Faces in the crowd: A narrative inquiry into the relationship violence experienced by four Black college women

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Faces in the crowd: A narrative inquiry into the relationship violence experienced by four Black college women

by

Lorraine D. Acker

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Education Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:
Natasha Croom, Co-major Professor
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The student author and the program of study committee are solely responsible for the content of this dissertation. The Graduate College will ensure this dissertation is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

2017

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DEDICATION

To Black women

Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.

Anna Julia Cooper, *Voices from the South*, 1892, p. 31

To the many Black faces in the crowd, both known and unknown, I SEE YOU, YOU MATTER, YOUR LIVES MATTER and YOUR STORIES MATTER.

I am a person who believes in asking questions, in not conforming for the sake of conforming. I am deeply dissatisfied — about so many things, about injustice, about the way the world works — and in some ways, my dissatisfaction drives my storytelling.

Chimamanda Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*, 2009
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Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:5-6 (NIVB)

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ABSTRACT

Relationship violence among Black college women is becoming a serious concern. However, the face of relationship violence in higher education has been predominantly that of White women, which subsequently has excluded the voices of Black college women and other women of color. The rationale for this study came from my desire to uncover how Black college women make meaning of their experiences of relationship violence. Therefore, this narrative study explored (a) how four Black women experienced relationship violence in college, (b) how they made meaning of their relationship violence experience in college, and (c) how they navigated campus resources related to their experience.

The study used a Black feminist epistemological approach related to Black college women’s lived experiences to illustrate how they dealt with their relationship violence experiences on a college campus. Using Black feminist theory, social learning theory, and ecological theory as frameworks, the study examined the internal and external challenges, and the resilience of four Black college women navigating their campus environment as relationship violence survivors. The findings were derived from my in-depth interviews with and the reflective journals of four Black college women who had experienced relationship violence on campus, as well as from my research journal and group discussions with all four participants. The significance of the findings of this study is two-fold in that it has the potential to contribute to both scholarship and practice.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

What is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal, and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.

Lorde, 1984, p. 40

This narrative study explored the experiences of relationship violence as related to race and gender using a sample of four Black college women. The knowledge generated from this inquiry provides new insights and will inform higher education practices in order to prevent and respond to such violence, especially on college campuses. Furthermore, this research employed a qualitative methodology to represent the participants’ voices in this narrative.

Research examining relationship violence among Black college women students has been minimal in the domestic violence and higher education literature. Despite this lack of attention, relationship violence among Black women has recently garnered national attention (Tanis, Odom & Simmons, 2014). A report by the Black Women’s Blueprint (Tanis et al., 2014), a civil and human rights organization that convened the first ever Black Women’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission to focus on Black women’s rape and sexual assault, prompted a grassroots initiative to address the impact of sexual violence on Black women. The Black Women’s Blueprint study reported that 60% of Black girls will have experienced sexual abuse before the age of 18 (Tanis et al., 2014), which has opened a national discussion about the unspoken traumas of Black girls. Equally problematic is the number of Black women entering college who have already been affected by various forms of relationship violence, although colleges and universities have not adequately anticipated their needs and those of other women of color who have had these experiences (Banks, 2009; Moses, 1989).
The Black Women’s Blueprint report came out simultaneously with the reauthorization of the 1994 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA, 2013), which was signed into law again by President Obama on March 7, 2013, following Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush. A significant component of the VAWA was the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act (SaVE Act), which requires colleges to include statistics on acts of domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking in their annual crime reports. The Campus SaVE Act (Pub. L. No. 113-4 2013) seeks “to address the violence women face on campus: the highest rates of stalking, the highest risk of nonfatal intimate partner violence, and 20-25% of female students experiencing rape or attempted rape” (VAWA, 2013). The reauthorization of the VAWA not only was groundbreaking for domestic violence survivors and agencies but also illuminated the victimization of college women both on and off campus.

Immediately following the reauthorization of the VAWA, the White House Council on Women and Girls and the Office of the Vice President released the report *Rape and Sexual Assault: A Renewed Call to Action*, which documented the steps “the administration has taken to combat rape and sexual assault, and [identified] areas for further action” (VAWA, 2013, p. 1). A highlight of this report holds colleges and universities accountable for ensuring a safer campus “by issuing guidance to help schools understand their obligations to prevent and respond to campus sexual assault, and by stepping up federal compliance and enforcement actions” (White House Council on Women and Girls, 2014, p. 3). The report also noted that women are more likely to be victims of rape, because statistically 1 in 5 will be raped in their lifetime (Krebs,
Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2009) supporting the conclusion of Koss, Gidycz, and Wisnewski (1987) who reported 1 in 4 women would be victims of rape.

However, these rates are usually reported for all college women, which does not address the extent of relationship violence suffered by Black women and other women of color, or if the rate of 1 in 5 adequately represents Black college women. Relationship violence is not a monolithic experience, and women are not a monolithic group. There are distinct differences in the types of relationship violence that women experience and cultural factors that influence how Black women have addressed and made meaning of their personal experiences of relationship violence, which this study has explored.

**Problems, Background, and Significance**

*To imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy.*  
Lorde, 1984, p. 67

The current problems with addressing relationship violence among Black women enrolled in college are three fold. Firstly, the rate of 1 in 5 women raped often includes all women and therefore does not show the proportion of Black college women who have been. This general statistic is limited because it does not address the scope of relationship violence among Black women and other women of color. Secondly, if Black women entering college have already experienced relationship violence trauma, the likelihood of their victimization is potentially high, given the 1 in 5 victimization rate among women. Thirdly, the new federal mandate to address relationship violence in college does not account for the cultural and diverse needs of women. There are distinct differences in types of relationship violence that women experience and cultural factors that influence
how Black female college students respond to these acts of violence and the overall impact they have on their college experience.

Researchers, advocates, and legal experts have defined relationship violence in different ways. Wekerle and Wolfe (1999) defined it as “any attempt to control or dominate another person physically, sexually, or psychologically and may result from physical acts (e.g., hitting, punching, shoving), sexual aggression (e.g., nonconsensual sex, unwanted touching), and psychological aggression (e.g., isolating self/partner, name-calling, threats to harm self/other)” (p. 436). The word ‘relationship’ in this definition is critically important because it encompasses behaviors that are often disregarded or insignificant because two individuals are in a close, personal relationship (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). In this study, relationship encompasses dating, interpersonal non-dating, and intimate partner relationships. This distinction is important to note because in the college environments, relationship violence occurs in dating as well as in non-dating relationships.

The research on relationship violence among Black women has focused on psychological aggression (Clark, Beckett, Wells, & Dungee-Anderson, 1994; Few & Bell-Scott, 2002; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Rouse, Breen & Howell, 1988), disclosure patterns (Washington, 2001; Wyatt, 1992), and coping strategies (Barrett, 1999; Few & Bell-Scott, 2002). A number of studies about Black women have focused primarily on sexual risk behaviors (Foreman, 2003), body image (Falconer & Neville, 2000), dating violence (Amar, 2006; Amar & Alexy, 2005), racial identity, and academic success (Schwartz & Washington, 2000). The current study and similar studies can expand the literature specifically about relationship violence among Black college women.
The literature suggests that some Black women are often unwilling to share their victimization with rape crisis centers, medical providers, police, friends, and family members (Washington, 2001; Wyatt, 1992) because, while their “remaining silent may hinder their recovery, disclosing their victimization makes them more susceptible to being, blamed, questioned, and stereotyped” (Donavan & Williams, 2002, p. 100). Besides, Black women do not want to bear the burden of vilifying Black men (Donovan & Williams, 2002; Olive, 2012). Although the prevalence of relationship violence in the Black community has been widely documented (Collins, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991; Krebs et al., 2011; Washington, 2001; Wyatt, 1992), an exploration of how Black college women have addressed such experiences is absent from the literature.

Studies about Black college women’s victimization have compared dating violence rates and prevalence among Black women to those among White women (Bryant-Davis, 2010; Donovan & Williams, 2002; Porter & Williams, 2011; West & Rose, 2000). Although this approach can be helpful in examining the similarities and differences among racial groups, the comparison fails to provide a holistic understanding of how Black college women experience relationship violence. As Henry (1995) argued, some researchers often seek a multicultural research cohort so that no group is left out. Thus, Black women’s lived experiences are rarely well developed into a cohesive discussion. They become snippets, usually as a comparative minority group in studies mainly about [White] girls or [White] women. (p. 281)
My research is not a comparative or statistical study, but rather a narrative, qualitative study focusing on the individual lived experiences of four Black college women and the impact their experiences of relationship violence had on them. The significance of this study was its potential to contribute to both scholarship and practice in higher education. The percentage of Black women enrolled in college has increased over the last 35 years; currently 37%, ages 18 to 24 are enrolled in college, including graduate and professional school (Mathers & Adams, 2007). Despite the prevalence of Black women in college, few studies have focused on the relationship violence they have experienced (Few, 1999).

Despite the current federal mandate to improve how colleges and universities address relationship violence on college campuses, qualitative studies examining Black college women involved in violent relationships has been slow to emerge. Potentially this federal mandate will encourage student affairs practitioners and college administrators to explore new ways to improve the campus climate surrounding relationship violence and develop programs and services to better address the needs of the diverse student body. As academic institutions continue to identify prevention strategies to respond to the growing relationship violence problem in general, Black college women continue to be victimized and ignored (Branch, Richards, & Dretsch, 2013; Robinson & Franklin, 2011b; West & Rose, 2000). While the research points to this trend in violence as impacting all college women, it has not identified how colleges and universities plan to address it among Black women.
Colleges and universities should recognize the cultural experiences of Black college women because “ignoring [their needs] is shortsighted” (Rosales & Person 2003, p. 53). Black college women are members of the campus community and as such, these institutions should be abreast of their needs and proactive to ensure their success. The underlying issues for colleges and universities are whether Black college women feel safe on campus and whether they believe their issues and concerns are taken seriously. What is missing from the literature is a clear understanding of the multiples ways Black women experience relationship violence and how they interpret the role of higher education institutions in supporting them as Black women, or in further perpetuating the notion that Black women are not in crisis.

According to hooks (1981), “... no other group in America has had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women” (p. 7). Black women have for several decades been viewed as the forgotten population (hooks, 1981; Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982), so it is not surprising that although they account for the most rapidly increasing population entering institutions of higher learning (Bennett & Lutz, 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; Winkle-Wagner, 2015), very little research has been done to understand and address their particular relationship violence experiences.

The notion of Black college women remaining in college and outpacing their Black male counterparts (JBHE, 2003) is widely reported in the literature. However, understanding how Black college women persist in college despite the psychological trauma of surviving rape, sexual assault, or other forms of relationship violence is not well documented in the literature. While most colleges and universities highlight their success at retaining Black women, they have failed to recognize these women’s day-to-
day challenges of navigating the university campus as survivors of relationship violence. Retention is not only about academic achievement; it is about how students are engaged outside of the classroom. Moses (1989) indicated, “the attitudes and behaviors of faculty members, student services staff members, other campus employees, and student peers frequently determine how well or how poorly women students are served” (p. 9).

In addition, Miles, Bertrand-Jones, Clemons, and Golay (2011), citing Wolf-Wendel (2000), argued that “an atmosphere of inclusion and support can be found for women of color at predominantly White institutions if these institutions deliberately take into account their needs” (p. 109). The current study not only seeks fill the gap in the research about Black college women’s experiences of relationship violence, but also to inform institutional practices to improve these women’s overall educational experiences and especially to prevent and help them cope with relationship violence.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

_I am a person. I have feelings. I have needs. I have wants. I'm sittin' here and nobody sees me. Everybody just looks over me and walks on past because I'm black, because I'm a woman, because I'm poor, because I have no education. But I'm still here._

Cora Lee Johnson (Martin, 1999, p. 33)

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand how four Black women have addressed their relationship violence throughout their college careers. The study employed narrative inquiry, using individual interviews, to document the stories as told by the participants and to provide them space to reflect on their relationship violence experiences and meaning making process. In addition, the study sought insight into how Black college women have navigated campus resources in order to deal with their encounters of relationship violence.
As a Black feminist scholar, I have felt a sense of commitment to create an opportunity for Black college women to share their stories and get the support they need so as to thrive within the academy. Therefore, the central question guiding this research study was: How did the Black women in this study make meaning of their relationship violence experiences in college? Additionally, the research study addressed these subquestions:

1. How did the Black women in this study experience relationship violence in college?
2. How did the Black women navigate campus resources related to their experiences of relationship violence in college?

**Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. In Chapter 1, I provide an introduction to the study highlighting the significance of the research topic, key literature followed by the study’s purpose and research questions. This chapter also introduces the definition of key terms. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature in three main sections. The first section (the nature of violence) examines the social construction of gender and violence, patriarchy, and the types of violence women may experience. The second section addresses violence among Black men and women, with specific emphasis on the impact of slavery and violence on both. In the third section, the literature specifically explores relationship violence in college in general and among Black college women in particular and the fourth section reviewed Black identity development literature, specifically how higher education scholars have studied the experiences of Black college students. The theoretical frameworks, Black Feminist Theory, Social
Learning Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory are also outlined in this chapter. A synthesis of each section of the literature review supports the importance and relevance of the research study.

Chapter 3 presents the research design for this study, along with the theoretical framework. This chapter provides a detailed description of the study’s research design and includes discussions of the following: (a) epistemology, (b) methodology, and (c) methods. Black feminist epistemology was used to speak directly to how race and gender impact Black women’s lived experiences. The methodology I employed for this research study was narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is grounded in the oral, written, and visual retelling of our lived experiences, specifically how individuals making meaning of their lives through stories (Andrews, Squire & Tambokou, 2008; Chase, 2005). This chapter also provides a comprehensive description of my participant selection process along with data collection, including interviews and reflective journals, data analysis procedures, followed by my procedures for data analysis and criteria for trustworthiness of the study results.

In Chapter 4 of the dissertation, I present the key findings of the study as five composite narratives. The composite narratives are organized around the themes that emerged from the interviews and constructed as a collective dialogue between all four participants and myself. The composite narratives include data from 12 in-depth interviews with four participants, three participant reflection journals, and my interactions with the participants as a group. Preceding each narrative is an analytical poem developed by the researcher that represents a summation of the stories generated by this inquiry. In Chapter 5 contains a robust discussion of the study findings. I intentionally connect the
findings to the literature on higher education, relationship violence, and Black college women to the thematic narratives with the goal of providing interpretive insights into the study’s findings. Chapter 6 contains the conclusions of the dissertation study, where I provide a summary of the study, the study limitations, implications for research and practice, and my reflections as the researcher.

**Definition of Terms**

**Black:** Adopted during the Black Power Movement (1966-1975), the label is often used interchangeably with African American to define positive Black racial identity (De Walt, 2011). For this study, the term Black is used to describe the participants who self identify as Black or African American.

**Dating violence:** “Violence committed by a person who is or has been in a romantic or intimate relationship with the victim; and where the existence of such a relationship is determined based on its length, type, and the frequency of interaction between the persons in the relationship” (Violence Against Women Act, 2013).

**Economic abuse:** Is defined as making or attempting to make an individual financially dependent by maintaining total control over their financial resources, withholding their access to money, or forbidding their attendance at school or work (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014, para 5).

**Emotional abuse:** “Purposely undermining an individual’s sense of self-worth and/or self-esteem is abusive. This may include, but is not limited to, constant criticism, diminishing of the person’s abilities, name-calling, or damaging their relationship with their children” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014, para 3).
**Intersectionality:** Is “... a critical theory that suggests that race, gender, and class are interconnected as “intersecting oppressions” and cannot be examined separately” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 68).

**Intimate partner violence:** “... Includes physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression by a current or former intimate partner (i.e., spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, dating partner, or ongoing sexual partner” (Breiding, Basile, Smith, Black & Mahendra, 2015, p. 11).

**Physical abuse:** “Hitting, slapping, shoving, grabbing, pinching, biting, hair pulling, etc. Such abuse also includes denying a partner medical care or forcing alcohol and/or drug use on him or her” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014, para 2).

**Psychological abuse:** “Elements of psychological abuse include—but are not limited to—causing fear by intimidation; threatening physical harm to self, partner, children, or the partner’s family or friends; destroying pets and property; and forcing isolation from family, friends, or school and/or work” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014, para 2).

**Psychological aggression:** Includes “behaviors such as name-calling, insults, and humiliation. Coercive control includes behaviors that are intended to monitor and control an intimate partner through threats to harm, interference with family and friends, and limiting access to money” (Breiding, Chen, & Black, 2014, p. 81).

**Rape:** “Is defined as any completed or attempted unwanted vaginal, oral, or anal penetration through the use of physical force (such as being pinned or held down, or by
the use of violence) or threats to physically harm, and may include times when the victim was drunk, high, drugged, or passed out and unable to consent. Rape is defined by three types: completed forced penetration, attempted forced penetration, and completed alcohol or drug-facilitated penetration” (Breiding et al. 2014, p. 81).

**Relationship violence:** Relationship violence is any attempt to control or dominate another person physically, sexually, or psychologically, causing some level of harm. “The harm caused by acts of relationship violence may result from physical acts (e.g., hitting, punching, shoving), sexual aggression (e.g., nonconsensual sex, unwanted touching), and/or psychological aggression (e.g., isolating self/partner, name-calling, threats to harm self/other)” (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999, p. 436).

**Sexual abuse:** “Coercing or attempting to coerce a person to participate in any sexual contact or behavior without consent. Sexual abuse includes—but is not limited to—marital rape, attacks on sexual parts of the body, forcing sex after physical violence, or treating a person in a sexually demeaning manner” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014, para 3).

**Sexual assault:** Includes “unwanted sexual contact that could include touching of a sexual nature, oral sex, sexual intercourse, anal sex, or sexual penetration with a finger or object” (Krebs et al., 2009, p. 641).

**Stalking:** “. . . involves a pattern of harassing or threatening tactics used by a perpetrator that is both unwanted and causes fear or safety concerns in the victim” (Breiding et al., 2014, p. 81).
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this research was to explore how four Black women had experienced relationship violence while in college, as well as their use of campus resources to deal with it. The study attempted to answer (a) how these Black college women addressed issues of relationship violence, (b) how they have personally responded to and made meaning of their experiences of it, and (c) how these Black college women navigated campus resources related to their experiences of relationship violence. This literature review is divided into five sections: (a) defining relationship violence, (b) the social construction of gender and patriarchy, (c) slavery, Black women, Black men, and violence, (d) relationship violence in college, e) relationship violence among Black college women, and (d) Black identity development.

Defining Relationship Violence

An operational definition of relationship violence is necessary to provide a framework for understanding this experience among Black college women. A scan of the literature shows different kinds and definitions of relationship violence, including physical violence, psychological abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual violence (Kaukinen, Gover, & Hartman, 2012). Although definitions of types of violence vary across studies, there is consensus among researchers that physical violence involves the threat or use of physical force in a dating relationship (Kaukinen et al., 2012; Nabors & Jasinski, 2009; Palmer, McMahon, Rounsaville, & Ball, 2010; Shook, Gerrity, Jurich, & Segrist, 2000; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). Some studies have designated physical violence to mean hitting, slapping, kicking, or punching (Kaukinen et al., 2012; Palmer et al., 2010; Nabors & Jasinski, 2009; Shook et al., 2000).
However, very few researchers have restricted the definition of relationship violence to the use of physical force or threats and have opted for the use of ‘dating violence’ or ‘dating abuse’. The term ‘violence’ have been broadly used to encompass a wide range of controlling and dominant behavior, including physical, psychological/emotional, verbal, and sexual abuse (Nabors & Jasinski, 2009; Werkle & Wolfe, 1999).

For the purposes of this study, I have used the U.S. Department of Justice definition of relationship violence—also referred to as dating violence, domestic violence, or intimate partner violence—as being a pattern of violence in any intimate relationship where one person inflicts physical or emotional pain on a partner in order to gain or maintain power and control over their partner (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014, para 1). Although certain academic disciplines have defined violence in multiple ways, college and universities have shifted how they define the wide range of violence that college students encounter. Often used interchangeably, the terms used to denote violence experiences on college campuses have included domestic violence, intimate partner violence, dating violence, and courtship violence. However, these terms do not take into account the non-intimate, non-domestic, or non-dating relationship violence that some college students may experience. Although domestic violence, intimate partner violence, dating violence, and courtship violence occur among college students, these terms exclude other forms of relationship violence (i.e., emotional violence, psychological violence, economic violence, stalking, etc.). For this reason, many colleges and universities across the country have adopted the term ‘relationship violence’ to reflect the broader range of experiences that students can encounter.
It is important to note that relationship violence can include physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse between two individuals regardless of marital status or sexual orientation (Burns, 1999; Chez, 1994). O’Leary (1999) defined psychological abuse as “acts of recurring criticism or verbal aggression toward a partner, and/or acts of isolation and domination of a partner” (p. 19). These aggressive and violent actions are attempts to damage women self-esteem, induce fear, and contribute to other psychological difficulties (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2001; Mahoney, Williams, & West, 2001; O’Leary, 1999). To fully understand the role of violence in the lives of Black college women, an examination of the social construction of gender, patriarchy, and the types of violence that women may experience is also necessary to provide foundational knowledge for the research that has been done on violence against women.

Social Construction of Gender and Patriarchy

Gender is the most common indicator of violence acts (rape, sexual assault, etc.) perpetrated against women by men (Koss, Goodman, Browne, Fitzgerald, Keita, & Russo, 1994). According to the Black et al. (2011), 18.3% of women will be the victims of a completed rape before the age of 25, and almost half before age 18. It is also documented that men committed 99% of rape (Rozee & Koss, 2001). Although some men are rape victims themselves and some women are perpetrators of violence, it is important to note that violence against women, specifically rape and sexual assault are most often but not always by committed men (Koss et al., 1994).

The discourse on violence against women, and understanding why men are violent and why women are abused, can be found in a variety of disciplines, particularly sociology, criminal justice, women’s studies, and psychology. This study of relationship
violence has used an interdisciplinary approach to understand the social construction of
gender, patriarchy, and types of violence women may encounter.

The research on gender indicates that it is a social construct (Anderson & Collins, 2007; Glenn, 1999; Grant, 2006; Lorber, 1992; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). As Glenn (1999) indicated, “the concept of gender provides an overarching rubric for looking at historical, cultural, and situational variability in definitions of womanhood and manhood, in meanings of masculinity and femininity, in relationships between men and women, and in the extent of their relative power and political status” (p. 5). Anderson and Collins (2007) argued that, like race, gender cannot be fully understood at the individual level alone. Gender is structured by social institutions, including work, families, media, and education.

In the United States, White men are traditionally socialized to be dominant, aggressive, and heads of households. Kimmel and Davis (2011) asserted that “boys learn to be a man from an early age in playgrounds, schoolrooms, religious institutions, and homes, and are taught this by peers, media, parents, teachers, coaches – just about everywhere and from everyone” (p. 7). However, research suggests that for Black men, gender-role socialization is different (Hill, 2002; McGowan, 2014; Wallace, 2007). Like White men, Black men are socialized to be dominant and aggressive; however, they cannot be too aggressive or dominant because it can lead to serious consequences from White racists (Franklin, 1984), including emasculation, jail/prison, or death.

According to Wallace (2007), Black boys at birth are socialized according to their gender differently than their White counterparts. Black men are socialized to take on the “man as aggressor” role, but are denied the male privilege given to White males, that
categorize white male aggression as manly and being “the provider” (Franklin, 1984; Hill, 2002; McGowan, 2014; Wallace, 2007). Wallace stated that

Black children are taught that womanhood is something that one must
grow into while manhood is something that is both natural and
automatic…Black boys are regarded as adult men from young ages and
therefore are expected to not participate in behaviors associated with girls
or childhood. (p. 15)

These early lessons about Black masculinity are also translated into messages that Black boys and girls learn about sex and relationships. As children, Black boys learn that in order to assert their manhood, they must have sex with as many women as possible – with the goal of spreading their seed to make babies and to assert power and control over their women (Collins, 2004; hooks, 2004). This view and expression of masculinity sends a clear message to Black boys that “they must be aggressive, dominant, and, sometimes, violent in order to be true men” (Wallace, 2007, p. 16).

