Please select the statement below that best describes your work status during your doctoral program.
    1. I worked one fulltime job while completing my doctorate (35 hours or more per week).
    2. I worked one part-time job while completing my doctorate (20 hours or less per week).
    3. I worked multiple jobs (parttime and/or fulltime) while completing my doctorate (and the hours per week varied).
    4. I did not work any jobs while completing my doctorate.
16. Please enter the number of years you have been/or were in your program.
17. Please list your academic discipline.
18. Please list your academic department.
19. If you are a recent graduate, what month and year did you complete your program? (Example March 2023).

End of Survey Message

Thank you for completing the demographic interest survey for Joakina Stone's doctoral research on Black women doctoral students and mental health and wellness. Data from this questionnaire will only be used if you are selected to participate in the study. All other data will be destroyed.

Joakina Stone will notify you via email if you meet or do not meet the requirements to participate in this research study. If you have questions about this project or survey, please email xxxx@gmail.com.

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Introduction
Hello! I am Joakina Stone, and I am a PhD candidate at the University of Maryland in the College of Education. I am so grateful that you are participating in my dissertation research. I cannot thank you enough for helping me reach my goal of completing my PhD. Just to share a little bit about myself: I identify as a Black woman. Portland, Oregon is home for me, but so is Bowie, MD. I have a one-year-old, and I have been married for almost 11 years. I am passionate about uplifting the Black community and centering the voices of Black women.

First, what draws me to do this work is my interest in understanding Black women's wellness as they matriculate through their doctoral programs. As a doctoral student myself, I know there may be things inside and outside of the classroom that contribute to our success and challenges. Being that you graduated, your insights on how you got over will be helpful. I hope this space is one where you will feel comfortable sharing your joys, pain points and everything in between related to your time in your doctoral program.

Before we get started with the actual interview, I wanted to review a few items:

- Review the IRB protocol (stress that the study is voluntary and the confidentiality of the interview)
- Ask the participant for a pseudonym; confirm spelling of the pseudonym. (If the meeting is virtual, I will request the participant change their name on screen to their pseudonym).
- Explain the interview will last anywhere between 60 to 90 minutes.
- Respond to any questions the participant may have.

Begin recording the interview

Interview questions:

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself (where you are from, some of your hobbies, what you are studying, etc.) and what piqued your interest in this study?
2. Tell me about your journey to your doctoral degree.
    1. Why did you choose to pursue a doctorate?
    2. What were your expectations when deciding to pursue a doctorate?
    3. What story can you share about your expectations not meeting your reality or your expectations being aligned with your reality regarding your doctoral experience?
3. Prior to our interview, you were asked to share a meme or gif that reflects (or reflected) your mental health throughout your doctoral journey. Let's chat about that.
    1. What made you choose that image?
    2. In what ways does it reflect your metal health and wellness?
4. How do you define "mental health and wellness" – what does it mean to you?
    1. How did you know when your level of wellness is high or low during your graduate program?
1. Reflecting on your doctoral journey, please share a story about a time when you were still enrolled in classes, where you felt your wellness was at its highest. Things to consider:
    1. What contributed to your wellness being at its highest?

    2. What influenced your wellness during that time?
    3. What about that situation made you feel well?
2. Reflecting on your doctoral journey, please share a story about a time when you were still enrolled in coursework where you felt your wellness was at its lowest. Things to consider:
    1. What contributed to it being at its lowest?
    2. What influenced your wellness during that time?
    3. What about that situation made you feel unwell?
5. What things happened during the course of your doctoral program, inside or outside of academia, that influenced your wellness (good or bad)?
    1. How did you manage those things?
6. Let's shift and talk about the larger context of your graduate education.
    1. How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact your doctoral journey?
    2. How did Black Lives Matter or the racial uprisings impact your doctoral program?
    3. How did both things (COVID and BLM) influence your wellness?
7. When you think about your social identities (sex, class, gender, etc.), what are your most salient identities and why?
8. Talk to me about what it was like being a Black woman doctoral student at your respective campus. What were some of your experiences?
9. Please share a story about a time during your doctoral journey where you had a negative racialized and/or gendered encounter?
    1. How did that interaction influence your wellness?
10. Please share a time during your doctoral journey where you felt empowered as a Black woman doctoral student.
    1. What contributed to your feeling of empowerment?

Those are all my questions. Do you have any questions for me? Is there anything that we didn't discuss that you would like to share?

Appendix E: Second Interview Protocol

Introduction

Hello! Thank you for participating in my doctoral research. I enjoyed our first interview, and I am excited for our second interview. Just as a refresher, I wanted to review a few items:

- Review the IRB protocol (stress that the study is voluntary and the confidentiality of the interview)
- Ask the participant to change her name on screen to her pseudonym
- Explain that I anticipate that the interview will last least between 60 to 90 minutes.
- Respond to any questions the participant may have.

Begin recording the interview

Let's get started:

1. Based on preliminary data analysis, themes of X have emerged. Would you say this is accurate? Please elaborate.
2. How would you describe your mental health and wellness prior to starting your PhD program?
    a. How would you describe your MHW now?
3. Talk to me about some strategies you use to manage your holistic mental health and wellness during your doctoral journey.
    a. What are your daily practices?
    b. What are your monthly practices or strategies?
    c. How did you learn these strategies?
4. Are there any strategies you wished you had learned?
    a. What do you think prevented you from learning those strategies?
5. How did you set boundaries as a Black woman doctoral student?
    a. How did boundary setting contribute to your wellness?
    b. With whom did you set boundaries (friends, advisor, family, etc.)?
6. What did community and support look like throughout your doctoral journey?
    a. Who would you say was a part of your community?
7. Who were your models for holistic wellness during your doctoral journey? How did they model holistic wellness (whether it was positive or negative)?
8. How would a focus on the holistic wellness of Black women doctoral students have impacted your doctoral journey (e.g., If your advisor talked more about wellness, how would that have impacted you)?
9. Please share a time when your identity as a Black women doctoral student was affirmed.
    a. What happened? Who helped you to feel affirmed.
    b. How did this influence your wellness?
10. As it relates to mental health and wellness, what piece of advice would you give to Black women considering pursing a doctorate?
    a. What would you tell her to do in times of stress?
11. What would you tell faculty or administrators who are interested in promoting healthy mental health and wellness amongst Black women doctoral students?
12. Please share any final thoughts.

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix F: Narrative Activity Prompt

Please select a meme, gif or image that represents how you would describe your overall well-being during your doctoral program. We will discuss your response during our interview. Feel free to consider the breadth of your doctoral journey.