Marin and Russon (2005) indicated “gender-role socialization provides for the transmission of the cultural values of patriarchy, including male entitlement, privilege, and domination” (p. 31). While men are socialized to assert their physical, economic, political, and intellectual status within society, women are socialized to be submissive, timid, and family caregivers. Ben-David and Schneider (2005) argued that gender roles are “normative behaviors and attitudes which are expected from individuals, based on their biological sex, and which are often learned through the socialization process” (p. 386). In essence, gender socialization is an institutionalized process that begins at birth,
in which men and women are expected to assimilate within their expected roles (Bell, 2004; Carter, 2014). Bell (2004) explained how the socialization of gender is formed:

Boys’ identification with masculinity, necessary to attain the correct gender role, happens through rejecting what stands for femininity. Boys come to recognize that what they are supposed to be is what their mothers are not…Rejecting femininity is then constant with denigrating femininity, so that tasks, traits, and qualities associated with being feminine are considered less socially valuable than are tasks, traits, and qualities associated with being masculine. (p. 156)

This rejection of femininity by males begins at birth. As the literature confirms, this attitude is engrained in the fabric of society and reinforced throughout the life course for men. Over the centuries, this negative view of femininity has perpetuated a power struggle between men and women because men are raised to believe that women are the lesser gender and, subsequently, less valued. Individuals who perform outside of their expected gender roles are often ostracized and deemed abnormal. Men and women learn how to enact their gender roles through continuous socialization within the home, school, and work. The message of this socialization is that men and women are different, and their roles and lives are judged by a different set of standards. Lorber (1992) stated in the Paradoxes of Gender that “in the social construction of gender, it does not matter what men and women actually do, or even if they do the same thing; the social institution insists only that what they do is perceived as different” (p. 26). In the context of the current study, the nature of violence among men and women is perceived differently according to the gender and the attitudes they have developed toward it.
Marin and Russon (1999) stated that “violence is often viewed as a tool or a means to exert power and maintain control; these qualities sometimes have been referred to as machismo” (pp. 31-32). While men are encouraged to engage in power relationships with women, women are discouraged from challenging men. This socially controlled power dynamic between men and women also leads to the transmission of patriarchy, male dominance, and male privilege (Collins, 2004; hooks, 2004; Marin & Russon, 1999). Feminist scholars have argued that male privilege, male dominance, and patriarchy have formed the basis for the feminist understanding of relationship violence and suggest that social systems established on the foundation of patriarchy create and maintain male privilege over women (Collins, 2004; hooks, 2004; Marin & Russon, 2005; Sugarman & Frankel, 1996).

The continuous reinforcement and celebration of male dominance in American society partly explains why women are abused or violated. The use of violence is often justified as a method for reproducing male dominance (Marin & Russon, 2005; Nabors & Jasinski, 2009; Sugarman & Frankel, 1996). In addition, feminists believe that teaching the socialization of gender and masculinity contributes to relationship violence (Marin & Russon, 2005). Despite claims about gender equality in the United States, it is a documented fact that women and men do not share power equally and in intimate and non-intimate relationships men exerts more power (Lennon, Stewart, & Ledermann, 2012; Lorber, 1992), despite the women’s rights movements and change in American rhetoric.
Feminists believe that, “violence cannot be examined unless gender and power are taken into account” (Yilo, 1993, p. 47). Historically men have been allowed to use their power advantage to control women (Dwyer, Smokowski, Bricout, & Wodarski, 1996; Lennon, Stewart, & Ledermann, 2012; Lorber, 1992). Feminist scholars have also argued that conforming to traditional gender role stereotypes contributes to the perpetration and perpetuation of relationship violence (Anderson & Collins, 2007; Glenn, 1999; Grant, 2006; Lorber, 1992; Marin & Russon, 2005; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005).

Moreover, Brownridge (2002) found that men who held traditional attitudes about gender and engage in behaviors that include isolation, stalking, or withholding partners’ finances, were more likely to engage in violence towards their partners compared to men with unbiased gender attitudes towards their partners. These gendered attitudes play a major role defining masculinity and femininity and further reinforce men’s violence against women. College campuses are not immune to reinforcing traditional gender roles. Risman (2004) argue that campus climate for college women is challenging because women experience sexism on institutional, individual, and interpersonal levels. These negative experiences are the result of macro and microaggressions, interpersonal and relationship violence, and everyday sexism (Swim, Mallett, & Stangor 2004), objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), and benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske 2001).

Sue et al. (2007) defined microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative [racist or sexist] slights and insults” (p. 271) directed at an individual. Moreover, as they pertain to gender, these
microaggressions are overt and covert forms of sexism that are harmful to women as individuals and to all women as a group. These aggressive behaviors also send and reinforce negative messages to women about their place in society via media objectification, the use of sexist language, and restrictive traditional gender roles (Sue et al., 2007). In 2004, Swim and colleagues found that college women experience one or two events each week that qualify as “everyday sexism,” including gender-role stereotypes and prejudice, degrading comments, and objectification (p. 117). Glick and Fiske (2001) described benevolent sexism as subtle and often as appearing positive, for example, showing women certain courtesies that suggest they are less capable of performing a task. However, benevolent sexism suggests that women and good and pure and should accept femininity as a natural part of their role in society (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Gender socialization are reinforced through the performance of traditional stereotypical tasks such as holding doors open and carrying heavy loads labels women as weak and men strong (Glick & Fiske 1996).

In addition to these overt and subtle forms of sexism, there is a lack of college women involvement in co-curricular leadership opportunities on campuses (Astin, 1993). Furthermore, senior women administrators and women faculty are also underrepresented and are unable to serve as mentors or role models (Nidiffer & Bashaw, 2001). As these and other forms of sexism accrue over time, they can have a “negative impact on women’s cumulative impact, creating an environment that dampens women’s self-esteem, confidence, aspirations, and their participation” (Sandler, Silverberg and Hall, 1996, p. 10). Negative attitudes towards women that continue to go unchallenged send messages that reinforce women’s lack of worth, which can lead to more instances of
relationship violence. Relationship violence cannot be explained when patriarchal values become institutionalized and communicated (Marin & Russon, 2005).

According to Goldrick-Jones (2002), patriarchy consists of “any practices and systems that oppress, control, or dominate women” (p. 5). Johnson (2014), examining patriarchy in The Gender Knot, asserted that this social construct reflects is rooted in a hegemonic structure that values male privilege and dominance. Johnson (2014) also argued that the privilege granted by patriarchy is attached to social categories, namely, race class, gender, and sexual orientation. Privilege is also socially constructed and one’s socially constructed identity determines if they are granted privilege. Marin and Russo (2005) argued that patriarchal attitudes are also transmitted and reinforced through the mass media, a powerful socialization agent (p. 32). However, it would be overgeneralizing to assume that patriarchy is the sole cause of violence against women.

York (2011) clearly states that the occurrence of relationship “violence cannot be explained by any “single bullet” theory such as patriarchy because the maintenance of patriarchy is not the sole motivation for the use of violence against women in a society” (p. 15). However, in the context of the present research study, patriarchy is used to understand the systemic oppression of women and the significant role of male perpetration of various forms of violence against women. Relationship violence does not occur in a vacuum and is linked to the male-dominated systems of privilege, masculinity, and patriarchy. Despite a decade of activism, passage of laws for equal rights, and changing attitudes about the status of women, relationship violence and other forms of violence perpetrated against women remain pervasive and destructive in our society.
Slavery, Black Women, Black Men, and Violence

Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women.
Jacobs, 2001, p. 66

To understand the implications of violence in African American communities, one must consider the history of systemic racism (Bent-Goodley, 2001; Dennis, Key, Kirk, & Smith, 1995; hooks, 1984). The long history of sexual violence, racial oppression, class exploitation, and social control of Black women in the United States chronicles and situates Black women differently from White women and from other women of color (Bent-Goodley, 2001; Collins, 2004; Dennis et al., 1995; hooks, 1984; Jacobs, 2001; Sommerville, 2005). These forms of oppression are historically rooted in the slave system, the lynching of Black men, and the Jim Crow legal system (Bent-Goodley, 2001; Collins, 2004; Dennis et al., 1995; hooks, 1984; Sommerville, 2005).

The plight of Black men and women during the years of slavery is well documented. The impact of slavery on both has been widely discussed across multiple disciplines and through all kinds of media. Lynchings of Black men by slave owners were often punishments for committing rape; however, Black women endured the punishment of sexual exploitation (Collins, 2004). These atrocities were everyday practices meant to control and to place fear into the minds of the slaves who did not comply with the demands of their slave-owners (Collins, 2004; Sommerville, 2005). Jacobs (2001) made it quite clear that while slavery was equally terrible for Black men, Black women endured various forms of sexual oppression, including rape and sexual assault at the hands of their slave owners, other slaves, and their husbands (hooks, 1984). In the eyes of the law it was legal to rape and sexual exploit Black women, but raping a White woman was considered a crime (Collins, 2004; Della-Guistina, 2005).
Moreover, during slavery, Black women were never viewed as women; they were treated like animals – used only for breeding (Collins, 2004; Jones, 1985; Roberts, 1997). Sommerville (2005) documented the exploitation of Black women sold into slavery, stating that they were “placed on the auction block, stripped naked, and examined to determine their reproductive capacity” (p. 23). Once sold, Black women were often coerced and violently forced to have sexual relations with their slave masters and overseers (Sommerville, 2005). Black women were also paired with other slaves, a process known as slave breeding, with the goal of producing children who would also be sold into slavery. Black women had neither control of their sexual encounters nor of their sexual reproduction. They were forced to live under a systemically oppressive system that stripped them of their Black womanhood (Collins, 2004; Jones, 1985; Roberts, 1997).

Sommerville (2004) also noted that the rape laws of that time did not provide equal protection for Black women. The rape laws were race-specific. For example, a 1867 Kentucky law defined a rapist as one who “unlawfully and carnally knows any white woman, against her will or consent” (Sommerville, 2004, p. 148). While Black men were often lynched, castrated, and incarcerated for being accused or convicted of raping a White woman, there were no legal ramifications for White men or Black men who raped or sexually assaulted Black women (Roberts, 1997; Sommerville, 2004; West, 2006).

Slavery’s degradation of Black women and men as individuals also had a profound impact on the state of the Black family (Collins, 2009; Giddings, 1984). However, the institution of marriage for Black men and Black women and the formation of the Black family must be considered when discussing the impact of violence on the
lives of Black women. The dismantling of the Black family is said to have been the most devastating consequence of slavery (Billingsely, 1992; Collins, 2009; Jones, 1985). Black women were the property of the slave owners. Black men had no property of their own and did not have power or control over Black women’s food, shelter, or clothing, which were controlled by the slave owner, which made Black families vulnerable to separation during slavery (Billingsely, 1992; Collins, 2009; hooks, 1984; Jones, 1985).

**Relationship Violence in College**

Researchers have revealed that individuals 16 to 24 years of age are at risk for the highest incidence of unwanted sexual experiences (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). This age range also mirrors the average college student population, making the incidence of sexual violence dangerously high on many college campuses (Banyard, Moynihan, Walsh, Cohn, & Ward, 2007; Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, & Turner, 2003; 2006; Koss et al., 1987). A landmark study by Koss et al. (1987) revealed that an estimated 84% of these women were acquainted with their attacker. Thus began a 20-year study of the prevalent public health problem of sexual violence and all those it negatively impacts (Campbell & Wasco, 2005). Additional studies have reported an estimate of 20% of college men and women are in physically abusive relationships (Palmer et al., 2010; Ryan, 1998; Shook et al., 2000; Straus, 2008). A national study examining the sexual victimization of college women revealed that approximately 1 in 5 are survivors of rape or attempted rape (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). This number is not only significant for women in general, but has revealed a national problem at U.S. colleges and universities.

In 2000, the U.S. Department of Justice produced a report called the “Sexual Victimization of College Women” from research that had examined the nature and
occurrence of sexual assault among 4,446 college women attending two- and four-year colleges and universities. The findings indicated that 2.8% of college women had experienced either a completed rape or an attempted rape and these incidents occurred in the evenings in residences, in fraternity houses (10%). In addition, 22.8% of the women sampled had been raped more than once and 90% of them identified their perpetrator as a classmate, ex-boyfriend, or acquaintance.

Further, Straus (2008) examined physical violence against partners of 13,601 university students in 32 nations. The findings indicated, “one third of the U.S. students had physically assaulting a dating partner in the previous 12 months” (Straus, 2008, p. 799). In addition, 69.6% students were in relationships where both individuals engaged in violent behavior, followed by relationships in which female-to-male-only violence occurred (20.6%). Although the research on relationship violence has focused on physical abuse, a few studies have explored psychological and verbal abuse. For example, Shook et al. (2000) investigated the verbal and physical aggression among 572 college students and found that 82% engaged in verbally aggressive behavior with a dating partner. Some of the behaviors were attributed to exposure to violence they had experienced as a child and to alcohol use. Moreover, Ryan (1998) examined the relationship between courtship violence and sexual aggression among 245 males and 411 females in college.

Courtship violence as defined in the study was “a variety of non-sexually aggressive acts that occur in dating (e.g., pushing, shoving, hitting)” (p. 377). Sexual aggression was defined as actions involving forced fondling, attempted rape, and rape. The results from Ryan’s study indicated a significant connection between physical
aggression and sexual aggression in men and women, and that 41% of the women in the study reported sexual aggression compared to 18% of the men.

In a similar study, Palmer et al. (2010) examined the sexually coercive behavior of 370 undergraduate men and women. Their study revealed that in the past year alone, 34% of college women and 31% of college men had experienced unwanted sexual contact; 6% of college women and 13% of college men reported having engaged in sexually coercive behavior, and 4% of college women and 9% of college men reported having experienced both unwanted sexual contact and engagement in sexually coercive behavior (Palmer et al., 2010).

The prevalence of other forms of relationship violence among college students is similar to that of sexual violence. In fact, studies involving dating violence have revealed an extremely high prevalence of physical assault on dating partners among college student couples (Straus, 2004). Moreover, among 16 countries, college-dating violence in the U.S. was found to be more common than marriage violence (Straus, 2004). Data from several studies regarding relationship violence among college students have revealed overall that between 13% and 42% of students have experienced and/or perpetrated physical violence in a dating relationship at least one time over the course of their college career (Beyers, Leonard, Mays, & Rosen, 2000; Luthra & Gidycz, 2006; Perry & Fromuth, 2005; Shook et al., 2000).

A similar study by Smith, White, and Holland (2003) examined physical assault and sexual assault in dating relationships from high school through college. Their sample included two classes of university women totaling 1,569, who completed five surveys during their four years in college. The findings indicated that women who were
physically assaulted in high school were at greater risk for re-victimization during their first year of college; each following year. During all four years of college, the women who were physically assaulted were more likely to be sexually assaulted that same year. Therefore, being victimized in high school was a more accurate indicator of being victimized in college than being victimized as a child (Smith et al., 2003).

The literature reveals that relationship violence on college campuses is still a concern for parents, students, and university administrations (Breitenbecher & Scarce, 1999; 2001; Day, 1995) and continues to be a pervasive problem. These studies have placed the spotlight on relationship violence on college campuses and are often cited in federal reports documenting the safety of college campuses, as well as the victimization of college women. These subsequent studies and statistics have also continued to serve as evidence of the need to continue the education and awareness of violence against college women.

The prevalence of relationship violence on campus has also produced studies that have identified factors that contribute to its high prevalence among college students, including alcohol use (Fisher et al., 2000); being friends with the perpetrator (Schwartz & Pitts, 1995); miscommunication about sex between men and women (O’Byrne, Rapley, & Hansen, 2006); having more liberal attitudes about sexual behavior (Himelein, 1995), and having been previously victimized either in childhood or adolescence (Smith et al., 2003). Incidents of relationship violence are not new to college campuses; however, colleges have not found ways to adequately address this pervasive issue that threatens the safety of college women.
**Relationship Violence and Black College Women**

Research on relationship violence among Black college women is minimal compared to that on White college women. Studies that have included Black college students have compared the dating violence rates of Black women with those of White students and other ethnic groups (West & Rose, 2000). While this approach can help distinguish similarities and differences among ethnic groups, the comparative approach fails to provide a holistic approach to understanding and preventing relationship violence among Black college women. What is needed is a non-comparative approach to better understand this population in regard to relationship violence.

While research on Black college women has been limited, current studies have focused on their psychological abuse (Clark, Beckett, Wells, & Dungee-Anderson, 1994; Few & Bell-Scott, 2002; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Rouse, Breen & Howell, 1988), disclosure patterns (Washington, 2001; Wyatt, 1992), and coping strategies (Barrett, 1999; Bryant-Davis, 2010; Few & Bell-Scott, 2002; Thompson, 2003). What is missing from the literature is an understanding of how Black college women have been affected by relationship violence and made meaning of such experiences.

Two studies focused whether gender difference influenced dating violence and aggression within the Black community. Both Plas and Gessner (1983) as well as Rouse (1988) have maintained that Black men are more likely than Black women to report their relationship violence encounter. More recent studies have revealed that dating violence is a significant problem in the Black community (Barrick, Krebs, & Lindquist, 2013; Porter & Williams, 2011; Stephens & Thomas, 2012).
Clark and colleagues (1994) examined the relationship between family interactions, personality variables, and dating violence among Black undergraduates. Their study found that over 90% of the participants reported having experienced physical or psychological aggression. The study also found that Black women were more likely than Black men to use physical aggression and the Black men in the study reported experiencing more dating violence than the Black women. Clark et al.’s (1994) exploratory study assessed gender differences but had a small number of Black men (76 men, 235 women). Their study provided useful information about prevalence and gender differences, but still unknown is which factors protect against dating violence and which factors place Black college students at risk for dating violence.

Moreover, a study of African Americans and dating violence (West & Rose, 2000) examined gender differences in dating violence and antagonistic beliefs among low-income, African American youth between the ages of 16 and 24. Some notable differences were found between the results of their study and one conducted by Clark et al. (1994). West and Rose’s (2000) research on dating violence included a sample of 171 African Americans between the ages of 16 and 24. They found that one half of their sample had experienced physical aggression either as a victim or a perpetrator. Additionally, more women than men reported sustaining aggression. Their study also found that subjects’ experienced sexual aggression less often than physical abuse, and psychological abuse was found to be the most common form of dating violence experienced. West and Rose (2000) provided insight about prevalence, gender differences, and types of abuse.
Rouse, Breen, and Howell (1988) found that over 80% of the Black college students in their study experienced psychological aggression. Similarly, Clark, Beckett, Wells, and Dungee-Anderson (1994) found that nearly 94% of the women and 93% of the men engaged in some form of psychological aggressive behavior and that psychological aggression was so prevalent that it almost appears to be “normal” behavior and occur more frequently than physical aggression (Clark et al., 1994).

In a study by Lewis and Fremouw (2001), 30% of college student’s dating relationship involved in physically aggression. It is important to note that the majority of the research in this area was conducted with White college students. However, Few and Bell-Scott’s (2002) study included Black college students with similar rates of physical aggression. Clark et al.’s (1994) study found that that nearly one third of Black college students were involved in physical aggression in their dating relationships.

Few and Bell-Scott (2002) examined the decision making process of six heterosexual Black college to leave emotionally abusive relationships. The study described emotional abuse or psychological abuse as “behaviors including verbal abuse (e.g., name calling, insulting), emotional abuse (e.g. humiliations, degradation), and intimidation/threats (e.g. attempts to frighten, threats of harm to self or others)” (p. 60). The results of the study found that Black women left emotional abusive relationship due to escalating levels of violence, separating from partner, reconnecting with positive social networks, and spirituality/self-empowerment activities.

Black Identity Development

How students experience college matters, and higher education researchers and student affairs practitioners have used student and identity development theories as a
guide to address the needs of college students (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). However, it is important to note that the early foundations of student development theory were derived from the experiences of White males, which reinforced dominant cultural values (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; McEwen, 2003; Torres et al., 2009) and did not capture the experiences of Black college students.

While these theories set the foundation for how practitioners have responded to the needs of college students, the experiences of Black undergraduate students, specifically Black women, were not considered when student development theories were originally created. Therefore, the identity development of Black students was forced to fit the constraints of developmental models based on the “perceptions and agendas of members of the dominant society” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 20).

One of the most frequently cited theories used to discuss Black students’ identity development is Cross’s Black Identity Model (Cross, Jr., 1971), later revised as the Psychological Theory of Nigrescence (1991), nigrescence being the “process of becoming black or assuming that racial identity” (Cross, Jr., 1991, p. 171). Seeing a noticeable gap in understanding how Black students experienced college, Cross, Jr. used an identity model that illustrated the process of becoming Black, whereby Black students transitioned from a lack of acknowledgment of their race to a place of recognition, self-actualization, and appreciation for their Blackness. These stages include: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, and internalization/commitment (Cross, Jr., 1991).

In the pre-encounter stage, the individual adopts a color-blind approach to race. They do not associate themselves with Blackness or Black culture and other cultural cues that represent race; instead, they attempt to assimilate into the dominant culture and see
themselves as part of the human race rather than Black culture or the Black race. The encounter stage encompasses two steps, encountering and personalizing. In the encountering step, an incident occurs that shapes how an individual views their Blackness. In the personalizing step, an individual takes action as a result of the personal impact an incident has on their worldview. Cross, Jr. (1991) argued that the encounter “need not be negative” (p. 197) for the incident to have enough of a significant impact to serve as the catalyst to change their thinking, thereby leading to nigrescence.

Stage three is experienced in two parts. The first is called immersion, whereby an individual immerses him or herself in Black culture by embracing food, paraphernalia, and customs. This stage is often viewed as romanticizing Black identity. Cross, Jr. (1991) stated that “immersion is a strong, powerful dominating sensation that is constantly energized by rage [at White people and culture], guilt [at having once been tricked into thinking Black ideas], and developing a sense of pride [in one’s Black self, Black people, and Black culture]” (p. 203). The second part is called emersion, when individuals begin to associate with other Black people in a much more meaningful way. Now that the individual has immersed her/himself in Black culture and is actively associating with Black people and has developed a support system, they move into stage four of the model which is called internalization/commitment. In this stage, individuals shift mentally and make a commitment to uplifting community and liberating Black people.

While Cross’s model served as a platform to examining the experiences of Black undergraduate students, it failed to include an intersectional approach of how race and other aspects of Black student identity can inform their view of self and how they might experience college. To build upon Cross’ Negro-to-Black Conversion Model (1971) and
the revised model of Psychological Nigrescence (1991), as an introduction to Black identity development, Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, and Chavous (1998) developed the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI). The difference between the MMRI and Cross’s model is that Sellers et al. (1998) intentionally used both terms, Black and African American, to describe the diverse viewpoints, experiences, and consciousness in Black identity. In addition, in their model, an individual racial identity is assessed at any given point instead of through developmental stages. The goal of the MMRI is two-fold in that it attempts to capture the significance of race and document the meaning-making process. The belief is that individuals have a number of constructed identities in a hierarchal order based on their perspective. The individual assesses his or her own identity and determines what it means to be Black without value or judgment (Sellers et al., 1998).

According to Sellers et al. (1998), the four dimensions of racial identity are (a) racial salience, (b) racial centrality, (c), racial regard, and (d) racial ideology. “Racial salience refers to the extent to which one’s race is a relevant part of one’s self-concept at a particular moment or in a particular situation” (Sellers et al., 1998, p. 24). For example, being the only Black student in a class with a majority of White students, may cause an individual to see race as more salient, whereas another Black student may not experience racial salience in the same way for that particular situation. Racial salience depends on the social context in which race becomes the core identity of how an individual experiences a particular situation.