Appendix G: IRB Consent Form

Institutional Review Board

1204 Marie Mount Hall ● 7814 Regents Drive ● College Park, MD 20742 ● 301-405-4212 ● irb@umd.edu

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Project Title	**HOW I GOT OVER: AN EXPLORATION OF HOW BLACK WOMEN DOCTORAL STUDENTS AND ALUMNAE STRIVED FOR HOLISTIC MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS**
Purpose of the Study	This research is being conducted by **Joakina Stone** at the University of Maryland, College Park. The purpose of this research project is to explore and develop a better understanding of the factors influencing Black women doctoral students' holistic mental health and wellness. To participate in this study, individuals should: • Identify as a Black, African American, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latina and/or African cisgender woman. • Be a current PhD student who has completed coursework at a research one (R1) or research two (R2) institution ***or*** recently completed a PhD program within the last six months at a R1 or R2 institution • Be/have been considered a fulltime student (enrolled in at least 9 credit hours) when enrolled in coursework. • Attend/attended school in one of the following states/cities: Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C. • Be at least18 years of age
Procedures	The procedures of this research study include the following: **1.) Respond to a Narrative Activity (10 minutes)** ● Prior to the initial interview, you will be asked to select a meme, gif or image that represents how you would describe your overall well-being during your doctoral program. Selecting a meme, gif or image will take a maximum of 10 minutes. You can send your email to Joakina prior to the initial interview, or you can have it ready during the initial interview. The image will be discussed during the first interview. **2) First Individual Interview (60-90 minutes, virtual via Zoom)** ● After I determine eligibility, you will be sent the consent form to participate in the study. The first part of participating in the study will be an individual interview via Zoom. The interview will be 60-90 minutes and will be audio recorded. Below are examples of

	interview questions: 1.) How do you define "mental health and wellness" – what does it mean to you? 2.) Reflecting on your doctoral journey, please share a story about a time when you were still enrolled in classes, where you felt your wellness was at its highest. **3) Second Individual Interview (60-90 minutes, virtual via Zoom)** ● After the initial interview is conducted, you will engage in a second interview. The interview will also be 60-90 minutes and will be audio recorded. Below are examples of interview questions for the second interview: 1. How would you describe your mental health and wellness prior to starting your PhD program? 2. Talk to me about some strategies you use to manage your holistic mental health and wellness during your doctoral journey. **4) Optional Member-Checking** After completion of your interviews, I will email copies of your interview transcripts for member-checking. This is to help clarify data collected during the interview. Member-checking allows the researcher to ensure the data is being represented in a way that aligns with the participant's voices and experiences. Member-checking is completely optional. If you choose to participate in member-checking, it will be done on your own time and will not be audio or video recorded. **Please note that interviews will be audio recorded. Though consent to be recorded is not required for participation in this study, it is preferred.**
Potential Risks and Discomforts	There may be some risks from participating in this study, including discomfort or negative emotions related to sharing stories about your holistic mental health and wellness, and recounting racist and sexist experiences. You will not be required to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering. There may be risks of the potential for the loss/breach of confidentiality. To ensure confidentiality, you will be required to use pseudonyms in individual interviews. To protect your privacy, all information provided will be kept under lock-and-key and secured on a password protected computer.
Potential Benefits	There are no direct benefits in this study. However possible benefits may include the opportunity to provide your insight to the research process through member checking, assisting with coordinating themes and sharing possible recommendations for university administrators. The overall benefit of conducting this research includes contributing to and expanding upon studies that highlight the holistic mental health and well-being of Black women doctoral students and indicate how universities can encourage and provide holistic mental health and well-

	being resources and support for Black women doctoral students at R1 and R2 institutions. Furthermore, the researcher will share with you resources on how continuing to manage your overall wellness (e.g., journal articles, recommendations from literature, etc.).
Confidentiality	Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing data in a password protected computer. Only Joakina Stone (the principal investigator) will have access to this information. To protect your identity, you will be given the opportunity to select a pseudonym, and all private details will be masked. An identification key will be created to link your real name to your pseudonym and this key will be securely stored in a password protected folder on a personal password protected laptop that only Joakina Stone has access to. Your true name will not be connected to any audio files or transcripts. Your contact information will only be stored in a password protected computer for compensation purposes. All interview audio files and transcripts will be stored within 24 hours to the principal investigator's personal and password protected computer. Any access to participant contact information, audio files, and transcripts will be limited to Joakina Stone. All data will be destroyed once it is no longer needed or upon a maximum storage period of two years. If I write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.
Compensation	You will receive a $40 gift card for completing the narrative activity, participating in two interviews, and member check process (optional). If you do not earn over $100, only your name and address will be collected to receive compensation.
Right to Withdraw and Questions	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. If you are a student, your grades, standing, or employability at your institution will not be positively or negatively affected by your participation or non-participation in the study. If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:

	[Joakina Stone] **Benjamin Bldg, 3942 Campus Dr, College Park, MD 20742** **xxxx@umd.edu or xxxx@gmail.com**	
Participant Rights	If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount Hall College Park, Maryland, 20742 E-mail: xxxx@umd.edu Telephone: XXX-XXX-XXXX For more information regarding participant rights, please visit: https://research.umd.edu/research-resources/research-compliance/institutional-review-board-irb/research-participants This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.	
Statement of Consent	**Survey:** By clicking "I agree" below, you are indicating that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. **Interview:** Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form. If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.	
Signature and Date [Interview Only]	**NAME OF PARTICIPANT [Please Print]**	
	SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT	
	DATE	

Appendix H: University Pseudonym Information

AJ Cooper University was named for Ana Julia Cooper, a Black liberation activist, scholar, educator, orator and sociologist. Born into slavery in 1858, Cooper became a prominent figure in the U.S. She was the 4th Black woman to earn a doctorate in the U.S. and her book *A Voice From The South*, published in 1892, is viewed as an expression of Black feminism.

Katherine Johnson College was named after the NASA mathematician and scientist, Katherine Johnson. Born in 1918, Katherine Johnson loved math and developed the calculations that put the first U.S. American in space.

L. Hansberry University was named after Lorraine Hansberry. Lorraine Hansberry was born in 1930 and was a playwright and activist. She was best known for her play A Raisin in the Sun. Her literary works centered around the Black experience.

McMillan State University was named for both Terry McMillan and Enolia P. McMillan. Terry McMillan (born in 1951) is an author who's writing focuses on the experiences of Black women. Enolia P. McMillan (born in 1904) was the first woman elected President of the NAACP.

MW Stewart College was named for Maria W. Stewart, who was an abolitionist, women's rights advocate, and orator. Born in 1803, Stewart was one of the first women public speakers of any race in the United States. Her work laid the foundation for and influenced Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass.

N.H. Burroughs University was named for Nannie Helen Burroughs. Born in 1879, Nannie Helen Burroughs was an orator, educator, activist, feminist, and religious leader. Her work was a precursor for the civil rights movement and focused on uplifting and educating working-class Black women.

References

Adichie, C. N. (2009). *The danger of a single story* [Video]. TED Conferences. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en

Alex-Assensoh, Y. (2003). Race in the academy: Moving beyond diversity and toward the incorporation of faculty of color in predominantly white colleges and universities. *Journal of Black Studies*, *34*(1), 5–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934703256058

Allen, B. J. (2000). "Learning the ropes:" A black feminist standpoint analysis. In P. M. Buzzanell (Ed.), *Rethinking organizational & managerial communication from feminist perspectives* (pp. 177–208). SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452225494

American College Health Association. (2019). *Graduate/professional reference group report, Spring 2019*. https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II_SPRING_2019_US_REFERENCE_GROUP_EXECUTIVE_SUMMARY.pdf

American Mental Wellness Association. (2024). *Risk and protective factors.* The American Mental Wellness Association. https://www.americanmentalwellness.org/prevention/risk-and-protective-factors/

Apugo, D. (2019). All power to the peers: Black women graduate students' peer relationship typologies in PWIs. *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education*, *12*(2), 224–244. https://doi.org/10.1080/19407882.2019.1573690

Austin, A. E. (2002). Preparing the next generation of faculty: Graduate school as socialization to the academic career. *The journal of higher education*, *73*(1), 94-122. https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2002.0001

Austin, A. E., & McDaniels, M. (2006). Preparing the professoriate of the future: Graduate student socialization for faculty roles. In L. W. Perna (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 397–456). Springer.

Bacon, J. N. (2014). *Sisters in the dissertation house: A dissertation narrative.* New Forums Press.

Baker-Bell, A. (2017). For Loretta: A Black Woman Literacy Scholar's Journey to Prioritizing Self-Preservation and Black Feminist–Womanist Storytelling. *Journal of Literacy Research*, *49*(4), 526-543. https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X17733092

Bamberg, M. W. (2007). *Narrative, state of the art.* John Benjamins Publishing.

Barker, M. J. (2016). The doctorate in black and white: Exploring the engagement of Black doctoral students in cross race advising relationships with White faculty. *The Western Journal off Black Studies, 40*(2), 126–140. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/doctorate-bllack-white- exploring-engagement/doccviiew//2049976566/se-2?accountiid=14537

Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T. (2007). You have to show strength: An exploration of gender, race, and depression. Gender & Society, 21(1), 28-51. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243206294108

Bekkouche, N. S., Schmid, R. F., & Carliner, S. (2022). "Simmering Pressure:" How systemic stress impacts graduate student mental health. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, *34*, 547–572. https://doi.org/10.1002/piq.21365

Bell, D. A. (1995). Who's afraid of critical race theory. *University of Illinois Law Review*, *1995*(4), 893–910.

Bertrand-Jones, T., Wilder, J. & Osborne-Lampkin, L. (2013). Employing a Black feminist approach to doctoral advising: preparing Black women for the Professoriate. *The Journal of Negro Education,* 82, (3), 326-338. DOI: 10.7709/jnegroeducation.82.3.0326

Bertrand Jones, T., Osborne-Lampkin, L., Patterson, S., & Davis, D. J. (2015). Creating a "safe and supportive environment:" Mentoring and professional development for recent black women doctoral graduates. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *10*, 483–499. http://ijds.org/Volume10/IJDSv10p483-499Jones1748.pdf

Biles, S [@simonebiles]. (2021, July 26). *Verified prelims ☑ now to prepare for finals. it wasn't an easy day or my best but I got through it. I truly do feel like I have the weight of the world on my shoulders at times. I know I brush it off and make it seem like pressure doesn't affect me but damn sometimes it's hard hahaha! The olympics is no joke! BUT I'm happy my family was able to be with me virtually□ they mean the world to me!* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CRxsq_kBZrP/

Bingham, A. J., & Witkowsky, P. (2022). Deductive and inductive approaches to qualitative data analysis. In C. Vanover, P. Mihas, & J. Saldaña (Eds.), *Analyzing and interpreting qualitative data: After the interview* (pp. 133–146). SAGE Publications.

Birks, M., Chapman, Y., & Francis, K. (2008). Memoing in qualitative research: Probing data and processes. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 13(1), 68-75. https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987107081254

Breeden, R. L. (2021). Our presence is resistance: Stories of Black women in senior-level student affairs positions at predominantly white institutions. *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education*, *14*(2), 166–186. https://doi.org/10.1080/26379112.2021.1948860

Byrom, N. C., Dinu, L., Kirkman, A., & Hughes, G. (2020). Predicting stress and mental well-being among doctoral researchers. *Journal of Mental Health*, *31*(6), 783–791. https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2020.1818196

Center for Collegiate Mental Health. (2022, January). 2021 Annual Report (Publication No. STA 22-132)

Charles, S. T., Karnaze, M. M., & Leslie, F. M. (2022). Positive factors related to graduate student mental health, *Journal of American College Health*, *70*(6),1858–1866. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1841207

Chinn J. J., Martin I.K. & Redmond, N. (2021) Health equity among Black women in the United States. *Journal of Womens Health,* 30(2), 212-219. DOI: 10.1089/jwh.2020.8868.

Chirikov, I., Soria, K. M., Horgos, B., & Jones-White, D. (2020). Undergraduate and graduate students' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. SERU Consortium, University of California-Berkeley and University of Minnesota. https://cshe.berkeley.edu/seru-covid-survey-reports

Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. A. (1978). The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, *15*(3), 241–247. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0086006

Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry: A methodology for studying lived experience. *Research Studies in Music Education*, *27*(1), 44–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103x060270010301

Clandinin, D. J., Pushor, D., & Orr, A. M. (2007). Navigating sites for narrative inquiry. *Journal of Teacher Education, 58*(1), 21–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487106296218

Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Routledge.

Clandinin, D. J., & Huber, J. (2010). Narrative inquiry. *Qualitative Research*, 436–441. https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-08-044894-7.01387-7

Clark, C. (2011). Occupying the academy: Just how important "is" diversity in higher education? *Multicultural Education, 35*, 149–177. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2013.0044

Cohen, B.D. (2012) Reimagining gender through policy development: the case of a 'single-sex' educational organisation. *Gender and Education*, 24(7), 689-705. doi: 10.1080/09540253.2012.685055

Cohen, P. N. (2020, June 9). *No Black women are not the "most educated" group in the US*. Family Inequality. https://familyinequality.wordpress.com/2016/06/07/no-black-women-are-not-the-most-educated-group-in-the-us/.

Coles, J. A. & Powell, L. (2020). A BlackCrit analysis on Black urban youth and suspension disproportionality as anti-Black symbolic violence. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *23*(1), 113–133. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2019.1631778

College Factual, Data Analytics. (2023, March 9). *University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Racial-ethnic diversity breakdown*. College Factual. https://www.collegefactual.com/colleges/university-of-wisconsin-stevens-point/student-life/diversity/chart-ethnic-diversity.html

Collins, P. H. (1986). Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of Black Feminist Thought. *Journal of Social Problems*, *33*(6), S14–S32. https://doi.org/10.2307/800672

Collins, P. H. (1989). The social construction of Black feminist thought. *Signs*, *14*(4), 745–773. https://doi.org/10.1086/494543

Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought*. Routledge.