Race centrality involves how an individual defines him/her self racially across multiple situations based on an implied hierarchical order of identities (Sellers et al.,
1998). For example, gender may be a more central identity than race for some Black women, whereas other Black women may view race as the most significant element of their identity. Racial regard and racial ideology are more concerned with how individuals make meaning of their Black identity and less about how they identify (Sellers et al., 1998). The third dimension, racial regard, determines whether an individual feels positively or negatively towards the Black community, as well as how they feel about being a member of it. In this dimension the individual is concerned about the private and public perceptions of Blackness (Sellers et al., 1998).

The fourth dimension of racial identity is racial ideology, which “is composed of the individual’s beliefs, opinions, and attitudes with respect to the ways she or he feels that the members of the race should act” (Sellers et al., 1998, p. 27). In this dimension, Sellers et al. (1998) identified four dominant racial ideologies that have been used by African Americans to categorize the Black experience: (a) nationalist, (b) oppressed minority, (c) assimilationist, and (d) humanist. The nationalist ideology is very similar to “Cross’s immersion stage in that it focuses on distinguishing between Black experiences and Black culture, and advocates for empowerment and self-determination within the Black community” (Baldwin, Fisler, & Patton, 2009, p. 195). Black college students associated with this ideology will seek out activities with Black clubs and organizations and make friendships with other Black students (Baldwin et al., 1998). Students subscribing to the oppressed minority ideology focus on forming a connection between other oppressed groups (e.g., gay men, lesbians, etc.), which are similar to the Black experience. Those associated with the assimilationist ideology are not only concerned with the Black experience, but also seeking similarities between Blacks and the dominant
White majority. Students of this ideology are not only involved in Black organizations but also in mainstream campus organizations. Last is the humanist ideology, in which students are not necessarily concerned with race, but are more concerned with issues impacting all students.

Understanding how Black students develop and shape their Black identity is critically important to understanding how they navigate the college environment. Both Cross, Jr. (1991) and Sellers et al. (1998) have offered another way to understand the complexity of Blackness for Black college students. Within the context of relationship violence, there is an opportunity to rethink how Black college women are experiencing relationship violence and how they are making meaning of their experience in the college environment by understanding how they define and think about their Black identity.

**Theoretical Framework**

The aim of this research study was to (a) understand experiences of relationship violence among a small sample of Black college women and (b) how they addressed these experiences throughout their college careers. I have used Black Feminist Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory as conceptual guides to view key issues in order to understand relationship violence in the lives of the Black college women in my study.

**Black Feminist Theory**

Black Feminist Theory served as the main theoretical framework for this study because it provides a fundamental explanation of Black women’s lived experiences. This theory emphasizes empowerment within the context of Black women’s lives. It holds that empowering women requires a contextualized understanding of three kinds of power: (a)
personal power, (b) interpersonal power, and (c) political power (Collins, 2009; Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003; hooks, 1984). As a theoretical framework, Black Feminist Theory supports the use of qualitative methods of inquiry. Integrating this theory into this study meant that Black women could be directly involved in the research process through sharing their stories with me as the researcher about their lived experiences of relationship violence. That is, the women in this study spoke for themselves. They were invited to tell their stories in a manner that is authentic to who they are, because as Phillips and McCaskill (1995) noted, Black feminist theory allows Black women to speak from and about their own lived experience (p. 1010).

The crux of this study was an attempt to reveal how four Black women persisted in college despite the trauma they endured from relationship violence. The tenets of Black feminism assert that Black women have a shared historical reality, and as a result of the effects of slavery and other systems of oppression, also have a shared worldview of historical resistance (Collins, 2009). This documented historical resistance was evident during slavery, as Black women resisted rape and sexual exploitation (Tillman, Bryant-Davis, Smith, & Marks, 2010; West 2006), sexual exploitation of their children (Collins, 2004; Jones, 1985; Roberts, 1997; Tillman et al., 2010), and the exploitation of their labor (Collins, 2004; Jones, 1985; Roberts, 1997; Tillman et al., 2010)—all of which Black women contend with today. Historically, Black women had fought back either by running away from their slave owner or developing a culture of silence by refusing to disclose their rape (West & Johnson, 2013; Sommerville, 2004; Tillman et al., 2010). The present study had the potential to reveal how Black college women are resisting, and remaining silent about, relationship violence—including rape.
While some Black women may not be able to identify with the historical implications of slavery, explored collectively, the patterns of systematic oppression that continue to inform their lived experiences are revealed (Collins, 2004; Roberts, 1997; Tillman et al., 2010). In the context of the current study, a college campus, the impact of violence on the lives of Black college women continues to be an unspoken reality, especially as the face of relationship violence that is represented on college campuses is that of White women. Therefore, Black women continue to be left out of the conversation on relationship violence and continue to struggle for acknowledgement that they too are experiencing various forms of it while in college, which feeds the assumption that they are not affected by relationship violence and further silences them regarding their violence experiences.

The historical implications of sexual violence during slavery along with its psychological trauma have left a permanent stain on the lives of Black women (Collins, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991; Krebs et al., 2011). While colleges and universities may not include the voices of Black women in discussions of relationship violence, many of these women are also choosing to be silent about relationship violence. It is not farfetched to assert that Black women have been socialized in a culture of silence, by society as a whole and in colleges and universities in particular. Black women are also silent about the violence in their communities and families (Bryant-Davis, 2010; Hampton, Oliver, & Magarian, 2003; Mitchell, 1999; Taylor, 2002). While remaining silent may be a coping strategy, it can lead to assumptions among advocates for stopping relationship violence, including college administrators and other practitioners, that Black women are relatively unscathed by sexual trauma and/or relationship violence. However, for colleges and
universities to respond to the needs of Black women who are suffering from relationship violence on their campuses, these women need spaces and opportunities in which to share their stories. This research study presents the stories of four Black college women, told in their own voices, about their experiences of relationship violence.

**Social Learning Theory**

*What people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave.*

Bandura, 1977, p. 25

To fully understand the scope of how the experiences of relationship violence have informed the lives of Black college women, it is important to explore the social locations and meanings behind their experiences. To do so, I used Bandura’s (1977) Social Learning Theory to help illustrate how the college environment as well as the participants’ backgrounds has informed their understanding of relationship violence. This theory suggests that people learn through observing others’ behaviors, attitudes, and the outcomes of those behaviors. Figure 1 illustrates learning as a continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences. Social Learning Theory is one of the most popular social psychological theories that have been used to understand relationship violence (Jasinski, 2001), and was appropriate for this study.

According to Bandura (1977), “most human behavior is learned through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action” (p. 22). For example, if young child is exposed to violence in the home, it becomes normalized and they begin to define intimacy in those terms. In essence we learn from observing others. In the literature on relationship violence (Ehrensaft, Cohen, Brown, Smailes, Chen & Johnson, 2003), Social Learning Theory focuses on how individuals
learn to behave through both their “experience of” and “exposure to” violence. The word ‘experience’ refers to those who have engaged in a violent relationship either as the perpetrator or the victim; exposure also refers to those who have witnessed abuse or have themselves been abused.

**Figure 1.** Interactions with the environment according to Social Learning Theory.

Wekerle and Wolfe (1999) suggested that witnessing or directly experiencing violence as a child puts individuals at risk for future trauma. This risk is due to the messages received about the use of violence to express oneself, to solve problems, and/or to control and dominate another (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). As we begin to explore relationship violence in the lives of Black college women we also need to explore the early messages (from family, church, community, and school) these Black women received about violence, and how these messages have been reinforced throughout their college experiences.
Ecological Systems Theory

The work of developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner has been one of the most influential advances in understanding human development in the past several decades (Shaffer, 2000). Bronfenbrenner (1979; 2005) built on the work of Freud, Erikson, Piaget, Vygotsky, and others to develop his Ecological Systems Theory. He asserted that individual development indeed occurs in stages, yet noted that it is greatly influenced by the environment in which each individual is embedded. He also explained that the environment (or ecological) influences individuals on multiple levels (or by systems), which become the context by which they mediate social processes (see Figure 2). I used Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory to help understand the context of relationship violence in the college environment. One of the goals of this study was to examine how Black women navigate campus resources related to their experiences of relationship violence. Bronfenbrenner (1979; 2005) theorized that five environmental factors influence an individual’s growth and development: (a) the microsystem, (b) the mesosystem, (c) the exosystem, (d) the macrosystem, and (e) the chronosystem.

Within the ecology model, the microsystem consist of relationships and interaction an individual has with friends, family, and colleagues; while the mesosystem involves the interaction between an individuals and the environment in which they occupy. Within the exosystem, an individual interaction is influenced or impacted by external agents, such as policymakers, employers, or school board, etc. The macrosystem consists of the society beliefs, cultural values and attitudes that shape one’s behavior. The chronosystem– which consists of all of the experiences that a person has had during his
or her lifetime, and can include environmental events, major life transitions, and historical events that reflect ethnic and cultural norms (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Model](image)

While Black women are no longer enslaved or used for the sexual conquests of White slave owners, the current culture of the college environment still operates in ways that silence these women’s experiences of relationship violence. Thus, how the college environment fails to respond to Black women’s claims about incidents of relationship violence is an example of their continued sexual oppression. The campus culture plays a large role in setting both written and unwritten expectations about what is valued. In the context of how colleges and universities discuss relationship violence, administrative policies that govern it are set, and how it is handled are environmental factors regarding how Black women experience relationship violence on campus. From a systems theory
perspective, it can be argued that at the heart of the Ecological Systems Theory is the process of continuous negotiation between different systems that influence each other (e.g., a woman and a man in an intimate relationship).

As noted before, relationship violence does not occur in a vacuum; a number of societal influences contribute to how individuals respond to it. For example, examining the role of the college environment is essential for understanding how Black women respond to relationship violence and how the campus community responds to their claims. In addition, these women’s decision to disclose violent encounters can be influenced by family and community. Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) ecological theory can help reveal the environmental influences that shape Black women’s college relationship experiences.

Black Feminist Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory also helped me answer the study’s research questions: (a) How did four Black women experience relationship violence in college? (b) How did these Black college women make meaning of their experiences of relationship violence? and (c) How did the Black college women navigate campus resources related to their experiences of relationship violence?

I expected Black Feminist Theory to help answer all three research questions. However, I specifically used Social Learning Theory to address research question two (How did the Black women navigate campus resources related to their experiences of relationship violence in college?), which would allow the Black college women in the study to articulate the meanings they have ascribed to their experience of relationship violence. The use of Ecological Systems Theory to discuss the college environment and
how the Black college women did or did not use its resources to address or deal with their experiences of violence would be a critical component of the study’s analysis.

While using Bronfenbrenner’s (1979; 2005) Ecological Systems Theory as a basis for understanding the relationship violence in the lives of the four Black college women in the study, I combined elements from his theory with Bandura’s Social Learning Theory and Black Feminist Theory to address how the four Black women defined themselves in terms of their experiences of relationship violence, and how they interacted with the college environment related to these experiences. Figure 3 illustrates how the college environment can influence how Black college women make meaning of their experiences of relationship violence based on their race, gender, and the campus culture. For example, what Black women are generally told about relationship violence, what policies govern those experiences, and what campus resources are available to them?

Figure 3. Theoretical frameworks for the study, combining Black Feminist Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory
Witnessing a Black Woman Suffering Violence

Reflecting on my early exposure to violence, I immediately thought about my neighbor Ms. J. She was a proud Black woman. When she walked through our neighborhood, she always held her head high, never looking down at her feet. However, part of Ms. J’s identity was that she was an abused Black woman. I can vividly remember her screams as she cried out for help, the bruises on her face, and her swollen lips from being beaten. Everyone in my neighborhood knew she was being abused, if not by her screams, then by the scars she wore so proudly. Not once did I see or hear the police visit Ms. J’s home to inquire about those screams or the scars on her face. Not once did I see another member of my community rush to Ms. J’s rescue. I would often hear my grandparents say, “Stay out of people’s business,” which meant that we were not to see, hear, or speak about anything having to do with Ms. J’s abuse.

The silence of my family and community in denying Ms. J’s abuse, her efforts to maintain her dignity and womanhood, and the messages I received as a child illustrate the ecological, social learning, and Black feminist theories. While I do not know how Ms. J made meaning of her abuse or why the community and those around me ignored her cry for help, I do know that those experiences made a lasting impression on me. I am now a 38-year-old Black feminist scholar who by all accounts never sustained the physical pain endured by Ms. J. However, I am still deeply affected by having witnessed the effects of her experiences of physical violence and trauma.

Black women are taught to have a strong self-identity. Being a strong Black woman is considered a badge of honor within the Black community. The strong Black woman’s narrative has been widely researched. She is described as strong, independent,
nurturing, and able to successfully handle impossible life circumstances (Robinson, 1983; Romero, 2000; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004). Moreover, being defined as a strong Black woman morphed into a culturally acceptable coping mechanism for which Black women have used to deal with the internal and external pressures of racism and sexism (Thompson-Sanders, Bazile & Akbar, 2004). Beaufoeuf-Lafontant (2005) stated that the strong Black woman should “muster through” all adversity “without scarring,” should “always try to help other people,” and should present herself as a capable “twenty-four-hour woman” regardless of the demands and stresses she faces (p.71).

Rather than try to meet her own needs, the Black woman focuses on identifying and meeting the needs of others. To my knowledge, Ms. J never verbalized her abuse to anyone, but I believe her cries were a call for help, though the neighbors never intervened on her behalf. Rather, what she most often focused on as she stopped and chatted with her neighbors was the overwhelming pride she had in her sons and their achievements. She seemed content while pretending to live a respectable and normal life. Nor from my recollection did her neighbors ever acknowledge her abuse. Therefore, apparently Ms. J’s only means of resistance and survival was her silence about her own plight.

**Chapter Summary**

This literature review began with an examination of the multiple definitions of relationship violence. This study uses the definition of relationship violence established by the U.S. Department of Justice (2014), that is, a pattern of violence in any intimate relationship where one person inflicts physical or emotional pain on a partner in order to gain or maintain power and control over their partner. This definition applies to dating violence, domestic violence, or intimate partner violence. To further explore relationship
violence, the literature discussed the social construction of gender, and its connection to reinforcing gender roles and contributing to relationship violence among women. Patriarchy was also introduced as it is directly connected to the social construction of gender. This discussion focused on male dominance and male privilege as factors in the oppression of women. A discussion of the socialization of Black men and women, and the sexual exploitation of Black women during slavery followed. Statistical details on the extent of relationship violence in college and among Black college women provided a context for the overall purpose of the study. The literature revealed that relationship violence is very prevalent on college campuses and among Black college women, but few studies have provided a comprehensive examination of its occurrence among Black women.

To create the context for the study, the literature review also discussed the three theoretical frameworks the study employed to examine relationship violence among four Black college women. Black Feminist Theory explored the Black women’s self-definition. Social Learning Theory suggested what Black college women have learned about and made meaning of the relationship violence in their lives. Ecological Systems Theory addressed the factors in the college environment that have helped or hindered the Black college women’s experiences with relationship violence. Used collectively, these three theories helped address how the Black women in this study define themselves and regard their experience of relationship violence, and how they interact within the college environment based on their experience.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative research techniques, specifically narrative inquiry, to explore the stories of four Black college women and their encounters with relationship violence. This inquiry addressed four research questions: (a) How did the four Black women in this study experience relationship violence in college? (b) How did these Black women make meaning of their experiences of relationship violence in college? and (c) How did these Black college women navigate campus resources related to their experiences of relationship violence? This chapter provides my positionality as the researcher and a detailed description of the study’s research design according to the following areas: (a) researcher positionality (b) epistemology, (c) methodology, (d) methods, (e) data collection, (f) data analysis, and (g) criteria for trustworthiness.

Researcher’s Positionality

Positionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects.

Madison, 2005, p. 7

My positionality as a researcher was at the forefront of my mind as I started to address this research topic. While exploring such a sensitive area of inquiry as the relationship violence experienced by Black college women, I was keenly aware of the potential emotional and mental risk to myself associated with this project. How to best create an authentic space where my research participants could share their stories and I could be honest in my interaction with them were at the forefront of my mind as I approached my research. As I think about my positionality, I know that my background knowledge, my role as an advocate to end relationship violence, and how I planned to use the data could be areas that my research participants would be concerned about. I am
often asked where I derived my passion for relationship violence research, and my response has been: “It has always been a part of me.” Of all my childhood memories, one that remains vivid in my mind is the battering and violence endured by my Black neighbor [Ms. J]. To this day, I do not know what became of Ms. J, but what I do know is that my curiosity about relationship violence—beginning with hers—has influenced my determination to end it. My curiosity and passion for this issue grew out of my vivid childhood memory of her suffering.

My interest in relationship violence work also formed through various kinds of activism during my college years. I became involved with programs to end violence against women and raise awareness about sexual assault. If there was a “Take Back the Night” rally, I was there! I was passionate about the cause of preventing the sexual assault of women because I knew the physical and emotional scars they endured. I also knew that no woman should have to endure the kind of pain Ms. J had suffered on a daily basis. I felt a personal obligation to speak up for those who could not speak for themselves. I wanted to show solidarity, so I joined in the fight. At the time, I did not know that this form of activism would lead to my area of academic research.

Prior to my doctoral journey, I served as the Assistant Dean of Students for Women’s Programs at my university. My job entailed providing students with resources and programming on domestic violence awareness. There were a few staple programs that the campus community expected to see every year (Take Back the Night, the Vagina Monologues, and The Clothesline Project). However, there were limitations to my job. The focus on domestic violence limited the scope of other kinds of violence that students were experiencing. I felt that ‘relationship violence’ encompassed a broader definition of
the types of violence they were encountering (rape, sexual assault, stalking, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, etc.) and would allow my office to explore how to meet the diverse needs of students dealing with varied forms of relationship violence.

During my time as Assistant Dean, I saw firsthand the psychological trauma Black college women were dealing with on campus as a result of relationship violence. What I found in my quest to better serve these students were minimal resources, and non-existent programs and services to address the cultural differences in relationship violence. I also thought that the experiences of relationship violence that Black college women were dealing with were not a priority for the college administration. My job became much more difficult, but my compassion for these students’ suffering and the need to create a more supportive college environment for them are the reasons for my unwavering commitment to this area of research.

However, my choice to immerse myself in relationship violence research also had the potential to have an emotional impact on me. Prior to, and throughout this research study, I spent considerable time thinking about relationship violence, and reading and talking about it. Through my interviews for my study, I came face to face with survivors of relationship violence and their trauma. I heard the personal accounts of Black college women’s relationship violence experiences. Anticipating this reality, I kept a research journal throughout the study to document my thoughts and emotions during this experience. To remain balanced, I also talked with a therapist on a weekly basis through the five months of data collection to help process my thoughts and feelings.

In contrast to my approach, traditional, mainly quantitative research, feelings and emotions have no place (Creswell, 2013). Researchers are generally expected to create
distance between themselves and their research participant(s) to avoid becoming emotionally invested in their lives. However, I was fully aware that sensitive research, as in my study, required a different level of thinking and approach, especially knowing that the participants were dealing with issues of power, privilege, and bias (from a variety of sources) as they attempted to make sense of their personal experiences of relationship violence. My overall goal for this study was to develop an authentic relationship with my research participants, which would allow them to see me not only as a researcher, but also as an advocate interested in giving voice to a population that has been ignored. Hence I designed and conducted a qualitative research study.

**Epistemology**

*The failure of academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson.*

*In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower.*

Lorde, 1984, p. 112

Audre Lorde, one of the great Black lesbian feminist thinkers and writers, asserted throughout her scholarship that for the feminist movement to succeed there must be recognition of difference, and in turn, we must use difference as a tool to fight patriarchy. To gain a better understanding of feminism and the choices made throughout the feminist movement that both helped and hindered women’s progress, we must first understand the philosophical underpinning that has guided feminist scholarship. The “truth” about feminism can be found in an understanding of what we know about the experiences of women, i.e., through feminist epistemology.

Epistemology is the study of knowledge, and how epistemic foundations have both guided and shaped how we think and what we think (Collins, 2009; Harding, 1987).
In addition, epistemology is critically important to the study of feminist theory because it has allowed feminist thinkers to advocate for the creation of knowledge that speaks to the experiences of women. According to Anderson (1995), feminist epistemology is primarily concerned with explaining why and how the entry of female researchers into the sciences (particularly the biological and social sciences) has generated new questions, theories, and methods. Feminist scholars have pointed to how early epistemological scholarship falsely and incompletely represented the experiences of women, which in turn provided flawed and inaccurate depictions of women’s lived experiences. Narayan (1989) pointed to the critical need for feminist epistemology, arguing that integrating women’s contributions into the domain of science and knowledge will constitute a mere adding of details; it will not merely widen the canvas but result in a shift of perspective enabling us to see a very different picture. The inclusion of women’s perspectives will not merely amount to women participating in greater numbers in the existing practice of science and knowledge, but it will change the very nature of these activities and their self-understanding. (p. 256)

The inclusion of women’s lived experiences in the domain of science and knowledge is critical to improving the status of women in society. If the body of knowledge that exists continues to show women as intellectually, politically and economically inferior to men, then the positionality of women will be relegated to domestic or private sphere of influence (Collins, 1986; Narayan, 1989). However, as Narayan (1989) indicated, being included in the creation of knowledge for and by women allows for a different view of who they are and what they care and
think about. And I would add, what they can do in all areas of life.

*The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* identified six ways in which women have been silenced in epistemological scholarship. Accordingly, dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge attribution, acquisition, and justification systematically disadvantage women by (a) excluding women from inquiry; (b) denying epistemic authority or barring women from creating knowledge about women; (c) belittling women’s feminine cognitive style; (d) producing theories of women that represent them as inferior, deviant, or significant only in ways that serve male interests; (e) producing theories of social phenomena that render women’s activities and interests, or gendered power relations, invisible, and women’s experiences written from the perspective of men, and (f) producing knowledge (science and technology) that is not useful for people in subordinate positions, or that reinforces gender and other social hierarchies (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-epistemology/).

The absence of women in the acquisition and creation of knowledge about women is why feminist epistemology is critically important. Feminists thinkers (Assister, 2000; Brooks, 2006; Collins, 2009; Davis, 2008; Narayan, 1989; Tong, 2009) have adamantly argued for a stronger emphasis on critically exploring the lives of oppressed and marginalized women. Assister (2000) called for an “emancipatory value” (p. 337) approach to feminist epistemology. She believes that women’s lives and women’s knowledge must be valued in order to see a shift in patriarchal epistemological dominance. Brooks (2006) called for feminist epistemology to not only challenge the inclusion of women’s experiences, but believes that feminist epistemology can “apply the vision and knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change” (p. 55).
Additionally, other feminist scholars have challenged feminism and feminist epistemology on their exclusion of non-White, poor women stating that the majority of the discourse surrounding the experiences of women within feminism has been that of White middle class women (Brooks, 2006; Collins, 2009; Davis, 2008; hooks, 1984; Narayan, 1989). While Narayan (1989) and Davis (2008) were not dismissing the experiences of these White women, they were calling for a more holistic view of women’s experiences. Davis (2008) asserted that feminism should take an intersectional approach to creating knowledge about women.

Citing the work of Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), Davis (2008) stated “intersectionality refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of those interactions in terms of power (p. 68). In addition, she recognized how the systemic power dynamic of privileged White women and feminism has continued to perpetrate the exclusion of differences among women. Similar to the dominance of patriarchy, feminism and feminist epistemology can and have contributed to the oppression of other women (Davis, 2008). Davis (2008) believes that intersectionality is important because it allows for understanding the effect of how race, class, and gender can simultaneously impact the lives of women.