Cook, D. A., & Williams, J. T. (2015). Expanding intersectionality: Fictive Kinship networks as supports for the educational aspirations of Black women. *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, *39*(2), 157–166. https://www.proquest.com/docview/1713975736?sourcetype=Scholarly Journals

Copeland, V. C., & Butler, J. (2007). Reconceptualizing access: A cultural competence approach to improving the mental health of African American women. *Social Work in Public Health*, *23*(2-3), 35–58. https://doi.org/10.1080/19371910802148263

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd Edition). Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches.* SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE Publications.

Daiute, C. (2014). *Narrative inquiry: A dynamic approach*. SAGE Publications.

Davis, A., & Hilmantel, R. (2018, October 29). *This is why we chose to talk about Black women and infertility.* Yahoo! https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/why-many-black-women-suffering-145700556.html

Deroma, V. M., Leach, J. B., & Leverett, J. P. (2009). The relationship between depression and college academic performance. *College Student Journal, 43*(2), 325–335. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ872247

Dinsmore, B., & Roksa, J. (2023). Inequalities in becoming a scholar: Race, gender and student-advisor relationships in doctoral education. *Teachers College Record*, 125(9), 84–107. https://doi.org/10.1177/01614681231198648

Dortch, D. (2016). The strength from within: A phenomenological study examining the academic self-efficacy of African American women in doctoral studies. *The Journal of Negro Education, 85*(3), 350–364. https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.85.3.0350

Dortch, D. & Patel, C. (2017). Black undergraduate women and their sense of belonging in STEM at predominantly white institutions. *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education*, 10(2), 202-215. doi: 10.1080/19407882.2017.1331854

Dumas, M.J. (2016) Against the dark: Antiblackness in education policy and discourse. *Theory Into Practice*, 55(1), 11-19. DOI: 10.1080/00405841.2016.1116852

Eisenberg, D., Gollust, S. E., Golberstein, E., & Hefner, J. L. (2007). Prevalence and correlates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality among university students. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 77*(4), 534–542. https://doi.org/10.1037/0002-9432.77.4.534

Eleftheriades, R., Fiala, C., & Pasic, M. D. (2020). The challenges and mental health issues of academic trainees. *F1000 Research*, *9*(104), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.21066.1

El-Ghoroury, N. H., Galper, D. I., Sawaqdeh, A., & Bufka, L. F. (2012). Stress, coping, and barriers to wellness among psychology graduate students. Training and education in professional psychology, 6(2), 122-134. DOI: 10.1037/a0028768

Ellis, E. (2001). The impact of race and gender on graduate school socialization, satisfaction with doctoral study, and commitment to degree completion. *Western Journal of Black Studies, 25*(1), 30–45. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/impact-race-gender-on-graduate-school/docview/200355246/se-2

Evans, S. Y., Bell, K., & Burton, N. K. (2017). Introduction: Learning to breathe: Toward a balanced model of Black women's wellness. In S. Y. Evans, K. Bell, & N. K. Burton (Eds.), *Black women's mental health: Balancing strength & vulnerability* (pp. 1–19). SUNY Press.

Evans-Winters, V. E. (2019). *Black feminism in qualitative inquiry: A mosaic for writing our daughter's body*. Routledge.

Fendrich, H. (2021, May 28). Tour, players react to Osaka: Talking to media part of job. *AP NEWS.* https://apnews.com/article/europe-media-french-open-tennis-sports-2d5291a2d2f0547e6fc989e128288e0e

Ferreira, M. (2003). Gender issues related to graduate student attrition in two science departments. *International Journal of Science Education*, *25*(8), 969-989. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500690305026

Fitch, C., Hamilton, S., Bassett, P., and Davey, R. (2011). The relationship between personal debt and mental health: a systematic review. *Mental Health Review Journal*, *16*(4), 153–166. https://doi.org/10.1108/13619321111202313

Flaherty, C. (2020, December 9). Calm before the storm. *Inside Higher Ed.* https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/12/09/nsf-data-doctorates-granted-show-slow-growth-some-exceptions?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=200cd9864b-

DNU_2020_COPY_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-200cd9864b-236226473&mc_cid=200cd9864b&mc_eid=8f6797bef5

Fleming, J. (1984). *Blacks in college*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Fries-Britt, S., & Kelly, B. T. (2005). Retaining each other: Narratives of two African American women in the academy. *The Urban Review*, *37*, 221–242. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-005-0006-2

Fries-Britt, S., & Turner, B. (2002). Uneven stories: Successful Black collegians at a Black and a White campus. *The Review of Higher Education*, *25*(3), 315–330. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2002.0012

Gallimore, S. S. (2022). *I'm not your superwoman: Examining the holistic well-being of black women graduate students in STEM* (Publication No. 29399499) [Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University]. Dissertations & Theses Global. https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/i-m-not-your-superwoman-examining-holistic-well/docview/2735175613/se-2

Gamby, K., Burns, D., & Forristal, K. (2021). Wellness decolonized: The history of wellness and recommendations for the counseling field. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, *43*(3), 228–245. https://doi.org/10.17744/mehc.43.3.05

Garcia-Williams, A. G., Moffitt, L., & Kaslow, N. J. (2014). Mental health and suicidal behavior among graduate students. *Academic Psychiatry*, *38*(5), 554–560. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40596-014-0041-y

Gardner, S. K. (2009). The development of doctoral students: Phases of challenge and support. *ASHE Higher Education Report, 34*(6). Jossey-Bass.

Gaston Gayles, J., & Kelly, B. T. (2004). Preparing the next generation of African American scholars through mentoring and professional development experiences. *National Association of Student Affairs Professionals Journal, 7*(1), 46–62.

Gayles, J., & Kelly, B. T. (2019). Mentoring for success across the academic spectrum. In L. Flores & J. Olcott (Eds.), *The academic's handbook* (4th ed., pp. 232–239). Duke University Press.

Gay, G. (2004). Navigating marginality en route to the professoriate: graduate students of color learning and living in academia. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *17*(2), 265–288. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390310001653907

George, C. E. , Saclarides, E. S., & Lubienski, S. T. (2018). A difference in priorities? *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, *9*(1), 38–57. https://doi.org/10.1108/sgpe-d-17-00040

Gibbs, J. T., & Fuery, D. (1994). Mental health and well-being of Black women toward strategies of empowerment. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 22*(4), 559–582. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02506893

Gin, L. E., Wiesenthal, N. J., Ferreira, I., & Cooper, K. M. (2021). PhDepression: Examining how graduate research and teaching affect depression in life sciences PhD students. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, *20*(3), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.21-03-0077

Gildersleeve, R. E., Croom, N. N., & Vasquez, P. L. (2011). "Am I going crazy?!": A critical race analysis of doctoral education. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 44*(1), 93–114. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2011.539472

Glesne, C. (2016). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (5th ed.). Pearson.

Gooden, M. A., Devereaux, C. A., & Hulse, N. E. (2020). #BlackintheIvory: Culturally responsive mentoring with Black women doctoral students and a Black male mentor. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, *28*(4), 392–415. https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2020.1793083

Grant, C. M. (2012). Advancing our legacy: A Black feminist perspective on the significance of mentoring for African-American women in educational leadership. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *25*(1), 101–117. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2011.647719

Grant, C.M & Simmons, J.C. (2008). Narratives on experiences of African-American women in the academy: conceptualizing effective mentoring relationships of doctoral student and faculty. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 21 (5), 501-517. DOI: 10.1080/09518390802297789.

Grier-Reed, T. (2013). The African American student network: An informal networking group as a therapeutic intervention for Black college students on a predominantly White campus. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *39*(2), 169–184. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798413478696

Grier-Reed, T., Madyun, N., & Buckley, C. (2008). Low Black student retention on a predominantly White campus: Two faculty respond with the African American student network. *Journal of College Student Development*, *49*, 476–485. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0031

Griffin, K. A. (2006). Striving for success: A qualitative exploration of competing theories of high-achieving Black college students' academic motivation. *Journal of College Student Development*, *47*(4), 384–400. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2006.0045

Griffin, K. A., Stone, J., Dissassa, D. -T., Hall, T. N., & Hixson, A. (2023). Surviving or flourishing: how relationships with principal investigators influence science graduate student wellness. Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education, *14*(1), 47–62. https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-12-2021-0085

Griffith, A. N., Hurd, N. M., & Hussain, S. B. (2017). "I didn't come to school for this:" A qualitative examination of experiences with race-related stressors and coping responses among black students attending a predominantly White institution. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *34*(2), 115–139. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558417742983

Guerra, M. (2013, November 13). *Fact Sheet: The state of African American women in the United States* (Rep.). Retrieved February 10, 2021, from https://www.scribd.com/document/182448606/Fact-Sheet-The-State-of-African-American-Women-in-the-United-States

Gusa, D. L. (2010). White institutional presence: The impact of Whiteness on campus climate. *Harvard Educational Review*, *80*(4), 464–586. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.80.4.p5j483825u1l10002

Harper, S. R. (2013). Am I my brother's teacher? Black undergraduates, racial socialization, and peer pedagogies in predominantly white postsecondary contexts. *Review of Research in Education*, *37*(1), 183–211. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x12471300

Harris-Perry, M. V. (2011). *Sister citizen: Shame, stereotypes, and Black women in America.* Yale University Press.

Haywood, J., Howard-Hamilton, M. F., Njoku, N., Patton-Davis, L., & Rogers, J.(2024, January 19). *Saving our selves, saving our sistas (SOS): A call to action for Black women in higher education* [Webinar]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crNm9GclGQg

Headlight Data. (2016, February 10). *Top large metros for black American bachelor's degree holders are San Jose, Washington DC, Raleigh; most improved are San Jose, Austin, Salt Lake City*. https://headlightdata.com/top-large-metros-for-black-american-bachelors-degree-holders/

Hettler, B. (1976). *The six dimensions of wellness model.* National Wellness Institute. https://cdn.ymaws.com/members.nationalwellness.org/resource/resmgr/pdfs/sixdimensionsfactsheet.pdf

Hettler, B. (1980). Wellness promotion on a university campus. *Family & Community Health, 3*(1), 77–95. https://doi.org/10.1097/00003727-198005000-00008

Hettler, W. (1984). Wellness: Encouraging a lifetime pursuit of excellence. *Health Values: Achieving High Level Wellness*, *8*, 13–17.

Hickson, H. (2016). Becoming a critical narrativist: Using critical reflection and narrative inquiry as research methodology. *Qualitative Social Work, 15*(3), 380–391. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325015617344

Hipolito-Delgado, C. P., Estrada, D., & Garcia, M. (2021). Countering deficits: A grounded theory of success from graduate students of color. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 49*(1), 4–17. https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12202

Hunter, K. H., & Devine, K. (2016). Doctoral students' emotional exhaustion and intentions to leave academia. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *11*, 35–61. https://doi.org/10.28945/3396

Hyun, J. K., Quinn, B. C., Madon, T., & Lustig, S. (2006). Graduate student mental health: Needs assessment and utilization of counseling services. *Journal of College Student Development, 47*(3), 247–266. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2006.0030

Jabali, M. (2024, January 13). *Black HBCU leader takes her own life after alleging university president caused her "harm and mental damage."* Essence. https://www.essence.com/news/lincoln-university-missouri-candia-bailey-john-mosely-resignation-calls/

Jackson, M. (n.d.). *Mahalia Jackson—how I got over*. Genius. https://genius.com/Mahalia-jackson-how-i-got-over-lyrics

Jairam, D., & Kahl Jr, D. H. (2012). Navigating the doctoral experience: The role of social support in successful degree completion. International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 7, 311. https://doi.org/10.28945/1700

Johnson-Bailey, J. (2004). Hitting and climbing the proverbial wall: Participation and retention issues for Black graduate women. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *7*(4), 331–349. https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332042000303360

Johnson-Bailey, J., Valentine, T. S., Cervero, R. M., & Bowles, T. A. (2008). Lean on me: The support experiences of Black graduate students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *77*(4), 365–381. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25608705

Johnson-Bailey, J., Valentine, T., Cervero, R. M., & Bowles, T. A. (2009). Rooted in the soil: The social experiences of Black graduate students at a southern research university. *Journal of Higher Education*, *80*(2), 178–203. https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.0.0040

Jones, A. M. (2023): Self-silencing as protection: How the "angry Black woman" stereotype influences how Black graduate women respond to gendered-racial microaggressions. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2023.2201480

Jones, C., & Shorter-Gooden, K. (2004). *Shifting: The double lives of Black women in America.* New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2014). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education: Fundamental elements and issues* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Jørgensen, K. M., & Largacha-Martinez, C. (Eds.). (2014). *Critical narrative inquiry: Storytelling, sustainability and power.* Nova Publishers.