Similarly, Narayan (2004), an Indian-born feminist, also challenged feminist epistemology by calling for a more inclusive view of the lives of women. In her discussion of the impact of Western feminists on non-Western feminists, she suggested that although Western feminism has made important strides in changing the intellectual,
political, and social status of women in the West, ideas about womanhood and women’s experiences should not be attributed to the experiences of non-Western women (Narayan, 2004). Both Davis (2008) and Narayan recognized the “epistemic advantage” (Narayan, 2004, p. 221) of White feminists. The power of reading scholarship, watching television, or engaging in the social, political, and economic realms of society that speak to their existence and/or personal experiences has a profound impact on the lives of oppressed women. Melissa Harris-Perry, presidential endowed professor in politics and international affairs at Wake Forest University and MSNBC host of the Melissa Harris Perry Show, in her 2014 speech to Iowa State University, argued that feminism is about asking critical questions. Which/whose truths are missing is the question that both Davis (2008) and Narayan (2004) attempted to ask in their assessment of the continued formation of feminist epistemology.

**Black Feminist Epistemology**

[A] dimension of the oppressor/oppressed, exploiter/exploited relationship is that those who dominate are seen as subjects and those who are dominated objects. As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one’s reality is defined by others, one’s identity created by others, one’s history named in ways that define one’s relationship to those who are subject.

Hooks, 1989, p.42

*I have come to believe, over and over again, that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.*

Lorde, 1984, p.40

[B]ell hooks (1989) underscored the importance of epistemic privilege and what truths are told and by whom. Lorde (1984) reminded us that although the lived experiences of subjugated groups might be difficult to hear, they must be scrupulously told to avoid further victimizing or objectifying such individuals. In order to understand
relationship violence among the Black college women in this study, I have grounded my research in the Black feminist epistemology (BFE) of Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins (2009). However, much of Collins’ (2009) scholarship is rooted in late nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century U.S. Black feminist writings.

Many of the Black women involved in the early creation of BFE in the twenty-first century were daughters of former slaves (Giddings, 1984). Black women such as Maria Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells, and Sojourner Truth laid the groundwork for the development of contemporary Black feminist thought in the twenty-first century. These Black women used their speeches, writings, and activism to openly express their views about living in a racially discriminating and oppressive American society “dependent upon the degradation of everything human” (Giddings, 1984, p. 89). Take for example the work of Maria Stewart (1803-1979), who is said to have been the first Black woman to speak out publicly against the oppression of Black women to an audience of men and women, Black and White. In 1832, Stewart, with fewer than six weeks’ formal education, became the first American-born woman to speak in public, stressing the importance of higher education for Black women in the struggle for race advancement. She implored,

Oh, daughters of Africa, awake! Arise! Show forth the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties…. Let us promote ourselves and improve our own talents. (Perkins, 1980, p. 19)

What makes this statement so profound is that Stewart believed that Black women could use their intellectual agency to eradicate their oppression as Black women. Stewart
understood that Black women had a tremendous amount of social and political capital that could be used to improve their lives (Perkins, 1980).

In 1851, Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) delivered her famous extemporaneous speech *Ain’t I a Woman?* at the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, espousing the following sentiment:

…. Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman? (p. 75)

Truth, like other feminist thinkers (Brooks, 2006; Collins, 2009; Davis, 2008; Narayan, 1989), understood that Black women and other oppressed groups were viewed as inferior. Truth wanted to be seen for who she was (Black and a woman). She worked outside the home (like so many poor and Black women) but still was not given the respect she and other Black women deserved under the oppressive system of slavery. What Truth recounted about her experiences as a Black woman in 1851 is still a growing contention among contemporary Black feminist thinkers today (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989). During an era when even White women’s public presence was limited, Black women like Truth were publically engage in advocating for women’s rights and challenging Black women’s positionality through public speaking (Perkins, 1980).

Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964), another Black feminist scholar and educator, exposed how systemic racism and dominance conspired “to erase dissent, silence the
marginalized and render alternative views unthinkable” (May, 2009, p. 17). Cooper’s *A Voice from the South*, a collection of essays originally published in 1892, is recognized as the first full-length Black feminist book in the United States, in which she proclaimed that “the colored woman of today occupies a unique position in this country … she is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both” (Cooper, 1892/1988, p. 134). Cooper’s sentiment was later echoed by the Combahee River Collective (1983), a radical Black feminist group that examined how race, class, and sexual oppression informed Black women’s lived experiences.

However, the development of an articulated U.S. Black feminist epistemology became more visible in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. The publication of *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings of Women of Color* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981) and *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (Smith, 1983), a collections of essays and poetry by women of color in the United States, provided a space for these women to speak their own feminist truths about their own feminist lives. These writings chronicled the ongoing struggle for community among women of color as well as theorized the lived experiences of women of color and continued the work of other Black (e.g., B. Smith) and Chicana/lesbian (e.g., Moraga and Anzaldúa) feminist scholars.

The work of Patricia Hill Collins took Black feminist epistemology to another level in traditional social science research. Collins’ work has been used to theorize Black women’s lived experiences and to challenge Western epistemic viewpoints in social science research. Collins (2009) described epistemology as “the standards used to assess knowledge or why we believe what we believe to be true” as well as “the ways in which
power relations shape who is believed and why” (p. 270). Yet, in higher education, Black women’s lived experiences are not in the forefront of discussions about relationship violence involving women. The faces and experiences of those being discussed are more often those of White students. Does this absence of Black women’s voices mean that they are not affected by relationship violence, or have other factors contributed to this blatant disregard for Black women’s lives by higher education? However, the creation of knowledge or why we believe what we believe is essential for understanding the lived experience of Black college women. Yet knowledge creation is often centered on White-male epistemic privilege, which views the experiences of Black women as invalid. Those in power are “elite white men who have the authority to manipulate Western structures of knowledge validation” (Collins, 2009, p. 271). This narrow view of Black women, which is rooted in the slave narrative and resulting social construction, suggests that these women cannot produce knowledge, are incapable of articulating the meanings behind their lived experience, and are intellectually inferior.

My goal throughout this research study, therefore, was to highlight the experiences of Black women who have been overlooked, underserved, and ignored in regard to relationship violence in the college setting. This study was not intended to be a comparison between Black and White college women, but rather a focused exploration of how Black college women experience relationship violence. As previously indicated, the scholarship concerning Black college women is limited and often lost in discussions about the experiences of college women in general. Using BFE employs both race and gender to understand how Black college women experience relationship violence. Traditionally, colleges and universities have used “whiteness” to address issues of
relationship, without taking into account the cultural differences affecting Black college women. However, BFE challenges this point of view by speaking directly to how race and gender impact Black women’s lived experiences.

Four tenets are at the core of BFE: (a) lived experience as a criterion of meaning, (b) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, (c) the ethics of caring, and (d) the ethics of personal accountability (Collins, 2009). Despite being devalued by mainstream epistemic traditions, these tenets focus on Black women’s collective experiences, construction of knowledge by Black women, and the legitimacy of Black women’s experiences.

Lived experience as a criterion of meaning

The first tenet of BFE, “lived experience as a criterion of meaning”, differentiates knowledge from wisdom. Collins (2009) explained that having knowledge means “book learning” (p. 275) and having wisdom means valuing and using the personal lived experiences of those who came before in order to understand what it means to be a Black woman. Citing the work of Geneva Smitherman (1977), Collins (2009) stated that because written documents about Black women’s lived experiences are limited and often misinterpreted, we cannot rely only on formal education to shape our interpretation of Black womanhood. Collins (2009) also asserted that Black women must have both knowledge and wisdom because “knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate” (p. 276).

Collins (2009) cited Sojourner Truth’s statement “Look at my arm, I’ve ploughed and planted.... Ain’t I a woman?” She depicted Truth and other Black women as “connected-knower[s]” (p. 277) because of their lived experiences and unique voices that
address societal issues. This is very important for Black women because, not only have they developed “a distinctive Black woman’s standpoint, they have done so by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge, such as the first-hand experiences of being Black” (Collins, 2009, p. 270). The information shared by Black women no longer comes from an objective perspective, but from their own personal knowledge. What Collins (2009) argued is that Black women’s use of personal experience or “connected knowers” (p. 277) provides a strong basis for creating meaning through lived experiences.

**Use of dialogue for assessing knowledge claims**

Another example of how Black women are producing and validating knowledge is through the use of dialogue, the second tenet of Black feminist epistemology. Dialogue implies actively engaging in conversations with others about one’s lived experiences. Collins (2009) suggested that Black women’s knowledge claims are not developed individually, but through intentional dialogue and engagement between members of a community: “for Black women, new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community” (p. 279).

Moreover, the use of dialogue within community is not a new phenomenon for Black women, as community dialogue is rooted in the African American oral tradition (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Collins, 2009). The oral tradition, known as “call-and-response” is based on the idea that community connectedness, active participation, and the validation of each other’s experiences is essential to the preservation of African culture

Knowing what I know about the historical realities of Black women’s lived experiences required me to engage with my study participants in very nontraditional ways. Allowing them to speak their truth about how they had experienced relationship violence prompted me to also share my knowledge and experiences of it as well. The use of dialogue was essential not only for allowing these Black women to voice their experiences, but also to actively engage them in discussions about relationship violence through sharing their own ideas and conversing about its impact on community.

**Ethics of caring**

The third tenet of Black feminist epistemology implies that knowledge is built on the ethics of caring. Collins (2009) argued that “personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process” (p. 282). For Collins, personal expressiveness, that is, seeing emotion and showing empathy can bridge the binary of intellect and emotion. The focus of my study, i.e., Black women’s lived experiences of relationship violence, required some expression of my empathy since they would likely share personal accounts of their private lives. So I had great trepidation as the researcher about attending to their emotional needs throughout the study and validating their experiences throughout my data collection. I anticipated that not all of my participants would feel comfortable discussing their experience with me as a complete stranger. Thus, to meet these needs, I allowed them to express their thoughts and feelings in a written journal as well as through oral narrative in my interviews of them.
Ethics of personal accountability

The “ethics of personal accountability” is the fourth tenet and suggests that people be accountable for their own personal knowledge claims. “Knowledge claims made by individuals respected for their moral and ethical connections to their ideas will count more than those offered by less respected figures” (Collins, 2009, p. 284). Furthermore, knowledge cannot be separated from those who produce and share them (Collins, 2009).

This tenet was central to my positionality as the researcher. I believe that Black women in college are experiencing varied forms of relationship violence. I also believe that colleges and universities have failed to address the cultural dynamics at play in addressing relationship violence in communities of color. I also believe that Black women continue to be silenced about relationship violence issues. What my study intended to reveal was the types of violence Black women are experiencing in college, how they make meaning of them, and how they navigate campus resources to address these experiences.

Research Methodology: Narrative Inquiry

*Access, opportunity, and cultural voice in educational pursuits are critical to the liberation of African American women.*

bell hooks (1994)

The methodology I used for this study was narrative inquiry to illustrate the lived experiences of my participants. Narrative inquiry is based firmly on the premise that as human beings we come to understand and give meaning to our lives through stories (Andrews et al., 2008; Chase, 2005; Creswell, 2013; Riessman, 2008). Grounded in interpretive hermeneutics and phenomenology, narrative inquiry is a type of qualitative research that involves the gathering of narratives: written, oral, or visual. Narrative inquiry has two component parts: The first is *narrative*, meaning the story being told...
(Riessman, 2008), and second, *inquiry*, representing a systematic examination or analysis. However, in practice, a working understanding of the interactions that narrative inquiry employs is more complex. “First, narrative research is concerned with using individual lives as the primary source of data. Second, it is concerned with using narratives of the ‘self’ as a location from which the researcher can generate social critique and advocacy” (Bloom, 2002, p. 310).

I was particularly drawn to the use of narrative inquiry as my methodology because it focuses on the meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences, by providing “insight that (befits) the complexity of human lives” (Josselson, 2006, p. 4). Researchers employing narrative inquiry strive to attend to the ways in which “the story” is constructed, for whom and why, as well as the cultural discourses that it draws upon. Riessman and Speedy (2007) suggested that

the term *narrative* carries many meanings and is used in a variety of ways by different disciplines, often synonymously with *story*, the narrative scholar’s analytic attention to how the facts got assembled that way. For whom was this story constructed, how was it made and for what purpose? What cultural discourses does it draw on—take for granted? What does it accomplish? (pp. 428-429)

This study drew on the experiences of four Black college women who were asked to share their stories about how their relationship violence impacted them as college students and as Black women. It provided the space for these women to articulate how they have made meaning of their experiences of relationship violence. The use of narrative inquiry was appropriate for this study as it captured the experiences of the
participants in their own voices and uncovered the complexity of their lives as Black women. Narrative inquiry as a qualitative research methodology provides a different space for capturing how relationship violence impacts Black college women and can help provide a contextual understanding of their experiences in the higher education discourse on relationship violence. The use of narrative inquiry allowed each participant to tell her story in a way that was meaningful to her. According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006), “narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of a particular phenomenon” (p. 375). In the context of this study, the phenomenon was relationship violence.

Czarniawska (2004) indicated “narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected” (p. 17). Moreover, narratives can be collected through interviews, conversations, or observations can either be short stories, extended stories of situation or event within a participant’s life or a complete story of participant’s life. (Chase, 2005). Regardless of the narrative form, it should capture patterns within participant’s lived experiences from their own perspective that can offer deeper meanings of the stories being told (Chase, 2005; Czarniawska, 2004; Patton, 2002).

As a research methodology, narrative inquiry involves interaction between the researcher and the participant as well as the stories being told (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). The role of the researcher is to retell the stories from the participant’s perspective so as to understand the meanings behind their experiences. Chase (2005) reminded researchers that the goal of narrative inquiry is to understand how participants make meaning of their lived experience by gain deeper insight into their thoughts, emotions,
and interpretations. Bloom (1998) provides three essential goals of narrative inquiry. Firstly, “narrative inquiry should focus on an individual life story. Secondly, narrative inquiry uses stories of the ‘self’ as the starting point from which the researcher can generate critiques of social pressures or values and advocate for change” (p. 310). Within the context of this study, I viewed the experiences of relationship violence through the lenses of four Black college women, whose experiences may or may not fit into the normalized view of relationship violence in college.

By carefully interpreting the participants’ stories, I have illustrated the complexities associated with being a Black woman in college and dealing with this kind of violence. When viewing these women through an emancipatory lens, as the researcher, I also began to formulate a social critique and advocate for social change in higher education, both at the individual and group level. Thirdly, this type of research can deconstruct the ‘self’ as a “humanist conception” (Bloom, 1998, p. 310) – meaning that the “researcher is expected to encourage an openness to new ways of understanding the world, and new ways of understanding and reflecting upon ourselves” (Bloom, 1998, p. 310). In this instance, I explored new ways to understand the world of relationship violence among Black college women and new ways to think about how not only to serve this population but also new ways for them to contextualize their experiences.

**Methods**

...if I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive.

Lorde, 1984, p. 137

This study required the participants not only to define who they are as Black women but also to talk about their experiences in a way that was meaningful to them.
They were allowed to craft their own realities about what it means to be a Black college woman dealing with various forms of relationship violence. There is a lack of information about their experiences of relationship violence, which are often discussed in relation to other women who are often White. The previous quote by Audre Lorde set the tone and approach for this study, which was for the participants to define their lived experiences from their point of view. The selection of the participants for this narrative study was both intentional and purposeful.

**Participant selection**

To find participants for this study, I used purposeful sampling. According to Creswell (2013), purposeful sampling involves three important strategies: (a) selection of the participants, (b) sampling strategy, and (c) sample size. Creswell (2013) also noted that conducting a narrative study “consists of focusing on studying one or two individuals, gathering data through the collection of their stories, reporting individual experiences, and chronologically ordering (or using life course stages) the meaning of those experiences” (p. 70). I recruited a sample of four Black college women for this study. Purposeful sampling is commonly used in qualitative research and involves an intentional data selection process, which can lead to a rich and robust analysis of the information gathered, according to Patton (2002). He indicated that “the logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding and selecting information-rich cases whose [perspectives] will illuminate the questions under study” (p. 46). My intent in crafting this study was to share the stories of four Black college women and to acquire a deeper understanding of how Black college women make meaning of their relationship violence experiences. Additionally, purposeful sampling was important
for this study because it allowed for the selection of participants who best fit the overall criteria with regard to race, gender, relationship violence experience, and college enrollment, which aligned with my theoretical framework.

**Participant criteria**

Creswell (2013) noted that criterion sampling occurs when all the participants have experienced the same phenomenon and can address the overall goals of the study. As this study focused on the meaning Black college women make of their relationship violence experience, there were two clear criteria for selecting the participants (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002): they had to identify as Black college women and have experienced relationship violence. My main interest was to talk with undergraduate students and recent college graduates, as they would be more engaged in overall campus life. I procured two undergraduate students and two graduate students who offered a richness and diverse perspective to the study. I selected two graduate students to participate in the study because they were only in their first year of graduate school and making their connection to their undergraduate experience was still fresh in their minds. The two graduate students were also still connected to their undergraduate experience as one was pursuing her masters degree at the same institution as she had gotten her undergraduate degree. The other was an active alumni who frequently visited campus to work with students through class lectures and with her faculty mentor, whom she met during her first year, and who continues to be an advocate for her during her graduate studies.

The research on relationship violence has found that 1 in 5 women will experience such violence in their lifetime (Krebs et al., 2009). Although this study acknowledges that men also experience relationship violence, the overall purpose was to
describe and discuss the relationship violence as experienced by Black college women. For this study, I used the U.S. Department of Justice’s (2014) definition of relationship violence, also known as intimate partner violence, “as a pattern of coercive behavior used by one person to gain power and control over another, which can include physical or sexual violence, verbal or emotional abuse, stalking, or economic abuse. Sexual, emotional, or psychological intimidation may also occur” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014, para. 1).

I specifically chose this definition because it encompasses a broad range of violence. As a researcher, I did not want to assume that these Black women had only experienced a particular form of violence, but to look at relationship violence broadly. Also, this definition is used by the federal government and by colleges and universities to describe the various acts of violence that women often encounter. While it is known that relationship violence impacts men and women of all races, the interest of this study was to illuminate the experiences of a sample of Black college women. Therefore, I used Black as a racial category to broadly defined women who self-identify as African, Black, African American, Black Caribbean, and Black Latina. I specifically selected Black women from four year-institutions because I was interested in how they navigated the college environment when they had experienced relationship violence.

Understanding the social, cultural, and environmental context of the participants’ experiences allowed me to critically examine relationship violence resources and services in four-year institutions, which may include counseling services, domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers, women’s resource centers, academic advisors, etc. (Walsh, Banyard et al., 2010). As the researcher for this study, I was also fully aware of the
emotional stress that could resurface for a participant when they were talking about having personally witnessed or experienced relationship violence. So, in asking these women to share experiences that could trigger undesirable reactions, I assured them that they had resources to turn to for support if needed. I thus informed them about those available both on and off campus should any issues or distress occur at any point while they were participating in the study.

Although my approach was to be careful not to re-traumatize the participants as they reflected on their experiences, it was critically important for each to know the resources available and understand how to access them should they need them. Sensitive research involves “the topic, the consequences, the situation and any number of other issues that may arise: ‘research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it’” (Dickinson-Swift, James Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009). This particular study fell within the scope of these conditions, as it would rely on the participants’ disclosure of their personal experiences of violence.

**Recruitment of participants**

As the sample size for the study was only four participants, my recruitment was limited to my personal contacts and communication. Recruiting participants for this study was a critical step due to the overall sensitive nature of the topic being examined. I used multiple strategies to recruit my participants. I was very cognizant of the fact, that my research would garner some attention, due to the fact that I was studying a sensitive topic and the climate around Black women’s victimization was prevalent in the national media. To alleviate some of the ambiguity about who I was, my call for participants included my online portfolio with a chronicle of my background, experience, and education to give the
recipients a better sense of who I was as a researcher. I shared my online portfolio in my initial communication with the participants about the study.

First, I relied heavily on the referral process. I sent my call for participation (Appendix A) and recruitment email (Appendix B) to personal contacts and my professional networks in my university’s Student Affairs to disseminate the study information to individuals who fit the study criteria. I also posted the call for participants on various Facebook groups that I am associated with. Additionally, I emailed information about the study to student organizations that specifically catered to the needs of Black college women, including historically Black sororities to disseminate the study information to those who fit the study criteria. Second, I sent a call for participant recruitment email, using the university’s mass email system. I specifically requested the email be sent to students who self-identify as Black women.

Third, I contacted campus Women’s Center directors and Women’s & Gender Studies Departments to share information about my study. I also contacted staff in student affairs departments where I had personal contacts to share information about the study. I posted a flyer on bulletin boards calling for participants and shared via their social media pages and department list-serve.

All of these methods were favorable because I received many questions related to the study criteria from students and staff about where the study would be conducted, how it was being conducted, how many I was looking for, and whether graduate students could participate. Through this process, I identified six women who were interested in the study; however, two did not meet the criteria of no more than 1-3 years since their
undergraduate experience. Four Black women did fit the criteria and were selected to participate in the study.

**Data Collection**

As Creswell (2013) stated, “The backbone of qualitative research is an extensive collection of data, typically from multiple sources of information” (p. 43). The data collected for this study derived from three sources: (a) a participant survey, (b) three in-depth interviews of each participant, (b) three participant reflective journals, and (c) my research journal, which documented my responses, reactions, and feelings throughout the study. Data collection for the study began in December 2015 and concluded in April 2016. Figure 4 provides an overview of this data collection.

*Figure 4.* Data collection process for the study.
Introductory meeting

Once individuals responded to my call for participation (Appendixes A, B), I immediately contacted them for an introductory meeting (Appendix C). I met with two individually face to face and the other two by telephone. At this meeting I introduced the research study and discussed the expectations of myself as the researcher and the participant throughout the study. I was purposeful in developing a relationship with my participants, which became essential during the data collection. I also shared information with the participant about myself, my background, and why I was interested in the research topic. I also reviewed informed consent (Appendix D), the participant’s bill of rights (Appendix E), procedure to file a complaint (Appendix F), and answered any questions they had about the study. After this meeting, each agreed to participate in the study and was given one week to review the informed consent and return a signed copy. After I received the signed informed consent we scheduled future meeting dates, times, and location for each interview. I also assured the participants of their anonymity.

Participant survey

Immediately following the introductory meeting, each participant was asked to complete a short online survey (Appendix G). Table 1 summarizes the information about each of the participants from the survey, using pseudonyms. The demographic part of the survey asked their identity, school, and relationship violence experience. The identity questions revealed how the participants identified their race and gender. The school question established their current class status (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), and the relationship violence questions revealed the type they had experienced, whether they had sought help, what help they had sought, and the help they were currently receiving, if
any. The participant survey allowed me to determine whether the individuals fit the study criteria. The survey also provided insight into the level of trauma the participants had experienced and whether they had sought help and were still seeking help.

Table 1

Participants’ Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Academic Information</th>
<th>Relationship Violence History</th>
<th>Relationship Violence Support</th>
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<td>Peer Support</td>
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<td>Emotional Abuse</td>
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Participant interviews

In conducting narrative studies, researchers are encouraged to engage in several interviews to collect data rich in depth and breadth (Polkinghorne, 2005). I used three semi-structured interviews (Appendices I, K, M) with each participant (Merriam, 2002).
and open-ended questions, including three online journal prompts (Appendices H, J, L) pertaining to (a) the participants’ experiences as Black college women, (b) how they have made meaning of their relationship violence experiences, and (c) the campus and community resources that were/are salient to their recovery. My reasons for using interviews as my primary data collection method were multifaceted. Firstly, a qualitative interview is recommended when “studying people’s understanding of the meaning in their lived world” (Kvale, 1996, p. 105). The subject matter discussed during the interviews was personal in nature. Conducting one-on-one interviews gave my participants a sense of privacy and allowed them to speak freely about their experiences without my judgment. I also used member checks with each interview (Appendix N), and this study received IRB approval (Appendix O).