Juniper, B., Walsh, E., Richardson, A., & Morley, B. (2012). A new approach to evaluating the well-being of PhD research students. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 37*(5), 563–576. http://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2011.555816

Kaba, A.J. (2008). Race, gender and progress: Are Black American women the new model minority? *Journal of African American Studies*. 12, 309–335. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-008-9043-8

Katz, N. (2020, August 26). Black women are the most educated group in the U.S. Retrieved from https://www.thoughtco.com/black-women-most-educated-group-us-4048763

Kelly, B. T., Castillo-Montoya, M., Varghese, R., & Zúñiga, X. (2022). Braids and bridges: A critical collaborative autoethnography of racially minoritized women teaching intergroup dialogue. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 17(1), 1-13*. http://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000374

Kelly, B. T., Gardner, P. J., Stone, J., Hixson, A., & Dissassa, D.-T. (2019). Hidden in plain sight: uncovering the emotional labor of Black women students at historically white colleges and universities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000161

Kelly, B. T., Segoshi, M., Adams, L., & Raines, A. (2017). Experiences of Black alumnae from PWIs: Did they thrive? *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education, 10*(2), 167–185. https://doi.org/10.1080/19407882.2017.1325378

Kortegast, C., McCann, K., Branch, K., Latz, A.O., Kelly, B.T., & Linder, C. (2019). Enhancing ways of knowing: The case for utilizing participant-generated visual methods in higher education research. *The Review of Higher Education 42*(2), 485–510. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2019.0004.

Krathwohl, D. R. (1991). *Methods of educational and social science research: An integrated approach* (2nd ed.). Waveland Press.

Lacey K.K., Parnell R., Mouzon D.M., Matusko, N., Head, D., Abelson, J.M., & Jackson, J.S. (2015). The mental health of US Black women: the roles of social context and severe intimate partner violence. BMJ Open, 5, 1-12. DOI:10.1136/bmjopen-2015-008415

Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 11(1), 7–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/095183998236863

Lane, B. (2021, June 1). The French Open's Twitter account appeared to mock Naomi Osaka's media blackout in a now-deleted tweet before the tournament. *Insider.* https://www.businessinsider.com/french-open-mocks-naomi-osakas-media-blackout-on-twitter-2021-6

Lashley, M. -B., Marshall, V., & McLaurin-Jones, T. (2017). Looking through the window: Black women's perspectives on mental health and self-care. In S.Y. Evans, K. Bell, & N. K. Burton (Eds.), *Black women's mental health: Balancing strength & vulnerability* (pp. 215–229). SUNY Press.

Leitner, W. (2021, July 29). Why you shouldn't praise Simone Biles for quitting Tokyo olympics: Fox Sports Radio. *The Ben Maller Show.* https://foxsportsradio.iheart.com/featured/the-ben-maller-show/content/2021-07-29-why-you-shouldnt-praise-simone-biles-for-quitting-tokyo-olympics/

Lewis, C. W., Ginsberg, R., Davies, T., & Smith, K. (2004). The experiences of African American PhD students at a predominately White Carnegie I research institution. *College Student Journal*, *38*(2), 231–245. https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/pocpwi8/37

Lewis, J. A., Mendenhall, R., Harwood, S. A., & Browne Hunt, M. (2013). Coping with gendered Racial microaggressions among Black women college students. *Journal of African American Studies*, *17*(1), 51–73. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-012-9219-0

Liu, W. M., Liu, R. Z. & Shin, R.Q. (2023). Understanding systemic racism: Anti-Blackness, white supremacy, racial capitalism, and the re/creation of white space and time. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 70(3), 244-257. https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000605*

Lovitts, B. E. (2002). *Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Mackie, S. A., & Bates, G. W. (2019). Contribution of the doctoral education environment to PhD candidates' mental health problems: A scoping review. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *38*(3), 565-578. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1556620

Maher, M. A., Wofford, A. M., Roska, J., & Feldon, D. F. (2020). Finding a fit: Biological science doctoral students' selection of a principal investigator and research laboratory. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, *19*(31), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.19-05-0105

Martin, L. A., Neighbors, H. W., & Griffith, D. M. (2013). The experience of symptoms of depression in men vs women: Analysis of the national comorbidity survey replication. *JAMA Psychiatry*, *70*, 1100–1106. https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2013.1985

McAlpine, L. (2016). Why might you use narrative methodology? A story about narrative. *Eesti Haridusteaduste Ajakiri*, *4*(1), 32–57. https://doi.org/10.12697/eha.2016.4.1.02b

McClish-Boyd, K., & Bhattacharya, K. (2021). Endarkened narrative inquiry: A methodological framework constructed through improvisations. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 34(6), 534–548. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2021.1871981

McGee, E. O., Botchway, P. K., Naphan-Kingery, D. E., Brockman, A. J., Houston, S., II, & White, D. T. (2022). Racism camouflaged as impostorism and the impact on Black STEM doctoral students. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 25(4), 487–507. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2021.1924137

McGee, E. O., Griffith, D. M., & Houston, S. L., II. (2019). "I know I have to work twice as hard and hope that makes me good enough:" Exploring the stress and strain of Black doctoral students in engineering and computing. *Teachers College Record*, *121*(4), 1–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811912100407

McLane-Davison, D. R., Quinn, C. R., Hardy, K., & Smith, R. L. (2018). The power of sum: An accountability sistah circle. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *54*(1), 18–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2017.1336139

Mental Health First Aid USA. (2022, January 18). *How protective factors can promote resilience*. https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2022/01/how-protective-factors-can-promote-resilience/#:~:text=Protective%20factors%20include%20individuals%2C%20families,health%20or%20substance%20use%20challenges.

Merriweather, L. R., & Howell, C. D. (2022). On seeing academics who are Black and women: Understanding the ontological we. In B.T. Kelly & S. Fries-Britt (Eds.), *Building mentorship networks to support Black women: A guide to succeeding in the Academy* (pp. 49–63). Routledge.

Mertens, D. M. (2005). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Milem, J., Chang, M., & Antonio, A. L. (2005). *Making diversity work on campus: A research-based perspective.* Association of American Colleges & Universities. https://web.stanford.edu/group/siher/AntonioMilemChang_makingdiversitywork.pdf

Miles, M. L., Brockman, A. J.& Naphan-Kingery, D. E. (2020). Invalidated identities: The disconfirming effects of racial microaggressions on Black doctoral students in STEM. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 57,1608–1631. https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.21646

Miller, C., & Roska, J. (2020). Balancing research and service in academia: Gender, race, and laboratory tasks. *Gender & Society*, 34(1), 131–152. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243219867917

Miller, E. J. (2017) Black Girls Rock: The impact of integration and involvement on the success of Black college women. NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education, 10 (2), 156-166. dopi: 10.1080/19407882.2017.1325379

Misra, R., & McKean, M. (2000). College students' academic stress and its relation to their anxiety, time management, and leisure satisfaction. American journal of Health studies, 16(1), 41.

Moody, J. (2024, January 8). Did gay fail Harvard, or did Harvard fail gay*? Inside Higher Ed: Higher Education News, Events and Jobs.* https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/executive-leadership/2024/01/08/did-gay-fail-harvard-or-did-harvard-fail-gay

Mosley, D. V. (2023). A biomythography introducing the Blafemme Healing framework. American Psychologist, 78(5), 678–694. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001146

Murguía Burton, Z. F., & Cao, X. E. (2022). Navigating mental health challenges in graduate school. *Nature Reviews Materials,* 7, 421–423. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41578-022-00444-x

Museus, S. D. & Griffin, K. G. (2011). Mapping the margins in higher education: On the promise of intersectionality frameworks in research and discourse. In *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 15, 5–13. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Nagy, G. A., Fang, C. M., Hish, A. J., Kelly, L., Nicchitta, C. V., Dzirasa, K., & Rosenthal, M. Z. (2019). Burnout and mental health problems in biomedical doctoral students. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, *18*(2), ar27 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.18-09-0198

Njoku A., Evans M., Nimo-Sefah L. & Bailey J. (2023). Listen to the whispers before they become screams: Addressing Black maternal morbidity and mortality in the United States. Healthcare, 11(438), 1-17. DOI: 10.3390/healthcare11030438.

Office of minority health. (2019). Mental and behavioral health—African Americans. Retrieved February 12, 2021, from https://www.minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4&lvlid=24

Offstein, E. H., Larson, M. B., McNeill, A. L., & Mjoni Mwale, H. (2004). Are we doing enough for today's graduate student? *International Journal of Educational Management*, *18*(7), 396-407. DOI 10.1108/09513540410563103

Ollerenshaw, J. A., & Creswell, J. W. (2002). Narrative research: A comparison of two restorying data analysis approaches. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *8*(3), 329–347. SAGE Publications.

Oswalt, S. B., & Riddock, C. C. (2007). What to do about being overwhelmed: Graduate students, stress and university services. *College Student Affairs Journal*, *27*(1), 24-44. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ899402.pdf

Pallas, A. M. (2001). Preparing education doctoral students for epistemological diversity. *Educational Researcher*, *30*(5), 6–11. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x030005006

Patitu, C. L., & Hinton, K. G. (2003). The experiences of African American women faculty and administrators in higher education: Has anything changed? *New Directions for Student Services*, *2003*(104), 79–93. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.109

Patterson, A., Kinloch, V., Burkhard, T., Randall, R., & Howard, A. (2016). Black feminist thought as methodology: Examining intergenerational lived experiences of Black women. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, *5*(3), 55–76. https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2016.5.3.55

Patterson, W. (2013). Narratives of events: Labovian narrative analysis and its limitations. In M. Andrews, C. Squire & M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Doing narrative research*, 2nd Edition (p. 27-46).

Patterson-Stephens, S. M., Lane, T. B., & Vital, L. M. (2017). Black doctoral women: Exploring barriers and facilitators of success in graduate education. *Higher Education Politics & Economics*, *3*(1), 1–35. https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/aphe/vol3/iss1/5

Patton, L.D. & Croom, N. (2017). Critical perspectives on undergraduate black women. In L. D. Patton & N. Croom (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on black women and college success* (pp. 1–13). Routledge.

Patton, L. D., & Harper, S. R. (2003). Mentoring relationships among African American women in graduate and professional schools. *New Directions for Student Services*, 104, 67–78. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.108

Pifer, M. J., & Baker, V. L. (2016). Stage-based challenges and strategies for support in doctoral education: A practical guide for students, faculty members, and program administrators. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *11*, 15–34. https://doi.org/10.28945/2347

Pino Gavidia, L. A., & Adu, J. (2022). Critical narrative inquiry: An examination of a methodological approach. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *21*, 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221081594

Pitre, N. Y., Kushner, K. E., Raine, K. D., & Hegadoren, K. M. (2013). Critical feminist narrative inquiry: Advancing knowledge through double hermeneutic narrative analysis. *Advancing in Nursing Science*, *36*(2), 118–132. https://doi.org/10.1097/ans.0b013e3182902064

Polkinghorne, D. E. (2007). Validity issues in narrative research. Qualitative inquiry, 13(4), 471-486. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406297670

Polkinghorne, D.E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(1), 5-23. DOI: 10.1080/0951839950080103

Pope, E. C., & Edwards, K. T. (2016). Curriculum homeplacing as complicated conversation: (Re)narrating the mentoring of Black women doctoral students. *Gender and Education*, *28*(6), 769–785. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1221898

Porter, C. J., Davis, T. J., & Jones Boss, G. (2022). Solidifying our own 'scholarhood:' Growing (up) together as Black women in the academy. In B. T. Kelly & S. Fries-Britt (Eds.), *Building mentorship networks to support Black women: A guide to succeeding in the academy* (pp. 69–83). Routledge.

Posselt, J. (2021). Discrimination, competitiveness, and support in U.S. graduate student mental health. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, *12*(1), 89–112. https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-07-2020-0042

Rao, V. (2020, July 27). *'You are not listening to me': Black women on pain and implicit bias in medicine*. Today. https://www.today.com/health/implicit-bias-medicine-how-it-hurts-black-women-t187866

Robinson, S. J. (2013). Spoketokenism: Black women talking back about graduate school experiences. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *16*(2), 155–181. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2011.645567

Rosales, A. M., & Person, D. R. (2003). Programming needs and student services for African American women. *New Directions for Student Services*, *2003*(104), 53–65. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.107

Rigler, K. L., Bowlin, L. K., Sweat, K., Watts, S., & Throne, R. (2017). *Agency, socialization, and support: A critical review of doctoral student attrition* [Paper presentation] International Conference on Doctoral Education, University of Central Florida.

Saldaña, J. (2016). The coding manual for qualitative researchers (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Schmidt, M., & Hansson, E. (2018). Doctoral students' well-being: A literature review. *International journal of qualitative studies on health and well-being*, *13*(1), 1-14. DOI: 10.1080/17482631.2018.1508171

Shavers, M. C., & Moore, J. L., III. (2014a). Black female voices: Self-presentation strategies in doctoral programs at predominately White institutions. J*ournal of College Student Development*, *55*(4), 391–407. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2014.0040

Shavers, M. C., & Moore, J. L., III. (2014b). The double-edged sword: Coping and resiliency strategies of African American women enrolled in doctoral programs at predominately White institutions. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, *35*(3), 15–38. https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.35.3.0015

Slay, K. E., Reyes, K. A., & Posselt, J. R. (2019). Bait and switch: Representation, climate, and tensions of diversity work in graduate education. *The Review of Higher Education*, *42*, 255–286. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2019.0052

Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. C. (2008). Narrative and its potential contribution to disability studies. *Disability & Society*, *23*(1),17–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590701725542

Smith, K. M., Chesin, M. S., & Jeglic, E. L. (2014). Minority college student mental health: Does majority status matter? Implications for college counseling services. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 42*, 77–92. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2014.00046.x

Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *69*(1/2), 60–73. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.4.m6867014157m707l

Sonday, A., Ramugondo, E., & Kathard, H. (2020). Case study and narrative inquiry as merged methodologies: A critical narrative perspective. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *19*, 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940692093788

Stewart, D. L. (2015). Know your role: Black college students, racial identity, and performance. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *28*(2), 238–258. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.916000

Szymanski, D. M., & Lewis, J. A. (2016). Gendered racism, coping, identity centrality, and African American college women's psychological distress. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *40*(2), 229-243. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684315616113

Squire, C. (2013). From experience-centered to socioculturally-oriented approaches to narrative. In M. Andrews, C. Squire & M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Doing narrative research*, 2nd Edition (p. 47-71). Sage Publications.