Secondly, as Patton (2005) suggested, “we interview people to find out from them those things we can’t observe” (p. 196). I chose to interview my participants to not only understand their experience, but also for them to verbally articulate their experiences from their point of view. Thirdly, the interviews allowed me to capture the breadth of the participants’ stories by providing “thick descriptions” of the participants being (Merriam, 2002). All the interviews were between 45 and 90 minutes in length.

I asked open-ended questions throughout the interviews to encourage my participants to respond freely and openly to my inquiry (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Esterberg, 2002; Kvale, 1996). In addition, I asked follow-up questions when necessary to clarify my participants’ responses or to elaborate on specific aspects of their stories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The first interview focused on “putting the participant’s experience in context by asking her to tell as much as possible about . . . herself” as
suggested by Seidman (2013, p. 21). This interview provided the context of how each participant experienced college as a Black woman. The goal of this interview was to get the participants to talk about their salient identities as they related to being a college student and a relationship violence survivor. I also asked specific questions related to the direct and indirect messages they had received throughout their college experience about relationship violence. After the first interview, I conducted a member check with each participant to ensure they were emotionally able to continue with the study. I also asked my participants about how they practiced self-care during the interview process.

The second interview focused “on the concrete details of the participants’ present lived experiences in the topic area of the study” (Seidman, 2013, p. 21). I wanted the participants to share how they made meaning of their experience of relationship violence, so the questions for this interview were related to how my participants understood relationship violence and what their experience meant (or means) to them as college students, as Black women, and as members of their community. Member check was completed at the beginning and conclusion of the second interview. I attended to any housekeeping concerns at they related the journal submission and allowed for time for the participant to unpack and express things that she wanted to talk about, which in turn allowed for an easier transition into the interview questions.

The third interview “addressed the intellectual and emotional connections” between being a Black woman and dealing with relationship violence while in college (Seidman, 2013, p. 22). I was interested in understanding whether the college resources for dealing with relationship violence had met their needs as Black college women. This interview was a way to understand the campus resources available to these participants,
from their points of view, and to contextualize the choices they made in navigating them.

Similar to the format of the second interview, member checking was conducted at the beginning and conclusion of the third interview. During member check, I addressed housekeeping concerns about the journal entries and also allowed the participants to share how they were attending to their practice of self-care. I conducted all three interviews face to face in my college library study room with two of my undergraduate participants, which worked for two of the women, as the interviews were scheduled between their classes. All three interviews with the graduate student participants took place via telephone and were scheduled one week apart to allow the participants time to think and reflect about the previous interview, and time to respond to my journal prompts in their participant journals. I recorded the interviews on two separate devices using “Voice Recorder” software and immediately saved them in an encrypted online storage file (Cybox). Immediately following each interview, I reviewed each recording and documented my responses, reactions, and feelings in order to clarify misunderstandings, generate additional questions for upcoming interviews, and identify emergent themes.

**Participants’ reflective journals**

To expand on the stories they had shared in their interviews, the participants were asked to respond to three separate journal prompts, one per week throughout the data collection period. After each interview, they were sent an email inviting them to reflect and express their thoughts, feelings, and emotions about the journal topic via a Qualtrics link. Each journal prompt was directly linked to the overall research questions. The participants were instructed to reflect on each of the research questions and to share any information or other details about their story they were unable to express during the
interviews, either because of the sensitivity of the topic or for lack of time. Since this research required the participants to recall significant and sensitive information about their experiences of relationship violence prior to or during their college years, retelling their story could be difficult and they might feel vulnerable. Accordingly, the journals helped the participants share their stories on their own terms using their own language. Moustakas (1994) stated that “individual perceptions, memories, judgments, and reflections are core and figural in our developing understanding of things and people” (p. 94). There were instances during the interview process when some of the participants were unable to fully answer my questions. Therefore, the journals served as another option to expand on their responses or to clarify aspects of their narratives they had shared during the interview. These journals allowed for a deeper understanding of the meanings the participants had attributed to their experiences of relationship violence; provided a record of their feelings, attitudes, and captured certain memories, judgments, and reflections about their experience.

**Researcher’s reflective journal**

In qualitative research, the researcher often uses a journal as an “analytic space” to reflect on the data, to outline the analytic process, to identify biases and assumptions, and to help separate [her] perspectives from the participants’ stories (Fassinger, 2005; Morrow, 2005; Williams & Morrow, 2009). Throughout the data collection process, I maintained a reflective journal. After each interview or interaction with a participant, I reflected on my overall experience. In some instances, I wrote summative essays and other times, I wrote reflective poems. My reflective journal provided a record of ideas, insights, feelings, and questions that arose throughout my data collection and analysis.
periods. In Chapter 4, I present some of my reflections in the form of analytical poems that capture the overall themes for the participants’ narratives.

**Data Analysis**

*The process of narrative analysis is actually a synthesizing of data rather than a separation of it into its constituents parts.*

Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15

Data analysis “involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned. Working with data, you describe, create explanations, pose hypotheses, develop theories, and link your story to other stories” (Glesne, 1999 p. 130). Analyzing narratives involves examining the descriptions of the subjects’ life experiences as they unfolded during their conversations (Riessman, 2002). When analyzing narratives, researchers are strongly urged to take into account the “signs, symbols, and expression of feelings in language” with the understanding that the “researcher is collaboratively constructing the narrator’s reality, not just passively recording and reporting” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 123). The process involves both a retelling of the experience and the content within the story and illustrating why the story was told the way that it was (Riessman, 2002), not just relying on categories.

Narrative analysis methods have varied in recent years (Ezzy, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995; Riessman, 2008). The variations within narrative analysis are concentrated in two specific areas, linguistic structures within the stories and thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). For this research study, I chose the narrative analysis method of Polkinghorne (1995), who suggested that

Narrative analysis relates events and actions to one another by configuring them as contributors to the advancement of a plot. The story constituted by
narrative integration allows for the incorporation of the notions of human purpose and choice as well as chance happenings, dispositions, and environmental processes. The result of a narrative analysis is an explanation that is retrospective, having linked past events together to account for how a final outcome might have come about. In this analysis, the researcher attends to the temporal and unfolding dimension of human experience by organizing the events of the data along a before-after continuum. (p. 16)

In this study, my participants told stories of their lived experiences of relationship violence and how they navigated the college environment to cope with them. Their stories conveyed their worldviews, their attitudes about the significance of their experiences, and the path they took to get from point A to point B (Polkinghorne, 1988). The narrative data collected about the lived experiences of each Black college woman in this study reflects a detailed and rich perspective her trauma. The participants’ narratives provided an account of the personal, behavioral and environmental factors that affected their overall college experience.

**Narrative Data Analysis Procedures**

I drew on Polkinghorne’s (1995) narrative analysis method to analyze my data. According to Polkinghorne (1995), the “outcome of a narrative analysis is a story ... the researcher’s task is to configure the data elements into a story that unites and gives meaning to the data” (p. 15). Although Polkinghorne did not specifically refer to using a reflective journal, I integrated reflections from mine, in the form of analytical poems, as part of my narrative analysis.
My data analysis began immediately after I conducted the first taped interview and continued until after the last interviews were completed. Ezzy (2002) suggest that data analysis begin while simultaneously collecting data because both process are interrelated and can yield important insights and interpretation of the study findings. Polkinghorne (1995) identified four important phases of data analysis: (a) collecting and transcribing the data, (b) encountering the data, (c) analyzing the data, and (d) reconstructing the participant’s narrative. As an additional method of data analysis, I identified themes and commonalities to offer a summary analysis of the interview data, which provide a theoretical interpretation of the study (Patton, 2002).

**Phase one: Collecting and transcribing the data**

My data collection began in December 2015 and concluded in April 2016. My interviews were transcribed by the online service rev.com (https://www.rev.com). Upon receipt of each transcription, I read through it and simultaneously listened to the recording in order to fill in any gaps in the transcription, and to ensure that my participants’ thoughts and words had been accurately transcribed. By replaying the interviews and rereading the transcripts, I connected the words and emotions expressed by each participant. During this phase of my data analysis, I also shared all three interview transcripts with each participant to read through their responses to each question and make whatever revisions they felt necessary. The participants were given one week to review their interview transcript before the next interview.

**Phase two: Encountering the data**

Encountering my data occurred in three steps. The first was to organize the data with the goal of connecting the story elements from each participant’s journal to their
interview in order to construct one narrative for each participant. Thus, I developed a timeline to chronologically organize the data in addition to categorizing the participants’ interviews into story form and synthesizing the information from their journals to create a cohesive story. The second step was to listen to the participants’ recorded interviews again and reread their journals to get reacquainted with each participant’s story. The goal here was to determine the story the participant had shared during each interview and connect it to their reflective journals based on the interview questions asked.

The third step involved creating story maps, which served as a visual representation of each participant based on the salient stages of her lived experience. Each story map was a five-column table with the headings (a) self, (b) community, (c) family, (d) college experience, and (e) relationship violence experience. This process allowed me to see patterns of similarities and differences across the four narratives. From there, I added notes to the stories to capture the participants’ expressions and my overall presence during each interview. Before and after each interview I also recorded my thoughts, ideas, reactions, and observations in my reflective journal as part of my data.

**Phase three: Analyzing the data**

Analyzing my participants’ narratives involved three steps. The first was to identify the story being told in each narrative. Second, I repeatedly read through each participant’s story, reviewed each of their story maps, and identified common themes across all five narratives. Third, I connected the emerging themes from the participants’ data in my journal reflections. I then began to create analytical poems for each emergent theme from the collective narratives. Analyzing the narratives was a very emotional process for me. I had moments of sadness and moments of triumph as I allowed myself to
be fully engaged in the participants’ narratives. In fact, my analytical poems became a
coping mechanism not only to capture the essence of my participants’ narratives but also
to fully express my emotions.

**Phase four: Reconstructing the narrative**

In this phase, I began creating my participant’s profile, describing her based on
the unique characteristics that brought her life. My goal here was to paint a vivid picture
of each participant in an authentic and dignified whole, as she is much more than her
story of abuse. Thus, I incorporated elements of each participant’s unique style, using her
vivid language, expressions, and personality traits that also brought her to life. I then
organized the participant’s narrative with a beginning, middle, and an end, noting any
prior experiences that may have influenced her experience of relationship violence. I also
extracted direct quotes and key statements from my data to help convey the meaning
making process and actions of each story.

During this phase, I began connecting the narratives to my theoretical frameworks
(Black Feminist Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory) and
described the cultural context for each story. Given that these theories were the
underpinnings of my study, I made notes that identified connections between the family
background, religious/spiritual beliefs, socioeconomic status, racial and gender identity,
and other cultural influences in each participant’s story. Since social support (peers,
family, etc.) is frequently cited as having a significant role in a college student’s life, the
presence or absence of such support led me to identify other “characters” in the story that
affected the progress and outcome of the participant’s experience. I further critiqued my
narratives for coherence and persuasiveness, and again consulted and critiqued my
analytical poems to gain a broader understanding to the participants’ stories, and to account for bias or the exclusion of important data in my analysis.

**Phase five: Presenting the narrative**

My approach to my data analysis was not only to summarize my material, but also to use an orderly and consistent method for processing my data in order to illuminate the meaning of my participants’ narratives in order to promote understanding for them, and reveal how these four Black college women experienced relationship violence. My purpose as a researcher on this issue became clearer because how I retold these stories mattered. These narratives not only captured the daily struggles these Black college women experienced, but also chronicled how they have made meaning of their experiences in ways that have motivated them to live their truth. In this dissertation, I present the results from this study as composite oral narratives between the participants and myself. Centered on answering the three research questions, the narratives incorporate how the participants experienced college as it relates to their race and gender, their stories of relationship violence, and how they navigated the college environment as relationship violence survivors.

Although each participant shared her story individually through three one-on-one interviews and online journals, I also created a collective dialogue among the participants that provided a supportive community as they were dealing with their trauma. From my experience as a higher education scholar-practitioner, it is not common practice for Black college women to dialogue about issues of rape, sexual assault, and psychological abuse or engage in collective conversations related to their identity as a woman. On a college campus, the counseling center is often the only option available to students to discuss
these issues. However, a collective dialogue can provide space that can assist in the helping process in that it provides normalization (Boyd, 1993; Dorsey 2001; Giddings, 1984; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011).

Dorsey (2001) indicated that for other Black women “communicating with African-American women in small groups provides a unique support, one that is unwavering sources of strength for them” (Dorsey, 2001, p. 71). I wanted to create an atmosphere that not only honored the women and their stories being shared, but also to illuminate the similarities and difference among the stories. I wanted my participants to know they were not the only Black college women who were experiencing relationship violence and that this collective dialogue could provide a bond often missing in the college environment.

**Sister Circles**

Constructed within the framework of Black feminist theory and honoring the African tradition of collective wisdom (Collins, 2009; Angelou, 1970), the narratives from this study presented in Chapter 4 are in the form of collective conversations (mock “meet-ups”) between the four participants and myself about how the college environment has shaped their individual relationship violence experience. In order to create this collective conversation, I constructed several fictitious composite narratives to capture the essence of this collective community experience of relationship violence/abuse. I chose to present the data in the form of “sister circles” to figuratively bring together these four Black college women to openly discuss how relationship violence has impacted their college experience. These were not actual discussions between myself and my
participants as a group, only imagined conversations to capture the effects of their experiences of relationship violence and how they managed them in college.

Sister circles have always been common in the Black community. With origins rooted in the Black women’s club movement, the sister circle has been a tradition for Black women for over 100 years (Boyd, 1993; Giddings, 1984; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). The primary purpose of sister circles is to provide help, support, knowledge, and encouragement to Black women through enhancing existing friendships, building supportive kin networks, and create community (Boyd, 1993; Giddings, 1984; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Over time, the term sister circle has inherited various meanings. Some have referred to the sister circle as a women’s organization, service club, or church group who share a common interest on healthy and fitness, spirituality, love of books, etc. Boyd (1993) has also described sister circle as group therapy for Black women. Made popular by psychotherapist Julia Boyd in her best-selling book In the Company of My Sisters, sister circles help address the issues surrounding Black women and self-esteem, physical and mental health, the multiple roles of Black women, family legacies, and the importance of African Americans’ shared history (Boyd, 1993; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011).

In Chapter 4, I present the study findings as fictional composite narratives. As the researcher, I served as the facilitator of a mock sister circle to help guide the women’s conversation. The composite narratives capture my perception and interpretation of each participant’s personalities and their background as it was conveyed during our one-on-one interviews. These narratives provide a glimpse into the lives of MaKayla, Lizzie, Gina, and Fundi (pseudonyms for the participants). In Chapter 5, I present the discussion and implications of the study. The chapter captures the collective storied narratives and
connects them to the larger body of literature about relationship violence among Black college women. Chapter 6 includes recommendations to better serve Black college women in regard to relationship violence based on what my participants have shared throughout the study, in addition to my personal reflections.

Criteria for Trustworthiness

Armino and Hultgren (2002) noted that determining the trustworthiness of the results of a qualitative study involves “moving out from under the shadow of empirical-analytical expectations of interpretive and critical work” (p. 449). This study used the following five criteria of authenticity to evaluate its trustworthiness: (a) fairness, (b) ontological authenticity, (c) educative authenticity, (d) catalytic authenticity, and (e) tactical authenticity (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2003). Constructing and maintaining a standard of trustworthiness was an important consideration throughout this study because it required me as the researcher to be transparent and vulnerable when interpreting and critically analyzing my data. Below is a summary of how I strived to ensure trustworthiness throughout the study.

Fairness

Fairness involved capturing the voice of each participant. Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggested that fairness signifies “the extent to which different constructions and their underlying value structures are solicited and honored within the evaluation process” (pp. 246-247). In other words, the researcher is deliberate in creating opportunities to illuminate each participant voice and experiences throughout the study. To meet this criterion, I have provided detailed descriptions of the participants to emphasize their diversity and their backgrounds in the stories they shared (Lewis-Beck et al., 2003). In
addition, I was intentional about getting to know my participants through their journaling, my interviewing, and member checking (Lewis-Beck et al., 2003).

I used member checking (Appendix N) at the beginning and conclusion of each interview and response to the journal prompt. As Guba (1981) stated, “The process of member checks is the single most important action inquirers can take, for it goes to the heart of the credibility criterion” (p. 85). To ensure that my participants were emotionally able to continue with the study, I was very consistent in asking them to share how they practiced self-care. I was also cognizant of the stress level of each participant. There were instances during my data collection when some of the participants needed to unpack issues related to their college experience, home life, and other personal relationships that took precedence over our planned interview topics. During member check, I asked follow-up questions, clarified information from the interviews and journals, obtain participant feedback about the process, and shared any necessary information. This specific step was critical throughout the study as it gave the participants the option to rethink or restate their narrative and for us to connect beyond the researcher-participant relationship. I also wanted the participants to tell their stories in a way that was both authentic and meaningful to them as Black women.

**Ontological authenticity**

I completed audit trails (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002) to determine the participants’ increased knowledge and awareness of the complexity of how Black college women experienced relationship violence. These audit trails involved using memos to reflect and record my feelings, ideas, reactions and observations about the research process and narratives themselves (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Yeh & Inman, 2007). I wrote memos
throughout my data collection process, as they helped me monitor any biases that might arise during my data collection and analysis. These memos also became part of my data collection process. In addition to keeping memos, I maintained a reflective journal throughout the study. Journaling is a technique used in qualitative research to help researchers reflect on the study by keeping a record of their thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors that may arise during the study (Janesick, 2011). My journal writings took the form of analytical poems in this study.

**Educative authenticity**

Educative authenticity involves assessing whether the participants gained an increased awareness and respect for others’ perspectives (Lewis-Beck et al., 2003) on how Black college women experience relationship violence. To meet this criterion, I again completed audit trails by using peer reviewers. Corbin and Strauss (2008) indicated that this process will be different for each researcher because each research has varied processes of arriving and interpreting the data. Using peer reviewers can provide researchers the opportunity to discuss data, explore possible interpretations, and check emerging themes; this important step in the analysis process can improve the overall quality of data analysis. I used a set of peer reviewers with expertise and experiences that complemented the nature of my research study. My peer reviewers had the expertise to evaluate the construction and interpretation of my analytical poems, read through the interview transcripts as well as the composite narratives and identify emergent themes in the data, providing support and constructive feedback on the construction of the narratives. They also provided feedback on content flow, readability, and comprehension.
Catalytic authenticity

The goal of catalytic authenticity is that the research study will prompt action on the part of the participants that will lead to social change (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). They urged “researchers [to] offer recommendations for how practice can be transformed due to the insights gained from the study” (p. 458). While the goal of my study was not to use my participants to facilitate a change in the campus environment, I did however ask them to offer advice to other Black college women who may experience relationship violence in college. Further, at the conclusion of my dissertation, I provide practical recommendations to raise awareness and facilitate change in preventing relationship violence, and resources to cope with it on campus. This study offers scholars and practitioners insight into how Black college women experience relationship violence as well as challenges them to think more critically about the cultural implications when working with this population.

Tactical authenticity

Tactical authenticity involved empowering and inspiring my participants to have agency throughout the research process that would eventually lead to purposeful action (Lewis-Beck et al., 2003). Achieving tactical authenticity involved building a trusting relationship with each participant and providing space for them to share their stories and talking through their process of regaining control of their lives. My participants had a clear understanding of how their involvement in the study was a direct action in co-constructing their narrative. While some of the participants were more actively engaged in creating systemic change than others, I focused my attention on involving them all in the research process by asking for their feedback throughout the study. In addition, my
participants shared recommendations to other Black college women who might also be experiencing relationship violence.

(Re)presenting the stories

Re-presenting the stories of my participants took the form of composite narratives. As Jackson, Debassige, Masching, and Whitebird (2014) stated, “Composite narratives include characters and draw on the direct quotes of participants to support dialogue and discussion” (p. 148). Relying on the co-constructed themes derived from my participants’ interviews, journals, and the research literature, I wrote my composite narratives using a practice called compositing (Patton & Catching, 2009). The goal of compositing requires the “[use of] similar themes that arose across narratives together to present a more cogent picture of the participants’ experiences, while simultaneously allowing unique experiences to unfold” (Patton & Catching, 2009, p. 717). Re-presenting the data as a composite narrative situated the participants stories and illuminated their voices in a way that protected their identities.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the research methodology and methods use to conduct this study. I have provided an overview of my positionality as the researcher and my motivation for conducting this study followed by my epistemological stance and robust discussion about Black feminist epistemology. I have presented a detailed overview of my narrative inquiry, including my procedures for recruitment, sampling, and data analysis. Finally, I have addressed issues of trustworthiness in detail, specifically highlighting my process of integrity and respect for the four participants. My methodology included sensitivity towards the participants’ relationship violence trauma
in addition to their race and gender. The research results are presented in the three remaining chapters. Chapter 4 presents my study findings as a collective composite narrative between the participants and myself as the researcher. Chapter 5 contains a discussion of the theoretical implications and connects the findings to the body of literature on Black women and relationship violence. Chapter 6 suggests implications for future research and practice and concludes with my researcher reflection.
CHAPTER 4: COMPOSITE NARRATIVES

The purpose of this narrative study was to examine how four Black college women made meaning of their experiences of relationship violence. The research questions that guided this inquiry were:

1. How did the four Black women in this study experience relationship violence in college?
2. How did these Black women make meaning of their experiences of relationship violence in college?
3. How did these Black women navigate campus resources related to their experiences of relationship violence in college?

Understanding how Black college women experience relationship violence can help practitioners and researchers better meet the needs of this population. This chapter presents the key findings from 12 in-depth interviews with my four participants and their three reflective journals, in the form of composite narratives of imagined dialogues I had with these women. Constructed within the framework of Black Feminist Theory and honoring the African tradition of collective wisdom (Angelou, 2009; Collins, 2009), these composite narratives are organized around the themes that emerged from the women’s interviews and constructed as a collective (mock) dialogue between all four participants and myself, which I designate sister circles. Analytical poems that I wrote in my reflective journal precede these composite narratives and represent the stories generated by this inquiry, creating a deliberative space for making meaning. I developed these analytical poems after reading through and listening to the participants’ stories. I wanted to collectively represent the messages I heard in the stories being told and how I was
experiencing them as the researcher. The composite narratives capture some aspects of college life as they relate to the participants’ race and gender, their stories of relationship violence, and how they navigated the college environment as relationship violence and abuse survivors.

Through our actual interview conversations and member checking process, my participants had shared the many challenges of racism they faced from both faculty and peers in their classrooms and the campus environment. They had also shared their challenges of being a survivor and a victim of abuse, and the daily struggle of carrying their burdens so that they can serve others and become resilient themselves. While the narratives are presented as composites, the words used are verbatim from the participants’ interview transcripts. I italicized words to enhance each participant’s dialogue in order to create a more synergistic conversational flow and to capture their attitude and personality. The five themes that emerged from these composite narratives were as follows:

**Narrative 1: Self-Definition.** The context of this composite narrative describes how the participants self-identified based on their salient characteristics. The women all shared stories of how they developed their own sense of self in relation to their race and gender, as well as the challenges of self-acceptance and appreciation for their race. In addition, this narrative provides examples of how the participants viewed their race and gender within the context of their college environment and how their race and gender were directly linked to how they made meaning of their abuse.

**Narrative 2: Naming:** The context of this narrative illustrates the complexities of understanding and naming the abuse that the women in the study experienced. Naming
the abuse became the participants’ first step in understanding that they were in an unhealthy abusive situation. In addition, naming also illustrated how the participants came to acknowledge that their abuse was really abuse. Three of the four participants were challenged to view emotional abuse as real abuse, either from messages they had received growing up or from the campus culture, which has focused more on recognizing rape and sexual assault as more prevalent forms of abuse, thereby minimizing the impact of emotional abuse.

**Narrative 3: Survival:** This narrative speaks to the tools and strategies the participants used to cope with their abuse and their efforts to prevent its recurrence. Survival for these women meant protecting themselves from re-victimization. Their journey for survival was a daily task of limiting their interactions, carefully observing people’s behaviors, and limiting connections with those they deemed a threat to their overall safety. This narrative also captures the women’s attempts to regain control of their daily life. Engaging in activities that were uplifting, practicing self-care, using positive self-talk, and having a spiritual connection with God were all survival strategies the women used.

**Narrative 4: Support:** College students are provided a wealth of resources to help attend to their overall needs. While support services to address relationship violence differ across universities, counseling centers remain at the top of the resource list for students seeking immediate assistance. This narrative describes the support participants accessed and received to cope with the trauma from their relationship violence. The women all talked openly about their experience with the counseling center as well as about other campus resources they sought out for help. While campus support services
were identified in the women’s narratives, they also described the support they received from peers, family, individuals within the university, and their faith.  

**Narrative 5: Meaning Making:** This narrative captures how the women in the study made meaning of their experiences of violence or abuse. The women all interpreted their experiences differently and were all at different stages of their healing journey. Whether it was sharing their stories with others or learning to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy relationships, or finding purpose in people and things around them, the women all shared how their experiences had altered how they now view themselves and the world, and whether or not they see themselves as survivors. The term “survivor” has been defined as “a person who is in the process of gaining awareness of and/or healing from an abusive situation” (Wesely, Allison, & Schneider, 2000). The women were asked if they saw themselves as “survivors.” Their responses were mixed, which resonates with the literature that views recovering from abuse as being an individual process. This narrative presents the women’s interpretation of being a survivor.  

**Setting for the Composite Narratives**  
The setting for these composite narratives was the Women’s Center at a predominately White institution of 36,600 students, where Black students make up 3% and Black women make up 1.2% of the student population. The Black students on campus are active and have a visible presence on campus; Black women, however, are not as involved in leadership roles on campus. The Women’s Center at this university has been in existence for over 30 years and its staff has decided to intentionally engage with women of color directly. The following was the imaginary scenario for the narratives that would theoretically take place in this setting:
As director of this center and the researcher in this study, I invited Black women on campus to participate in five sister circle meet-ups. The goal of these meet-ups was to gather information about how Black women are experiencing relationship violence on campus. The four students who participated in the sister circle meet-ups were Lizzie, MaKayla, Fundi, and Gina (pseudonyms). Their interactions in the sister circles (or meet-ups) comprise the composite narratives that follow these descriptions of my four study participants.

**Sister Circle Participants**

**Lizzie**

Lizzie is a senior studying marketing. She came to college because it was expected. Her family was supportive of her attending college and always stressed the importance of education. Not attending college was never really an option. Lizzie is from a big city, and while she enjoyed city living, she wanted to try a new environment. She is very involved on campus with dance, the Black student association, and the marketing club, and she serves as a peer mentor to first-year students. Lizzie’s experiences of abuse happened prior to college and during her college experience. She shared that in high school she was involved in a physically abusive relationship. During her freshman year of college, she was in an emotionally abusive relationship. Both experiences were very damaging to her self-esteem and led to her depression. Lizzie shared that she has a close relationship with her family, but has not told them about the abuse because she is afraid of their reaction. She also shared that in her family there is a history of abuse; her grandmother, mother, and both her sister and brother all had experienced some form of abuse. Lizzie believes that she is cursed and does not understand why acts of violence
keep happening to her. Lizzie is committed to getting help for her abuse because she sees what it has done to her. She shared that therapy has really helped her make sense of her experiences and she is working towards living a life of empowerment and self-love.

**MaKayla**

MaKayla is a first-year student majoring in biology. She came to college knowing exactly what she wanted to do. She came to college with a plan focused on pursuing her dream of attending medical school. However, most recently, MaKayla has decided to change her major and is having a hard time convincing her family about the rationale for her decision. MaKayla is involved in the Black student association, the biology club, and a learning community. She has also taken advantage of opportunities to connect with faculty, staff, and graduate students of color. MaKayla shared that coming to college has provided her with opportunities to connect with other Black women. She indicated that these connections have helped her become more comfortable in her skin and she is much more accepting of her Blackness. She shared that she attended a retreat for women of color and was able to meet other Black students, faculty, and staff. These interactions energized her and allowed her to see what it means to be a positive Black woman. MaKayla revealed that it was during the retreat that issues of her prior abuse resurfaced. MaKayla shared that she was molested as a child and was in therapy for most of her young life. She shared that her family has been always supportive of her and was very involved with helping her during her trauma. MaKayla also shared that she was in an emotionally abusive relationship during her first semester of college. Although her family has been supportive, MaKayla has not told them about her emotionally abusive relationship. Instead she has told them that school has been difficult and she is dealing
with seasonal depression, and has decided to go to counseling. MaKayla believes that sharing this information with her family would result in her having to transfer to a college closer to home. She is happy with the experiences and connections she has made at her college and does not want to leave.

**Fundi**

Fundi is a first-year graduate student studying chemistry. She studied abroad in Kenya before starting graduate school, so her perspective on her Blackness has grown. She recently shared she just finished reading Melissa Harris Perry’s *Sister Citizen*, which has informed and shaped how she feels about being a Black woman. Fundi described her upbringing as difficult. She was exposed to a lot of violence at an early age. Her mother was a drug addict who was in and out of rehab. She also shared that she witnessed her mother being physically abused by her boyfriend, who was also a drug addict and an alcoholic. These events led to her living in foster care, shelters for recovering addicts, or homes for women just released from jail. Her choice to attend college was an easy one because she wanted to escape her environment; college was her way out because she did not want to be in the same position as her family. Fundi shared that she received a full scholarship to attend college and it was the best decision she has made. However, Fundi shared that the worst experience of her college career was being in an emotionally abusive relationship, which happened during her first year of college. She shared that she was ashamed of her abusive relationship given her prior history, and because she always blamed her mother for staying in her abusive relationship and putting Fundi and her siblings in danger. Fundi also shared that during her abuse she struggled academically because she was working 20 hours a week, being involved in campus activities, and
trying to be the perfect student all at once, which made college difficult. She also shared that she lost many friends during that time because she placed the relationship above everything else, and she regrets the time she wasted and the grades she let slip because of the relationship. She shared that she is in a much better place now and is able to view her relationships through a different lens.

**Gina**

Gina is a first-year graduate student studying social work. Her research centers on examining the impact of childhood sexual abuse. Gina shared that she was raised by her White grandparents, in a very White community. Although Gina is bi-racial and light-skinned, she revealed that she identifies as Black and has had difficult time fitting into White culture because White people do not accept her as White. She has found more connections and acceptance within Black culture and identifies more with her Blackness. Gina also shared that she does not like to categorize herself and feels much more comfortable just being. Gina is passionate about advocacy and starting conversation about sexual violence because she is currently dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of being molested as child and then again being sexually assaulted in high school. She is unpacking the emotional trauma from those situations. She shared that her undergraduate experience was triggering because it unearthed her experiences as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and sexual assault. She discussed disclosing her trauma to her instructor after sitting through a lecture in her Human Sexuality class. In turn, her instructor disclosed her own history of sexual assault, which helped shape how Gina thought about her own abuse. Additionally, Gina found in her instructor a safe space to openly talk about how her trauma was impacting her life as a student. To help deal
with her trauma Gina has committed herself to study this topic in her graduate studies. She also shared that she has a very strong spiritual connection to God and often turns to her faith to help her through difficult times. She believes that if it were not for her connection to God, she would not have gotten this far in her recovery. Gina also believes that her abuse was part of God’s plan for her life and that her purpose is to use her experience to help other people.

**Narrative 1: Self-Definition**

*I've never loved being a Black girl as much as I have this year.* (MaKayla)

**Blackness**

I am Black  
I am woman  
Anointed from the crown of my head  
to the sole of my feet in Blackness

Blackness is my badge of honor  
My calling card  
My soul  
My strength

My woman-ness  
Fights to be seen  
Covered by the unmovable shadow that won’t set me free  
I am woman  
Do you see my stride?  
The sway of my hips  
The curves in my thighs

I am a Queen you see  
Melanin for days  
Blackness blanketed in royalty  
Steeped in history  
Rich in Love  
Laced with purpose

My woman-ness needs to be seen  
She needs to be heard  
Look at me  
Can you see the fullness of my lips?
The arch in my back
The locks dangling from the crown of my head

I am woman
A Black woman
Kissed by the sun
My Blackness is power
My woman-ness is life
Together we build nations

**Self-definition (Theme 1)**

The first major theme was *Self-definition*. Having a strong self-identity made a difference in the lives of the women participating in this study. The women reflected on the identities that have shaped them as Black college women and how others within the university interacted with them. Self-definition also points out the challenges associated with maintaining a positive Black identity, colorism, and the practice of self-acceptance and self-love. Despite messages normalizing White standards of beauty, these women continue to make a conscious effort to embrace all the positives of being a Black woman. The following narrative further demonstrates the subtheme Being Black and a Woman.

**Sister circle meet-up #1**

**Lorraine:** Thank you all for attending the sister circle meeting tonight. My name is Lorraine Acker, and I will be facilitating the meeting. I also am the director of the women’s center. On tonight’s agenda we will focus on three main topics: (1) the goals of the sister circle; (2) learning about each other; and (3) framing our discussion around how relationship violence has impacted your college experience. Before we begin, I want to take some time to get to know each of you. Who would like to go first?

**Gina:** I will start... My name is Gina, and I am a graduate student studying community counseling. I grew up in a small town and was raised by my grandparents, who are White. My mother is White and my father is Black.
Although I am light-skinned, I identify as a Black woman. My passion is to educate people about abuse. Is there anything else you want to know?

**Lorraine:** Thank you for sharing Gina – this will do for now.

**MaKayla:** I guess I can go next… Hi everyone, I’m MaKayla. I am a freshman pre-med major for now. I plan on changing my major to education…. Before coming to college, I knew exactly what I wanted to do with my life, but since being here, I am not really sure what I want to do. I do know I don’t have a desire to go into medicine.

**Fundi:** Hi, my name is Fundi, a first-year graduate student studying chemistry. Before I began graduate school, I studied abroad in Kenya. What can I say…? There has been some good times in my college experience and I’ve has some pretty bad times. I met some of my closest friends in college and if it wasn’t for them, I am not sure if I would be here today.

**Lizzie:** Since I am the last one, I guess I will go. My name is Elizabeth, but you can call me Lizzie. I am a senior here and will be graduating this May with a degree in marketing. I would say that I am pretty involved… I dance, and I am a member of the black student association, the marketing club, and I mentor first-year students.

**Lorraine:** Great! Thank you all for sharing. Now that we know who is in the room, we can proceed with our agenda. Does anyone have questions before we get started?

*The group of four quietly shakes their heads to signal they do not have questions.*
**Lorraine:** Okay! Since there are no questions, let’s begin. The purpose of this sister circle meet-up is to create a space for Black women to discuss issues related to their experiences as Black women through a supportive sisterly community. As Black women we often deal with stressors and trauma in isolation, which can sometimes be helpful. However, having a supportive community affords us the opportunity to laugh together, cry together, and identify solutions together. I also recognize that the college environment can be challenging academically and personally, so the sister circle meet-up will be a place of encouragement and empowerment. Another important element of this sister circle is to begin to converse around how relationship violence is impacting us as Black women within the college environment. There is a national conversation around campus climate and sexual assault, but I have not seen any efforts made to include voices and experiences of Black women and other women of color. My only expectation of you all is to have consistent involvement and participation! This sister circle meet-up cannot occur without your involvement. If at any time you feel these meet-ups are not meeting your expectations, we can talk openly to address your concerns.

*A noticeable silence comes across the room. I can see on their faces both anxiety and anticipations about what to come next. To help break the silence in the room, I stand up and grab the large post-it notes and markers, then I state...*

**Lorraine:** So ladies, as I mentioned, I think it would be helpful for us to establish some ground rules for our conversation. These ground rules are a list of guiding principles that we will use to hold each other accountable. So what do you think are important principles to help guide our conversation?
Without hesitation, Gina enthusiastically chimes in.

**Gina:** I think it’s important that we all respect each other’s story.

**Fundi:** I agree. I think respect is important. I also think listening is key and not rushing to cut off someone if they are talking.

**Lizzie:** I am just concerned about confidentiality. I have a hard time trusting people, so it is important that whatever we share remains in this space.

*MaKayla nodding in agreement to Lizzie’s comments*

**MaKayla:** Thanks for saying that Lizzie. Confidentiality is also important to me. I don’t want my business to be shared with the rest of campus. I also think that validating each other’s experiences is important as well.

**Lorraine:** Thanks for sharing… So what I hear you all saying is that Respect, Listening, Confidentiality, Trust, and Validation are critical to us creating a supportive dialogue. I would also like to add that you do not have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering. I recognize you may not have thought about some of the questions I may pose, so it is fine if you need time to think and/or if you choose to not answer. I would also say that, if at any point during our conversation, you would like to add something else to our ground rules, you can.

**MaKayla:** Thanks for saying that Lorraine – While I may have something to share, I may also not have anything to say at that given moment. Sometimes I need time to process, so if I am quiet, please don’t judge me. I tend to think about things before I say it.
I see Gina and Fundi both nodding in agreement to MaKayla’s thoughts

**Lizzie:** That makes sense to me. That’s a good point.

**Lorraine:** Great! Now that we are have our ground rules set up, let’s talk about what it means to be a Black college woman on campus.

_There is nervous laughter around the room as the women begin to process the questions. The room is quiet again – I feel a deafening silence in the room. I check facial expressions and make eye contact with each woman as we all sit in a circle formation in silence. MaKayla looks at me and with a long sigh says..._

**MaKayla:** So there have been some good things and some bad experiences since I have been here.

**Lorraine:** Okay. What do you mean by good things and some bad things?

**MaKayla:** Before coming to college, I recognized that I was Black, but a lot of what I wanted to look like, what I wanted to dress like, what I wanted to do, was all based on a lot of Eurocentric ideals. I didn’t love my hair. I didn’t love a lot of things about myself because I think it was further away from what the ideal of Eurocentric beauty was. [Since being in college] I’ve come to realize that Black girls are beautiful. I really like my hair; I used to hate my hair. That’s one thing I used to hate. I have grown mine and seen a lot of girls going natural and embracing their natural hair. It’s taken me a while to step back and see that it is a blessing to have this color in my skin and have dark eyes and just look the way that I do. I’ve seen other [Black] people embrace their identity and that’s helped me to embrace mine even more.
**Lizzie:** That’s great MaKayla! I’m glad you were able to embrace your Blackness. I too am proud of being an African American. I am really proud about that. Even within myself, I’ve seen myself grow as an individual, but seeing our history and seeing how we went through pain, I see that it’s instilled in us. It’s part of our culture. It’s part of us to still rise to the occasion, use our strength, our courage, just bringing it. I think that’s not something that a lot of different races have… I also consider myself a naturalist; I wear my hair in its natural state. I don’t do a lot of products, so when I wear my hair in my Afro, my professors and other people misinterpret my Afro as a form of protest … Like I’m supposed to act a certain way. And I’m like “No,” I’m just trying to get back to what my mom used to do with my hair.

**Fundi:** That’s crazy … so people assume because you wear an Afro you’re suppose to be pro-Black … That’s messed up. When I hear stuff like that, I get really upset. It happens to me all the time. When people see me, they assume I am mixed – which I am, but I am Black and really get ticked off when people refer to me as bi-racial.

**Gina:** Being that I’m so light-skinned I’m viewed differently by a lot of people. Because I’m so light, a lot of people, even my own grandpa, don’t see me as Black. I feel sometimes my grandma even, the ones that raised me, they raised me in their “White way.” Some people when they look at me, they see Black and then sometimes I’m so White that people just don’t know. I identify more with being Black. I feel more connected to my Black counterparts and Black culture. I’m treated as though I’m more Black than White because White people don’t accept me as being White, because I am not just White, so I feel like I’m treated that way, and I think just being a Black woman is like living in a world inside of a world. I do think that I am privileged in a lot of ways than other colored people because I haven’t experienced a lot of racial trauma. I think that I’m really just an exception to the rule for some reason.
**Fundi:** When I was with my ex he had this weird thing about Black people. He wasn’t mostly racist; he was extra racist… I remember he would make comments about Black people and I was like, “Where is this coming from?” I think he thought maybe because I was lighter skinned that I was different. I couldn’t make the things make sense in my head because I was Black but he was saying things about Black people that I just couldn’t understand … I was like, “Well, then why are you with me?”… He was making me feel like I wasn't good enough or that anyone else wasn’t good enough. It almost made me not want to be light-skinned because he made me ashamed to be light-skinned. That’s what he did. I think that had some effect on me.

**Lorraine:** You all bring up some important points. Loving yourself, how other people view your Blackness, and how you chose to define yourself are critical to building positive Black identity. Are there other examples of how you have experience being a Black woman on campus?

**Lizzie:** Yeah… I feel being at a predominately White school I do get noticed, like “Oh, there's an African American female walking by.” I do every now and then see different stereotypes, or people sometimes make me feel inferior. Sometimes I bypass it… but I do feel a little bit inferior when I get noticed in my classes. Teachers would ask me questions that really did not relate to the class assignment. It just made me feel like I was not a part of the group.

**Lorraine:** It’s unfortunate that you all have to experience these feelings of isolation or being the only one. You feel like there is a spotlight on you all the time. I have had similar experiences throughout my college career. Has anyone else had a similar experience?
MaKayla: I have also felt isolated in my classes. Being the only person of color, the only woman of color in classes has been difficult. When completing group assignments or projects and I’m the only person of color in the group, what I have to say is often overlooked or questioned more than a student of a different background. I feel like my opinions aren’t valued as much as others. Even though I may be right and know exactly what I’m talking about, it’s always questioned compared to another White person in the group. They [White students] don’t get questioned or ridiculed about their answer. It’s just taken as it is. For me it’s questioned or ignored even, like people talk over what I have to say. I think this can be really problematic because it puts out the idea that what I have to say doesn’t matter and doesn’t have substance or validity because I am prejudiced because of my skin tone. This makes me feel angry, mostly because my opinion matters and just because my classmates can’t see that doesn’t mean they should be able to negatively affect my education.

Lorraine: You are right, MaKayla. You do matter! I am sorry you had to experience that. Being silenced or being invalidated because of your race or gender is not okay.

Gina: My first experience of feeling excluded was during my freshman year… This sounds really stupid, but I didn’t know there were Black and White sororities, so I went to the general sorority meeting. There was obviously, what was it called, rush day? There were hundreds of people there. I was in a group and I was the only person of color there. They were all talking to each other. Nobody would talk to me. I would introduce myself and people would just side-eye me. Then we were playing this game, this group game. Each person had to go in the circle and say something and the other group members, they were supposed to engage with you. You could be out of the circle and someone could go back in. Everyone did fine, but when it was my turn, no one said a word to me.
Lorraine: Wow – what a terrible experience.

Lizzie: *I am so sorry that happened to you Gina.*

Gina: *It really was... The group leader had to step in and be like, “All right, let’s do something else” because it was so awkward.*

Lorraine: *That’s unfortunate.*

Gina: *It really was!! After that experience I hung out with people of color from the learning community that I was in because I felt more comfortable there!*

Fundi: *Having other people around that look like you really makes a difference. When I started my freshman year, I was the only Black person in all my classes. I remember I had a chemistry class, and it had to be like 200 people in that class, and there was only one other Black girl; we nodded and I sat down…this was natural. I think that the idea of not being alone but knowing that you're completely different than everybody else makes you question who you are.*

Lorraine: *I agree. Visibility matters, but also validation matters. So tonight, I thank you all for sharing your experiences of being Black women in college. I heard frustrations; I heard affirmations, validations, and purpose. I want to encourage you all to seek out those individuals and spaces that allow you to be your authentic selves. Spaces where you don’t have to second-guess who you are or question if you belong! You all belong here and as Black women, you matter!*
MaKayla: Being able to see a lot of strong great Black women who I can look up to on campus, that are getting their work done and being an influence on other Black women on campus, has made a positive impact on me. I have people talk to me about my struggle on a predominantly White campus. I think it’s been empowering, which is kind of funny in a way because you think if you’re looking at yourself and people see you as this and that, then you must not see value in yourself, but I’ve never loved being a Black girl as much as I have this year.

Fundi: I don’t know... I hope this doesn’t come off the wrong way, but I am hesitant to say that when I think of Black, I think of strong Black and independent, because I feel like that’s something that’s been placed on us… After I read [the book] *Sister Citizen*, I feel like it’s something as though we’re pushing back versus the jezebel spirit stereotype that’s been put on us.

Lorraine: *Sister Citizen* is a great book; I highly recommend it, if you have not read it yet.

Fundi: Yes, it was a great book! There are so many identities that you can have that I think being Black is my top one; being Black, being a woman, so really I think it’s being comfortable and being proud and having the traits and characteristics that make me.

MaKayla: *I agree with that*. I think I was trying to say that being able to see people who have gone before me and done great things and have carried other people in the process, it’s just awesome to see… it’s caused me to love where I come from because we (Black women) are seen as the lowest of the low, yet we are still doing amazing things. So I love being a Black woman.
Lorraine: It is very empowering to see other Black women doing great things – especially in a challenging environment as you all described. I think that visible presence allows us to see our own potential and even gives us reassurance that we are okay, too. Fundi, you look like you are pondering something.

Fundi: I was thinking about how I view my race and gender. For me, I see myself as a Black woman and I don’t necessarily separate the two… I feel like it’s really hard to put one above another. I also feel like if I do put one above the other I’m not giving enough credit to one part of me.

Lorraine: Excellent point, Fundi. The idea of viewing your race and gender as a whole and not as separate parts speaks to the idea of intersectionality. However, intersectionality is much more than categories. It involves how systems of power are used to marginalize and oppress certain groups of people. It’s so important to embrace all the characteristics that make us who we are, but it can also be difficult when the structure around you is uniquely set up to see you fail.

MaKayla: Can I just say – thank you for doing this! I really enjoyed my time tonight and I am looking forward to our next meet-up.

Echoes of “Yes,” head nodding and fingers snaps follow MaKayla’s affirmation of gratitude.

Lorraine: I really enjoyed it as well. What I heard tonight in your stories is that finding ways to appreciate your race and gender is important. Programs like the women of color retreat can be helpful in exposing you to other Black women on campus. I also heard that the college environment poses many challenges to you all in an attempt to maintain a positive Black sense of self. You all provided examples where your identities were called into question, either you weren’t Black enough, or
woman enough. I hope you all know that you are enough and you matter. Thank you all for your willingness to share your stories.

**Gina:** Thank you, Lorraine, for creating a space for us.

**Lizzie:** Yes, thank you. This was awesome, I am so glad I came.

**Lorraine:** You’re welcome! We will definitely continue our conversation at our next meet-up. Please remember to continue to practice self-care.

**Poem and narrative summary**

The poem “Blackness” and previous narrative provides further evidence to support the theme, Self-definition, and reflects the complexities of how the Black college women in the study experienced race and gender. The narratives reveal how the women in the study understood their identities, namely their Black identities. Blackness was described as a sense of pride through knowing the history of Black people’s struggle. There is pride in owning one’s Black identity; seeing race first and honoring one’s race have been both a spoken and unspoken expectation for what it means to be Black. The lines “Blackness is my badge of honor/ My calling card” point to the “race-first mentality.”

**Being Black and a woman**

The subtheme *Being Black and a Woman* describes the race-first mentality that was present throughout the participants’ narratives. In both Fundi’s and Gina’s narratives, they said their skin color and their Blackness were called into question. Both women made it clear that although they appear light-skinned they identify as Black. These women also recognized that there were individuals who felt that being light-skinned was
better than being dark-skinned or Black. Fundi talked about her abusive relationship with her ex-boyfriend and how he admired her light skin, but spoke negatively about people with darker skin. This experience caused her to dislike who she was as a Black woman.