Squire, C, Andrews, M & Tamboukou, M. (2013). Introduction: What is narrative research? In M. Andrews, C. Squire & M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Doing narrative research*, 2nd Edition (p. 47-71). Sage Publications.

Tamir, C. (2021). *The growing diversity of Black America*. Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/03/25/the-growing-diversity-of-black-america/#:~:text=Texas%20has%20the%20largest%20Black%20state%20population

Taylor, M., Sanchez, C., Turk, J., Chessman, H., & Ramos, A. M. (2021, March 4). College and university presidents respond to COVID-19: 2021 Spring term survey. *Research & Insights*. https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Senior-Leaders/College-and-University-Presidents-Respond-to-COVID-19-2021-Spring-Term.aspx

Tompkins, K. A., Brecht, K., Tucker, B., Neander, L. L., & Swift, J. K. (2016). Who matters most? The contribution of faculty, student-peers, and outside support in predicting graduate student satisfaction. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, *10*(2), 102–108. https://doi.org/10.1037/tep0000115

Toirac, J. (2024, May 24). *Welcome to BWHI!*. Black Women's Health Imperative. https://bwhi.org/

Turman, L. (2024, January 19). Emails surface from Lu's VP of Student Affairs sent the day she died by suicide. *KRCG*. https://krcgtv.com/news/local/emails-surface-from-lus-vp-of-student-affairs-sent-the-day-she-died-by-suicide

Turner, C. R., & Allen, K. R. (2022). "She's a friend of my mind:" A reflection of Black sisterhood in academia. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2022.2088724

Tuwe, K. (2016). The African oral tradition paradigm of storytelling as a methodological framework: Employment experiences for African communities in New Zealand. In *African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP) proceedings of the*

38th AFSAAP conference: 21st century tensions and transformation in Africa. Deakin University.

UC Berkeley Graduate Assembly. (2014). *Graduate student happiness and well-being report 2014*. http://ga.berkeley.edu/well-beingreport

U.S. Department of Education. (2022, September). *Digest of education statistics, 2022*. National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_324.20.asp

Walker, H. (2002). I need you to survive [Song]. On *The essential Hezekiah Walker.* Verity Records/Legacy.

Walker-Barnes, C. (2017). When the bough breaks: The StrongBlackWoman and the embodiment of stress. In S.Y. Evans, K. Bell & N. K. Burton (Eds), *Black women's mental health: Balancing strength & vulnerability* (p. 43-55). SUNY Press.

Walkington, L. (2017). How far have we really come? Black women faculty and graduate students' experiences in higher education. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, *1*(39), 51–65. https://doi.org/10.55671/0160-4341.1022

Wallace, J. K., & Ford, J. R. (2021). "They don't value my knowledge": Interrogating the racialized experiences of Black first-generation doctoral students in HESA programs at HWIs. *Journal of First-generation Student Success*, *1*(2), 127–144. https://doi.org/10.1080/26906015.2021.1930290

Walton, Q. L., & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, O. B. (2017). The case for #BlackGirlMagic: Application of a strengths-based, intersectional practice framework for working with Black women with depression. *Journal of Women and Social Work*, *32*(4), 461–475. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109917712213

Watson, N. N., & Hunter, C. D. (2015). Anxiety and depression among African American women: The cost of strength and negative attitudes towards psychological help seeking. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 21*(4), 604–612. http://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000015

Wilkins-Yel, K. G., Arnold, A., Bekki, J., Natarajan, M., Bernstein, B., & Randall, A. K. (2022). "I can't push off my own mental health:" Chilly STEM climates, mental health, and STEM persistence among Black, Latina, and White graduate women. *Sex Roles*, *86*(3-4), 208–232. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-021-01262-1

Wilson, S. (2012). They forgot mammy had a brain. In G. G. Muhs (Ed.), *Presumed incompetent: The intersections of race and class for women in academia* (pp. 65–77). University Press of Colorado.

Winkle-Wagner, R. (2009). *Walking in enemy territory: Being Black on campus. The unchosen me: Race, gender, and identity among Black women in college.* Johns Hopkins University Press.

Winkle-Wagner, R., Kelly, B. T., Luedke, C. L., & Reavis, T. B. (2019). Authentically me: Examining expectations that are placed upon Black women in college. *American Educational Research Journal*, *56*(2), 407–443. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831218798326

Woods, R. (2001). Invisible women: The experiences of Black female doctoral students at the university of Michigan. In R. O. Mabokela & A. L. Green (Eds.), *Sisters of the academy: Emergent Black women scholars in higher education.* (1st ed., pp. 105–116). Stylus Publishing.

Woods-Giscombé, C. L., & Black, A. R. (2010). Mind-body interventions to reduce risk for health disparities related to stress and strength among African American women: the potential of mindfulness-based stress reduction, loving-kindness, and the NTU therapeutic framework. *Complementary Health Practice Review*, *15*(3), 115–131. https://doi.org/10.1177/1533210110386776

Woolston, C. (2020). Signs of depression and anxiety soar among U.S. graduate students during pandemic. *Nature*, *585*(7823), 147–148. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-02439-6

Woolston, C. (2019). PhDs: The tortuous truth. *Nature*, *575*(7782), 403– 406. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-03459-7

Workneh, L. (2016, June 28). *Jesse Williams: 'Just because we're magic, does not mean we're not real'*. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jesse-williams-bet-awards-humanitarian-award_n_57708cebe4b017b379f65077

Wyatt, T. & Oswalt, S.B. (2013) Comparing mental health issues among undergraduate and graduate students. *American Journal of Health Education*, 44(2), 96-107. doi: 10.1080/19325037.2013.764248

Yates, J., & Leggett, T. (2016). Qualitative research: An introduction. *Radiologic Technology, 88*(2), 225–231.

Young, A. M., Johnson, M., Douglass, C., & O'Neal Turner, B. (2023). Cultivating a conscious cohort: Sisterhood as a site of institutional change. In S. Fries-Britt & B. T. Kelly (Eds.), *Black women navigating the doctoral journey: Student peer support, mentorship, and success in the academy* (1st ed., pp. 125–138). Routledge.

Yusuf, J. E. W., Saitgalina, M., & Chapman, D. W. (2022). Work-life balance and well-being of graduate students. In *Work-Life Balance in Higher Education* (pp. 63-88). Routledge.