The idea that being lighter-skinned makes you more desirable reinforces to Black women that being or appearing White is better than being Black. The lighter you are, and the more White you look, apparently make Black women more accepted than being dark-skinned or Black. Gina also shared that she was raised in a White environment that did see and acknowledge her Blackness. The White culture that she was raised in did not accept her as being White enough; she instead connected with her Black culture by embracing her Blackness. She also experienced how being light-skinned had afforded her certain privileges. Both MaKayla and Lizzie talked about their gender identity in terms of beauty standards, specifically how they were perceived for wearing their hair natural, and how White peers and faculty interacted with them differently. What the women described is an example of colorism, which is defined as discrimination based on skin tone.

In this instance, the women’s narratives showed that connecting with other Black women around issues of race and gender were liberating experiences. The difficulty of maintaining one’s Black identity and the practice of self-love was also manifested in Fundi’s story as she shared the challenges she faced. The women were asked to talk about their identities and they all discussed their racial identity, but only talked about their gender identity in conjunction with their racial identity. Lizzie also reflected on how she has embraced her Black identity and the pride she feels owning her Blackness, as well as some of the challenges she has encountered because of her Black skin. Although the women in this study learned to embrace their Black identity, there was evidence in their
stories of the ways in which individuals in the college environment challenged their racial and gender identity, which led to them questioning their sense of Black pride.

The line “My woman-ness/Fights to be seen” points to how the Black women in the study talked about their gender as secondary, or an afterthought. Although they acknowledged their gender identity, it was clear that their racial identity was more salient. Specifically, MaKayla connected her Blackness to her gender as she reflected on her journey towards self-acceptance. Her statement, “I’ve never loved being a Black girl as much I have this year.” is an example of her newly formed identity, which she takes pride in. However, MaKayla’s journey towards developing self-love was not easy. Prior to coming to college, she shared how she did not appreciate her Blackness. She stated that because she has connected with other Black women, she has come to realize that “Black girls are beautiful.” For MaKayla, embracing her racial and gender identity did not happen overnight. It was a process, and within that process of learning to appreciate and love her Black skin, she was able to see her Black beauty for what it is.

Narrative 2: Naming

*Is this really abuse? (Fundi)*

*Something Happened*

For a long time there was denial
Blame
Guilt
Shame
But I knew
I knew
I knew
Deep down
Something happened
For a long time the memories were vivid
They were real
They felt real
As real as the touch of cold ice on my tongue
I knew
I knew
Deep down
Something happened

For a long time there were doubts
I had questions
Was I dreaming?
Does it have a name?
What do I call it?
Should I say it out loud?
Would anyone hear me?
Did something happen?

For a long time I needed answers
Answers to my memories
My doubts and my fears
Because
I knew
I knew
Deep down
Something happened

Naming (Theme 2)

The second major theme was Naming. As the women shared their stories, it was evident they were grappling with describing their abuse and acknowledging that their abuse had occurred. The types of abuse the women described were emotional, sexual, and physical. While it was clear they could easily reflect on sexual abuse and physical abuse, they had difficulty categorizing emotional abuse as real abuse. This is particularly significant because the participants’ apprehension was directly linked to the campus culture around relationship violence. As college campuses continue to focus solely on the prevalence of rape and sexual assault, it creates the perception that other forms of abuse,
including emotional abuse, are less valid. The two subthemes, *Is it Really Abuse?* and *Messages About Relationship Violence* are further illustrated in the following narrative.

**Sister circle meet-up #2**

**Lorraine:** Hello, ladies!! It’s good to see you all tonight. Last week we talked about how things were going for you all on campus and it seemed everyone had similar stories. At the end of the meeting, I asked that you all practice self-care, so before we get into our conversation tonight, I want to know, how have you been practicing self-care?

**Lizzie:** Classes are going well… I have a lot to do this semester since I am graduating in the spring, so if I look a bit out of it, just know that I am juggling a lot!

**Lorraine:** That’s good to know. Make sure you are doing what you need to do to manage your stress level. It can be difficult, but with support you can minimize your stress.

**MaKayla:** What do you mean by self-care?

**Lorraine:** Great question, MaKayla! When I say self-care, I am talking about the activities or actions that you are doing to de-stress, relax, and to re-center you mind, body, and spirit. You can think of self-care as rebuilding your mental, emotional, and physical self.

**MaKayla:** Thanks, that explanation helps!

**Gina:** For me, I really have just been doing really well. If I don’t want to do something, I don’t do it. That sounds really bad, but if I am having a really rough day, I’ll ask my supervisor if I can leave, or if I can afford to
miss class because I’m going through something challenging, I don’t go to class. I pray or rest or I do something that makes me feel good ... or process it with someone.

**Lorraine:** That’s great, Gina. It sounds like you have found what works for you.

**Fundi:** Before y’all came in I was telling Lorraine about my first semester in grad school, which is a whole lot different than undergrad! I am working on my time management and trying not to fall behind in my classes. I feel like I am busy all the time, but the one thing I make time for is church. I love spending time with my church family, so going to Bible study has definitely helped me manage my stress.

**Lorraine:** I am glad you all are doing well and finding ways to take care of yourselves. Our time today will be spent talking about how you have experienced relationship violence as Black college women. So when you hear that term, relationship violence, what immediately comes to mind?

**Gina:** When I think of relationship violence, I think about dating violence. I don’t know why I have correlated the two...

**Lorraine:** Yes, relationship violence does encompass dating violence, but it also includes sexual/gender harassment, sexual coercion, sexual abuse, stalking, sexual assault, rape, dating violence, and domestic violence.

**Fundi:** I would consider [relationship violence] to be actions or behaviors that are harmful to a person physically or emotionally; something that would either harm them or make them feel less than or inadequate to their normal self or their well-being. Pretty much anything that disrupts their normal well-being in the form of a behavior in the relationship
**Gina:** Okay. That makes sense!

**MaKayla:** I feel like when we're talking about abusive relationships, a lot of times we leave out the emotional kind or aspect of it. It’s not really real unless you’re getting hit, but that’s not always the case.

**Lorraine:** I agree with y’all. While it can be difficult to see emotional abuse, I believe emotional/psychological abuse is as impactful as physical abuse and sexual abuse.

**Fundi:** Yeah, when I was younger, emotional abuse was not considered abuse. That was just considered part of life… I grew up in a very abusive home. My step-dad was an alcoholic and he used to beat me…. I grew up in a physically abusive home. Now, after the fact, I know the effects of emotional abuse, but I think beforehand I didn’t realize how, not detrimental, but how impactful emotional abuse was because I was so used to the physical one. It’s easy if I was in a physically abusive relationship to see it. I’d be like, “Oh, no. This is not going to happen.” The abuse being emotional snuck up on me. I didn’t think my relationship with my ex was unhealthy [emotionally abusive]. He was not hitting me, so it’s not unhealthy [abuse]. Obviously I was wrong.

**Lorraine:** Say more about that, Fundi. What made the relationship with your ex unhealthy?

**Fundi:** At first I thought they were games that we played, I thought they were just games, and in actuality they weren’t just games. At first I was like, “Cool, this is normal,” but I don’t really have anything to compare it to because my mom was single as I was growing up and I had a step dad who was abusive, but he was very apparent about his abusiveness, so
when he would throw something or hit somebody, you knew it was abusive. The way my relationship with my ex was, it wasn’t violent most of the time, and so it didn’t seem unhealthy.

**Lorraine:** So these “games” turned into more aggressive behavior – both verbally and physically?

**Fundi:** Yes. It wasn’t violent most of the time, like I would say one or two times I felt I couldn’t do it anymore. It was a very manipulative relationship, very emotionally messy. He wanted me to stop talking to my friends, so I ended up for the most part cutting off all my friends. He wanted me to be covered up because of his religion. He was trying to tear me down… I just cried too many times. It was just crazy.

**Lizzie:** My situation was verbal and emotional abuse... It was really a mind game. He was really playing a lot of mind games with me like “Oh, yeah, we’re not together” or “Oh, yeah, we’re together.” He said I was nothing, and I would never be with him. It was a lot of negative feedback from him, and that’s when I shut down… At the time, I was really emotional about being wanted. The fact that he wanted me, I was like, oh, I went for it. He was claiming me, and not a lot of guys did that.

**Lorraine:** It sounds like a very emotionally abusive relationship. Thanks for sharing.

**Lizzie:** I wasn’t sure until it actually happened, then I had to re-think it. Is this really abuse? ... I feel like mine was so minor, but it also impacted me in a huge way, that I can't imagine someone who’s been through it ten times worse. It hurts. That’s why sometimes I don’t feel like I went through anything, but any form of abuse is abuse.
Lorraine: Yes, any form of abuse is abuse, even emotional abuse. Lizzie, your situation provides an example of how abuse can be mentally controlling and strip you of your power. It can also be an invalidating experience.

MaKayla: *I can relate to what Lizzie and Fundi experienced.* With me, I was in an emotionally abusive situation. I think it’s probably the best way to describe… I was talking to this guy, we weren’t even dating… it was always okay for me to validate him and help him go through what he was going through, but whenever I felt like I needed to express how I felt about something it was always, “Oh, you’re fine. It’s not a big deal.”

Lorraine: Say more, MaKayla. Can you share about your situation?

MaKayla: That’s how I felt at the time. I was questioning how I felt. Even though I would feel a certain way, I would feel upset because of something my abuser was saying to me. I was second-guessing myself, like I must be analyzing this the wrong way. It must be my fault!

Gina: *I too have* blamed myself and I've wondered why it happened twice or why it happened at all. What about me would attract perpetrators? I've had those thoughts and I have those feelings.

Lorraine: Blaming yourself, questioning yourself, and second-guessing your emotional responses to abuse is common. Trust me – it was not your fault!

MaKayla: I remember at one point we were arguing about something he did to me, and I told him I was going to cut off what we had going on. I was going to stop talking to him and that’s when he would tell me all lies, make false promises about what he was going to do, how he was going to
be there for me, which was a lie to get me to stay. My abuser would say the things that I wanted to hear and be, like, don’t make a big deal of this because if you do make a big deal of it, then I’m not going to keep showing my affection toward you in the way that you want. So in that way he was manipulative.

**Lorraine:** It sounds like it. It is hard to trust when your ability to trust was taken away from you. From what you all have shared – emotional abuse is abuse and can have a negative impact on how you view yourself, but also your interactions with other individuals. As we wrap up today, are there any final thoughts anyone would like to share?

**Gina:** I don’t have anything else to share

**MaKayla:** No, I am good, I think I shared enough.

*There is a collective sigh and Fundi and Lizzie look at each other and laugh.*

**Poem and narrative summary**

The poem “Something Happened” reflects the ambiguity of the women’s defining and naming their abuse. The premise of the poem speaks to how the women grappled with the reality of their abuse. The different emotions they experienced, from doubt, self-blame, shame, to questioning if, in fact, they were making a bigger deal about their situation than it was. All contributed to how they defined and named their abuse. Three of the four participants experienced emotional abuse and were challenged by whether their feelings, thoughts, and overall experiences would be seen as valid. Both the poem and narrative point to the contradiction of the feelings and emotions associated with being abused and naming the abuse. The act of knowing – both subconsciously and consciously – that something happened is an attempt to capture the internal struggle these women
faced in convincing themselves that they were, in fact, in an emotionally abusive relationship. Furthermore, being able to name the action associated with the abuse was also a critical step in their process of naming and defining.

*Is this really abuse?*

The subtheme *Is This Really Abuse?* describes the uncertainty of the participants’ responses to their abusive situations. The women in this study were not only conflicted in managing the emotional affects of their abuse, but they all went through a process of recognizing their experience as abuse. The idea that real abuse meant having scars or showed evidence of physical trauma was implied in the women’s narrative. The line in the poem, “for a long time I had denial,” speaks to how the women in the study struggled with coming to terms with owning their experience as abuse victims.

*Messages about relationship violence*

The subtheme *Messages About Relationship Violence* describes the different messages the women received about the different types of abuse, namely emotional abuse. It was clear from their narratives that the women had experienced or received messages about abuse prior to coming to college and throughout their time in college. The sentiment regarding abuse expressed by these women can be related to their socialization and the messages they received growing up, about what abuse looked like, and can also be attributed to the messages they receive in their college environment. The messages they got from first-hand experience of being a child abuse survivor or witnessing abuse informed how the women responded to their own abuse.

The Black women in the study shared how emotional abuse was a significant element of their college experience. However, in the college environment, the focus has
been on rape and sexual assault. What is problematic about only having this focus on abuse is that it leaves women questioning the validity of their abuse experiences. In addition, by naming and defining their abuse as emotional, the participants showed they were not using the same language as college administrators to describe their experiences, specifically when their psychological and emotional abuse did not escalate to physical violence.

**Narrative 3: Survival**

*That wall was thick. (Lizzie)*

**My Wall Was Thick**

My wall was thick  
My wall was survival  
A shield – My breastplate of armor  
No one could get in  
I could not get out  

My wall was safe  
My wall was protection  
Protection from the wind  
The rain  
The sun  
My wall was pain  
My wall was joy  
Joy in light  
Joy in darkness – my comfort  
No one got in  
I could not get out  

My wall was freedom  
My wall was power  
Free to decide who could get in/when I got out  
My wall was my prison  
My [quiet] solitude  
My escape  
My burial ground
No one got in
I could not get out

My wall did not protect me
I was a prisoner
Covered in fear
Stifled by pain
Suffocated by memories
Steeped of shame

My wall was thick
My wall was me

**Survival (Theme 3)**

The third major theme derived from the women’s sharing was Survival. This theme captures their attempts to make sense of their abuse in relation to their prior victimization. In doing so, the women articulated their practice of self-care. Survival for these Black college women meant acknowledging their prior victimization and how it connected to their current abuse. The poem “My Wall Was Thick” expresses the emotional barriers the participants experienced and the ways in which such barriers hindered their healing process. The women shared how limiting their interactions with peers were, carefully observing others, and limiting interactions with those they deemed a threat to their overall safety, namely men, as deliberate acts of survival. The practice of self-care was an intentional act of survival described throughout the women’s narratives. Engaging in activities that were uplifting (counseling, yoga, exercise, journaling, positive affirmations, and having a spiritual connection with God and/or a religious practice) contributed to the participants’ survival. To fully explore the ways in which the women interpreted their survival, I developed two subthemes: *Residual Affects of Childhood Abuse* and *The Practice of Self-Care/Love*. The following narrative illustrates these.
Sister circle meet-up #3

Lorraine: Hello, ladies. Thank you all for coming to the meet-up. I really appreciate your commitment to the group. Last week we got to know each other a little better and talked a great deal about your race and your gender. Before we get into our discussion today, I wanted to know how you all are doing, and what you have done to practice self-care?

MaKayla: My week has been good… it’s been good.

Lizzie: It’s been a busy week for me. I have a few projects due, so I’ve just been busy with trying to meet some deadlines.

Lorraine: What about you Gina – how has your week been?

Gina: My week has been good. I too have a lot going on. I have been working on this research proposal that’s due in May, so like you, Lizzie, I have been trying to meet my deadlines.

Lorraine: And, Fundi, what about you? How are things in your world?

Fundi: Honestly, I am doing great. Work has been a bit busy, but nothing to complain about. I’ve been good.

Lorraine: Have you all been practicing self-care this week?

MaKayla: So, when I'm at home my mom has a bunch of coloring books for me, so I have just been taking time to color. It helps me to not have to make any grand decisions or anything. It's just, like, calming.
Lorraine: That’s great, MaKayla. I’ve heard great things about those coloring books. Glad you found time to relax.

Lizzie: I’ve been journaling and I work out a lot. My therapist also recommended meditation, and I also do that too. It has helped me just being at one with myself.

Fundi: My church is really what gets me going. I feel renewed when I attend Bible study, so I make it a point to try and go each week, whether it’s church on Sunday or Bible study on Wednesday.

Gina: For me, I talk to God… and I spend time with God, just lean on that, lean on my faith, and I have a lot of people that care and love me…

Lorraine: Great. I am glad that you are all spending time taking care of yourselves. In our discussion this evening, I wanted to continue our conversation from last week. You all shared how you have experienced relationship violence, so I am interested in learning how those experiences impacted your quality of life as Black college women.

Fundi: Oh, my gosh! I don’t like to admit it, but I feel like I put the relationship as a priority. And that it was all about him and feeding him and making sure he was okay and spending time with him. I always made him a priority instead of my studies… Instead of my friends… And so I isolated myself from the only friends I had because of him.

MaKayla: I feel like I was a lot surer of myself before I met this person. Then after, I felt there was a time when I was deciding whether or not I was going to cut this person out of my life or not. When I realized how hard that was to do for me, that’s when I started questioning myself a lot because I hadn’t realized I had been that invested, or let myself get that close to the person.
**Fundi:** In a relationship I always think that… I think it’s okay to be a little selfish in this instance because it should be about how can you grow and how this relationship is helping. I think sometimes I didn’t evaluate how healthy the relationship was; I was like it’s a relationship. I think I got too caught up in the emotion of it…I wasn’t being reasonable; I wasn’t trying to look out for myself. I think I was just looking out for that gratification of the relationship.

**Lorraine:** While in hindsight, your priorities may have centered on your abusers – you did not ask to be abused. Even if you did make him less of a priority, you are not responsible for his actions or the emotional abuse you endured.

**Fundi:** Yes, you are right about that!

**Lizzie:** My freshman year I completely shut down. I was suffering from a little depression. I isolated myself... Before being sexually involved and having bad experiences with guys, I really didn’t talk to anyone; I was pretty much a loner. The only person that I really talked to was my roommate because we lived together. Every once in a while, I would say ‘hello,’ but I never really hung out with anyone. I think toward the end of my first semester I started talking to people, but for the most part, I was pretty shut down.

**Lorraine:** What do you mean you were “shut down?” Say more about that!

**Lizzie:** I had a block. That wall was thick! It was pretty thick. No one could come through it. No one could get under it. I kept a brick wall up when it came to guys trying to talk to me.

**Lorraine:** So you essentially closed yourself off to guys.
Lizzie: Yes! Yes, I did!

Lorraine: Thanks for sharing that Lizzie. Can anyone else relate to what Lizzie has shared?

Gina: I can definitely relate to that! I don’t think I’ve ever had a positive view of men, just because I never had a father figure. But I, like, did trust them, and have a semi-healthy relationship, but I feel like after I was [sexually assaulted] I’ve seen men as the enemy, and after that experience I felt like every man hurt me, either physically or sexually or emotionally.

Fundi: Yeah, Gina, sometimes I feel the same way. I think I had my priorities wrong and I didn’t like to admit it because I would like to think that I am a reasonable person. Usually I am a reasonable person, but I think growing up I think I didn’t have that role model that kind of set an example of what a relationship is suppose to be like. My dad was in jail, and my mom was with every other who knows who, so I think going into it, I always thought like those people who were in violent relationships, well, what’s wrong with you? Just leave. I realize that it was not as easy as it seemed.

Lizzie: I feel the same way Gina, I was so fed up with men treating me with so much disrespect and hurting me verbally and mentally. I couldn't take it anymore. I felt like men just manipulate women and make them do things they don’t want to do. I became really mean, though. I didn’t take anything from anyone. A hello was too much. I would flip out. My friends would look at me like, “Lizzie, calm down. He just said ‘hello.’” He just wanted to greet you.” I was like, “No.” I was just so ‘no’ to everything.

MaKayla: I think that after my situation I kind of felt unsure of things. Guys have tried to talk to me, but I just feel like I can’t trust them completely, just because of what I had just been through.
**Gina:** I’m trying to learn to not group all men together, but it’s hard… Recently, I started a new relationship and it’s everything that I’ve ever prayed for. But I’ve noticed how hard it is for me to really open up my heart completely because all I’ve ever been exposed to is people that treat me bad, and I almost found comfort in that because it’s familiar, and this isn’t familiar because it’s so good. So it just scares the hell out of me. I am trying to learn how to trust slowly and open myself up completely, but I think just my past and, like, my lack of relationships with men, just really make that difficult for me.

**Lorraine:** Yeah, that’s a tough place to be in, but it’s definitely understandable for sure. It is okay for you to feel scared, distrustful, and unsure. It will definitely take time to get to a place where you feel you safe and secure.

**Gina:** It’s hard to trust people; it’s hard to feel normal sometimes, I guess, because I feel like I have a lot of stipulations to what’s comfortable to me at times… My situation made me distrustful of people, even severely, and fearful of people, or things, or situations, and that’s how my view of men changed.

**Lizzie:** Yeah… I completely shut down. I kept myself in a little box. I kept myself in my room. I would go work out or dance, but that was pretty much it. I didn’t talk to any people, really. The spring of my freshman year I really started talking to people, but I still had this mentality that men are lowdown, dirty dogs.

**MaKayla:** It’s crazy because I understand why I’ve built up a wall somewhat. I feel like I was just a very much happier, carefree person
before the incident, and I’m trying to get back to that because I haven’t
been.

**Fundi:** Sometimes I pretended there was nothing wrong. I didn’t want to
make a big deal out of it, but there were times that I wanted out.

**Gina:** I think I was so cautious, and I was so fearful. I didn’t go out a lot, I
didn’t meet the people. I didn’t meet people the way that I wanted to just
because, I don’t know, I was just really scared…. I never veered out of my
comfort zone to find new friends or do new things just because that was
too scary for me….

**Lorraine:** Thank you for sharing. Being vulnerable and opening up
yourself to someone can be a difficult process, especially when your prior
experiences have been negative. Trusting people and opening yourself up
will take time as you all continue to work on healing. You all mentioned
that you’re in therapy, using your support networks, and talking to friends.
Tell me more about your healing process.

**Lizzie:** I went to therapy. I also went through an emotional roller coaster
talking to one guy. I couldn’t figure him out. My friends got tired of
hearing about him, so I was like, “Okay, I need to talk to someone about
this because this is getting too overwhelming for me to function. I can’t
have that.” It really helped me because I didn’t know what I wanted in a
male. I thought if I talked to someone who actually listened, I would
probably figure it out for myself. I did.

**Lorraine:** That’s great, Lizzie! I am glad you made that decision to seek
help.

**Fundi:** I also ended up going to counseling, which was not easy for me
because I absolutely hate counseling. I was younger… so I’ve been to
counseling a lot and let me tell you, counselors do not like me. I was like,
I don’t need to be here, I had an attitude … I am not an open person. I keep my thoughts to myself, and so it wasn’t something that I would first go to, but I was at a point where I didn’t know what else to do.

**Lorraine:** That’s great! Asking for help is not an easy thing to do. I am really happy that you made the decision to seek counseling. It is such an important step in the healing process.

**Fundi:** The counselor who was doing my intake reminded me of the best friend I had in high school, so I kind of felt like… it just worked. I think if it wasn’t her, if it was some White person, I probably wouldn’t go through with it. But because it was her and because she reminded me so much of my best friend, it just worked. I went back every week and it just worked…. I kind of feel like my world was coming back to normal, to the way it was supposed to be.

**Lorraine:** That’s great, Fundi! I am happy you connected with your counselor and that you feel things are getting back to normal. What has your process been, MaKayla?

**MaKayla:** *For me,* I wrote a letter to him about how he had hurt me and how what he did to me made me feel. Then I talked to him about it because I wanted him to understand why I was upset. Not necessarily for him to ask for forgiveness or anything like that but because I felt like I needed closure to let out where I had felt like I had been wronged. I did that to help me in the healing process to get over it a little more too.

**Lorraine:** Great job, MaKayla!!

**MaKayla:** I think that it was really hard for me to see that I deserved better, I think that was hard for me. I struggled a lot understanding that I can be alone and that that’s better than being hurt over and over again.
Lizzie: It hurts that I had to go through that, I told myself, “I’m not going to go through anything that my mom and my sister had gone through…” Maybe it’s a curse…

Lorraine: What do you mean by “it’s a curse”? 

Lizzie: Because it happened to my mom. She was in an abusive relationship, my sister was in an abusive relationship, and my grandmother was, too. I’m like, what is this? Is it a pattern?

Gina: I've also blamed myself and I've wondered why it happened twice, or why it happened at all. What about me would attract perpetrators? I've had those thoughts and I have those feelings, but I mean, sometimes I have them because my healing isn’t linear.

MaKayla: Yeah, I always blamed myself a lot, even though it’s not my fault. I think how I feel sometimes correlates to when I was sexually abused; it was when I was really young. I didn't even know how to deal with it, because I didn't know that it was an issue. That’s how normalized I was to it, which is really, really sad.

Fundi: It’s funny you should say that MaKayla, because I also grew up thinking my abuse was normal. With my ex, it snuck up on me. I didn’t know it until it was happening, so I didn’t realize it. I wasn’t prepared for it… When I was younger, I didn’t realize until later, that a lot of the stuff, I didn’t know was wrong. Like when I was growing up, I didn’t know that us not having food was not normal, and I didn’t know not having heat was not normal, or living in a house with cockroaches all over was not normal, or having, like, my mom’s boyfriend being drunk all the time and, like, hitting people, and lashing out, and punching holes through walls is like… I thought it was normal, so I didn’t realize it wasn’t normal until, like, high school.
Lorraine: Self-blame is a common response to abuse. I also believe that understanding how your environment contributes to how we respond to situations is also important.

MaKayla: I also think that the same mindset of blaming myself and not dealing with it could have been why I stayed in the situation that I was in for so long, for as long as I did, because it was like, “Oh, I’m the one who’s being irrational.” It was those same mindsets repeating themselves. “I’m the one who’s irrational.” Just over-emotional, or reading the situation the wrong way. Both of those instances, I was valid for what I felt, and I’m learning, but it’s hard to break.

Lorraine: Yes… as Gina mentioned, the healing process is not linear. You will have moments when you are confident and sure of yourself, and you will also have moments where you question yourself. I just want you to know that. You are not to be blamed. You never asked to be victimized! You never entered that relationship asking to be abused!

Gina: It’s a process. You have your highs and your lows along the way. I had little stages of brilliance, I guess, but it took some time. Times of understanding, times of relief, or even times of feeling grateful for what I went through. Being like, “Hmm. Thank you for that, because I wouldn’t have been where I would have been without it.”

MaKayla: I think I’ve gotten a lot better... I’ve been able to find places that validate the way that I feel. My mom was actually a help to me with this. When it comes to counseling and things like that, she’s helped me, and told me that it’s okay to go to counseling, and that it’s okay to not feel okay sometimes, and that we don’t always have to push things away, I guess.

Lorraine: Your mom sounds like an incredible person, MaKayla. That’s wonderful that she is able to support you when you need it.
Gina: My sisters, they’re also survivors as well because my older sister molested them too. My youngest sister, it doesn’t really affect her, now it doesn’t. But the sister that’s a year younger than me, it really affects her. So I think, just, I don’t know. I think, as weird as it sounds, it’s like a reminder of how I could be if I don’t continue moving forward.

Lorraine: It breaks my heart to learn the depth of your abuse, but it also makes me hopeful that you all are finding ways to move forward.

Lizzie: I had to re-evaluate a lot of things in my life, but once I was able to be aware and reflect on a lot of things that were going on, and just observing from afar, I was able to think more clearly about relationships and everything. Also seeing my friends be in relationships and see what’s healthy and not healthy, that helped me.

MaKayla: I’ve learned that your emotions, no matter what they are, are valid. Even if someone’s telling you that you’re being sensitive, or that you’re being over-emotional, that’s on them. I feel like it’s their problem if they can’t deal with your emotions, and not necessarily you’re the one that’s wrong for having those emotions. I’ve learned to validate myself and surround myself with people who are going to not judge me for how I feel, but how can we sort through emotions and stuff like that?

Lizzie: If you don’t, some bad people are going to come into your life and try to bring you down, make you feel even worse about who you are. Being able to know who you are, knowing your values and what you want. Knowing why you came to college. Not dwelling on who hurt you today and made you feel like you weren’t anything to them. Knowing that you do have to love yourself. You do have to be really in tune with yourself for you to continue to talk to anyone, or get yourself involved in certain situations.
Lorraine: Thanks, Lizzie, for sharing that. I agree that finding ways to love yourself and validate who you are is important.

Fundi: So true!

Gina: Yes! I completely agree!

The women all begin to snap their fingers in unison.

Lorraine: I think this would be a good time for us to wrap up today. I really want to thank you all for opening up today. I know that it was a bit challenging reflecting back on your abuse, so I am appreciative of your honesty in talking about your healing journey. What I heard you all share today was your emotional process that has brought you to this point of your lives. Your ability to acknowledge your abuse and your methods of coping are a critical step in rebuilding your self-confidence as Black college women. While you all are at different stages in the healing process, I hope you know that you are on the right path. Continue to work on self-care and finding positive ways to cope. I also want to offer myself as an additional resource. Feel free to stop by my office any time. My door will also be open to you.

Poem and narrative summary

The third major theme was that of Survival. The women in the study shared stories about how they developed survival strategies to cope with their abuse trauma. The poem “My Wall Was Thick” illustrates the depths of the women’s abuse and served as a barrier to protect against further victimization and from men. The wall was essentially a survival mechanism. While the women understood that they did not cause their own victimization, it was apparent that their coping strategies were connected to their attempt to regain control of their lives. To fully explore the ways in which the
women interpreted survival, I developed two sub-themes: *Residual Effects of Childhood Abuse* and *The Practice of Self-Care/Love*

*The residual effects of childhood abuse*

The subtheme *The Residual Effects of Childhood Abuse* describes how the women’s past abuse impacted how they were dealing with their current abuse. All four women spoke about the struggle to protect themselves from re-victimization. They also reflected on how the emotional walls they put up were due to the residual effects of childhood abuse. All four women experienced some form of child abuse prior to attending college. The “wall” also manifested as lack of trust, self-isolation, and self-blame. The women’s narratives reflected their lack of trust in men, but also how they used their emotional wall as a significant barrier to navigate the college environment. The line, “No one got in/I could not get out.” describes the ongoing struggle of these women to allow men a chance to hurt them emotionally, physically, or sexually. It also illustrates the women’s decision to share their experience of abuse with others, despite fear it would open them up to re-victimization.

*The practice of self-care*

The subtheme *The Practice of Self-Care* was significant to the women’s ongoing recovery process. The “wall” became a way for these women to re-establish control of their woman-ness. The line “my wall was safe, my wall was protection” describes how the women attempted to shield themselves emotionally. While the wall provided a sanctuary for healing and regaining control, it further isolated the women in their recovery process. The notion that the wall was keeping them a prisoner was salient as they talked in depth about their recovery. The women also realized that they were also
isolating themselves from interacting with people while making strides towards breaking down the wall. Whether it was a close friend, a family member, or a therapist, the women’s decision to reveal their trauma to someone was significant to begin the process of removing the layers of their emotional wall.

**Narrative 4: Support**

The most beneficial resources I had were my friends and counseling services. (Fundi)

**Black Girl**

They say

Black girl you’re strong
Black girl you’re thriving
Matriculating
Graduating
Record breaking
You slaying
Black girl, you don’t need

They say

Black girl, how you surviving
Carrying so much load
Burying all your woes
Black girl, who’s your cornerstone
Your comforter
Your rest
Black girl, you don’t need

They say

Black girl you’re number one
Surpassing your Black brothers
Faces of the race
Keepers of the community
Leaders of the movement
You fierce
Black girl, you don’t need

They say

Black girl, how you maintaining
Brave face
Pain in your smile
Anguish in your eyes
Fragility in your steps
You walking
Black girl, you don’t need

They say

Black girl you in charge
Black girl you independent
Leading
Rocking
Surviving
You magic
Black girl, you don’t need

They say

Black girl, how you livin’
Breathing in so much dust
Enduring all them lashes
Black girl, who’s your keeper
Your [refuge]
Your village
Black girl, what you need

I say

**Support (Theme 4)**

The fourth theme was *Support*. The women in the study shared the formal and informal support systems they used to address their abuse trauma. All the women in the study participated in some form of academic mentoring or support programs, where they were provided face-to-face time with staff members representing various area of support.
Along with university support resources, the women also had support from other women of color, peers, faculty, and advisors. The women shared their individual interactions with other women of color, faculty, and staff, in addition to their interactions with campus departments that aided them in their recovery process and developing a stronger racial and gender identity. Their connections with women of color were critical experiences within the women’s narratives, and demonstrated the types of support that were helpful to attending to their abuse trauma, as well as navigating race and gender within the college environment.

Support was also discussed in relation to trust and confidentiality. Through their outreach to the counseling center and other campus offices, they questioned whether they would receive genuine help in addressing their concerns, and whether their concerns would be confidential. The assumption that Black women are not in crisis and don’t need support was evident in the narratives, especially when other aspects of their racial and gender identity were called into question – trusting a system that has continuously ignored their experiences was a real concern for Black women in their decision to disclose their issues. The subthemes Connecting with Women of Color and Going to Counseling are further demonstrated by the following narrative and illustrate how the Black women in the study challenge the perpetual stereotype of the strong Black woman by seeking out support and finding constructive ways to deal with the trauma of their emotional abuse.
Sister circle meet-up #4

**Lorraine:** Hello ladies. Thank y’all for coming today. I know last week we began talking about how you were managing your abuse trauma as college women. Today I want to continue taking about coping strategies, but focus more on how you all have navigated the campus environment.

**Gina:** [As a graduate student] I feel really uninvolved within the university; I don’t feel outside of the people in my cohort, I haven’t met anyone at school. As I just feel really isolated within, I don’t know if isolated is a good word; I don’t feel a part of the university, if that makes sense.

**Lorraine:** That’s unfortunate. From my experience, the life of a graduate student is very different, compared to my undergraduate experience. It does feel a bit isolating at times.

**Gina:** In undergrad I was involved in the multicultural support program, so I did a lot of their programming, and I was a mentor for the incoming undergraduates in the program…. [As a graduate student], I just go to school, and go home, and that’s it.

**Lorraine:** Well, you mentioned last week that you went to counseling. Tell us more about navigating that experience.

**Gina:** For both undergrad and graduate I was in support groups. Well, in undergrad I was in group therapy, and now I’m in a support group unofficially… It was really easy [to navigate]. I just called [the counseling center] and needed an appointment; they set me up within a couple of days. I met with someone and did a screening, and they thought that trauma therapy would be good for me, and then I did individual therapy as well, and both were awesome. I had one of the best individual therapists I’ve had, and I think group therapy was, like, one of the most influential
pieces of my healing, because that was the first time I was ever exposed to people that experienced the same thing that I did.

**Lorraine:** That’s great to hear, Gina. I’m always happy to hear when students have a positive experience with the counseling center.

**Lizzie:** When I started not doing so well in my classes my junior year I knew it was time for me to go to academic counseling. But when I went there she told me to go to counseling because it did not seem like I was having academic issues; it was more like relationship issues, my personal life.

**Lorraine:** That’s good that she was able to refer you.

**Lizzie:** I went to sign up for counseling. My therapist did not say much, but questioned why I felt the way that I felt during the different situations that I had in my life. My therapist helped me realize that it was okay for me to not worry so much and actually take care of me first and not someone else.

**Lorraine:** It sounds like you also had a good experience going to the counseling center.

**Lizzie:** Yes I did… I truly began to learn about myself, and what I’ve been through. I was feeling good about myself because finally someone was starting to actually listen to my side of the story, without judgment, or body language. I was able to express what I was feeling and realized just by telling this individual what happened, it actually helped me see that I did deserve better and I actually started to truly love myself towards the end of my therapy.

**Lorraine:** I am glad you had a great experience.
**Fundi:** I decided to go to counseling and I don’t even know why I did that. I realized that there was no way on God’s green earth that I would do counseling unless something was really wrong.

**Lorraine:** Why do you feel that way? Say more.

**Fundi:** Well, I think I had to do forced counseling when I was younger and I hated it. I hated talking to people and talking about feelings and emotions and all that stuff that goes along with it. I was really, really against it. Now that I think about it, it must have been really bad if I was willing to do that. I think it worked out because there was the counselor who looked like my best friend from college; she was Vietnamese. I think that’s why it went so well because I felt like I was talking to a friend from back home [who is also Vietnamese].

**Lorraine:** That’s good to hear, Fundi. The counselor-client relationship is so important. If you don’t have a good connection with your counselor, it makes progress much more difficult.

**Fundi:** *Yeah, that’s what I’ve come to learn.* We [my counselor and I] figured out that the reason that I was susceptible to [emotional abuse] was because I did not know what a love relationship was supposed to be, and I wanted to have a family, I wanted to be loved by someone, I wanted to have a family. The hard part of the healing was trying to deal with some of the things that I did not want to deal with when I was [younger]. Looking back, the most beneficial resources I had were my friends and counseling services.

**Lorraine:** Wow, it sounds like you had a real breakthrough with your counselor. I am so glad the connection worked for you.

**Lizzie:** That’s great, Fundi!
Gina: Yeah, that’s pretty awesome!

Fundi: Thanks! Both of these resources provided a sense of understanding of my situation. Friends provided daily support while my counselor provided an outside perspective. A friend provided non-judgmental advice and support in regard to seeking protective resources to combat my ex’s stalker tendencies. Although I didn’t end up using the advice, it was nice to know I had options at a time when I felt like I had little option.

Gina: My really good group of friends continues to be a big support for me as well. Whenever I felt alone, I’ve never really been alone because there have been a lot of people reaching out to me.

Lizzie: That’s great to hear, you guys, because I have been around a lot of fake and phony friends that would say something nice one minute, and then the next, say some really hurtful things. But my friends now are really great. They would say, “Love yourself, be happy being single, don’t worry about him, he’s not good for you,” or the most said phrase of them all, “You deserve better.”

Lorraine: It sounds like you all have some great people in your corner for support when you need it. MaKayla, what about you, how has your experience been in navigating campus resources?

MaKayla: Well, my experience has not been good. I remember going into the student counseling services when I was having a terrible day. I was depressed and hopeless and really just needed someone to talk to, especially since I had never dealt with depression as severe as this. I got turned away.

Lorraine: Oh my! You were turned away?
MaKayla: Yes... I remember feeling so upset because I had really needed assistance at that time. I planned a day to go in another time and when I went in this time, they suggested that I go somewhere off campus to get long-term counseling.

Lorraine: So you were first turned away and then they sent you off campus? This does not sit well with me! I am so sorry that happened!

MaKayla: My first reaction was feeling overwhelmed because I went to the school for the assistance that they had promised to provide, and they were sending me elsewhere. The fact that I would have to sort through a number of other counselors and then figure out how to get to these off-campus facilities was ridiculous, and I just gave up with it.

Fundi: I am so sorry that happened to you, MaKayla

Gina: That’s just crazy! I can’t believe that happened to you.

Lizzie: Wow, this is terrible. I am so sorry MaKayla. Did you find someone to talk too?

MaKayla: Overall, that experience caused more stress than help in my opinion. I did find someone to talk with though. My multicultural advisor ended up being a great outlet and a really fantastic person to talk to.

Lorraine: That’s great that your advisor was there to support you, MaKayla.

Fundi: It’s nice that you were able to talk to your multicultural advisor about your situation. For me, I was less likely to trust someone who was in the student affairs office, like the LGBT center [multicultural affairs office], or the women’s center. I felt that I could really trust that what I shared would be confidential with counseling services as opposed to, like, other services.
MaKayla: *I really didn’t have a choice and she was genuinely interested in helping me figure things out.* It’s sad that I couldn’t get help from the facility that was supposed to be helping me.

Lorraine: That is a very unfortunate situation for sure, MaKayla. I am sorry you were not provided the immediate support you needed.

MaKayla: Me too…

Lorraine: Fundi, you raised an interesting point. If I understand you correctly, you were worried that the information you shared with [the student affairs offices] would not be kept confidential.

Fundi: *Yes...* Even though I related more to people in the [multicultural affairs office] and the women’s center, I would be more likely to go to someone I feel is not associated with me [personally]. I feel like the confidentiality would be really confidential. Compared to counseling services where people are like professionals and they don’t hang out with the students and they don’t go to these different events. It was such a small and tight-knit community that it would probably be difficult to share personal information with the hope that it’s going to be kept confidential.

Lorraine: I have not thought about that perspective before. You do raise some good points.

Fundi: *The problem I see with my abuse, with those offices, is that my information might get out.* Those [offices] are very close-knit communities. There are only about 600 or so [students of color on campus]… not that many Black people on campus or students of color in general. It’s hard not to have some type of relationship with the people who work in and around [those offices]… They are not separated from
university life or social life. There are too few degrees of separation between me and the people who work in those [offices].

**Lorraine:** I completely understand your concern about seeking out services and individuals that are confidential and creating that separation. I think whatever method you choose to use to help navigate your experience is what’s important. And from what you all have shared, you have all approached navigating the campus environment differently.

**Poem and narrative summary**

The poem “Black Girl” describes the duality of Black women’s lives. It illustrates the external and internal expectations of how Black women navigate the world. In one instance, Black women are praised for their noted accomplishments, enrolling in college, graduating and surpassing their Black brothers, all the while carrying heavy burdens. The women in the study all knew they needed help to make sense of their trauma and to deal with how their trauma was impacting their college experience. While the successes of Black women are widely noted, in this case their continued success in college, and how they chose to navigate the college environment around their relationship violence abuse is important to note. The women in the study all knew they needed help to make sense of their trauma and to deal with how their trauma was impacting their college experience.

**Connecting with women of color**

The subtheme Connecting With Women of Color describes the impact of the participants connecting with women of color within the university. The questions being asked in the poem (“Black girl, who’s your cornerstone/ Your rest/Your refuge?”) are asking Black women who their support system is. From the outside looking in, it may appear that they don’t need support – as illustrated by the line, “Black girl, you don’t
However, it was clear throughout the narratives that connecting with other women of color formally and informally was significant to the women’s racial and gender identity development and to their recovery process. To feel at ease in knowing there was someone else who look liked them and may have experienced some of the same challenges they faced were critical elements in the women’s narratives. The participants’ interactions with other women of color affirmed and reaffirmed their racial and gender identity. Specifically, both MaKayla’s and Fundi’s narratives captured the meanings associated with no longer being the only Black woman in the class, having a woman of color therapist, and having a Latinx advisor. These interactions mattered because their visible presence and interactions spoke of the common experiences and language of being marginalized in a predominately White space. In addition, for MaKayla, seeing and connecting with other women of color served as self-motivation for her to embrace her own racial and gender identity.

**Going to counseling**

The subtheme *Going to Counseling* describes the women’s choice to seek counseling. The women in the study all knew they needed help to make sense of their trauma and to deal with how their trauma was impacting their college experience, so seeking counseling was an important step in their recovery process, although they were apprehensive. The appearance that Black women don’t need support provides a false narrative about the emotional scars that they are experiencing. “If you look closely, you see her brave face, the anguish in her eyes, and sometimes the fragility in her steps.” These lines describe the mask that Black women often have to wear in their effort to navigate the world around them. It also suggests that Black women do hurt and are
shaken by trauma. While it is important to recognize “Black girl magic,” there is a need to reveal the hidden reality of Black women’s trauma, which is often dealt with in silence, often unseen. The notion that Black women are unscathed by trauma, in this case relationship violence trauma, perpetuates the idea that Black women do not need support and that they will not seek support. However, the Black women in this study provided a counter-narrative to this claim.

Narrative 5: Meaning Making

*I found purpose in my pain. (Gina)*

**Rooted**

I am rooted
Grounded
Unapologetically purposeful
Purpose filled
Knowing where I belong
Who I belong to
In-spite of
Regardless of

I am rooted
Grounded
Unapologetically purposeful
Purpose filled
Seeing my life as whole
Connected to more than the stain
More than the pain
More than

I am rooted
Grounded
Unapologetically purposeful
Purpose filled
Bent, but not broken
[Scarred], but healing
Afraid, but walking
Creating new paths
Meaning making (Theme 5)

The fifth major theme was *Meaning Making*. As the study participants reflected on their experiences it was important to understand how they made sense of them as Black women, as college students, and as abuse survivors. While there were commonalities among the narratives, the women all interpreted their meaning making processes in very different ways. Their view of self and how they were perceived within the college environment affected how they interpreted their abuse, how they made sense of their abuse, and the resources they accessed. Meaning making for the women also meant putting their abuse experience into perspective. The women shared how important it was for them to find ways to validate themselves, set priorities, remember the reasons they came to college, and have a positive outlook on life; these were all messages they would want to share with other Black women. The women in the study were seeking ways to regaining their sense of self and self-worth. In an effort to further explore these participants’ meaning making process, two subthemes were identified: *Reclaiming Agency* and *Survivor vs. Victim*, which are further illustrated by the following narrative.
Sister circle meet-up #5

**Lorraine:** Today we will discuss your process of making sense of your abuse. Who would like to start us off?

**Gina:** *I will start....* I think it took me a really long time, and I can’t even tell you where exactly it clicked. I think it maybe clicked several times at several different points in my life where I'm like, “Oh, maybe this is why,” or just meeting people along my journey that also had the same, not the same story, but a similar story, and seeing how me being open helped them be open, and just seeing how much people appreciate honesty, and rawness, and not having a filter I guess, and just starting the conversation that people don’t start. I think that I found courage by seeing how people respond, and realizing that I can either cry about it every day, or help other people, and essentially help myself in the same sense.

**Lorraine:** That’s great, Gina! Knowing that you are not alone and there are other women who have had similar experiences can be impactful.

**Gina:** I remember the day when I literally had an epiphany. I was crying and I said, ‘God get me through this so I could help other people.’ It wasn’t punishment for me; this was for me to experience something so I could help others in need. I felt I needed to step up and be the voice because there are so many people that are voiceless, and I think that’s where it started for me. I gain momentum and motivation through all the new people that I meet. Every single story I hear fuels my fire.

**Lizzie:** For me, I enjoy paying it forward and trying to help other women on campus by sharing some of my story, but not [the entire] story… I really want to help women not feel bad about themselves. It sucks! When you feel bad about yourself it tumbles down and goes all the way to,
“Oh, I can’t live anymore.” I don’t want anyone to feel like that. I felt like that. I don’t want anyone to ever feel that way.

**Lorraine:** I think finding ways to share your story can be a good step forward in the right direction. I am glad you both found meaning in sharing your story with others.

**Lizzie:** I also have made meaning by remembering that life has its ups and downs. I learned that some people might not be who they really are on the inside. I have come to the understanding that people may not be as they appear. It will always be an experience that I will never forget…

**Lorraine:** It sounds like you have learned a lot from your experiences, Lizzie

**Lizzie:** Yes, I have!

**Lorraine:** I believe, as women, listening to our inner voice can serve as a critical guide to make meaning of our situation.

**Lizzie:** Yeah, and I just actually experienced that the other day. I saw someone from my past and when I looked at him, I was just like, “You mean nothing to me.” I had nothing to feel for this person because they didn’t do anything that helped me feel differently about myself. It made me realize that, that was part of your past. That doesn’t define who you truly are, which is a wonderful person.

**Lorraine:** It’s a good feeling when you are able to recognize that your past does not dictate your future. MaKayla, what about you, what does your meaning-making process look like?

**MaKayla:** Well… I realize that I don't have to settle for something just because I feel somewhat secure in it, I guess! So even though I felt
somewhat secure with him, that didn’t make up for the times, even if they were small times, when I felt insecure with him. The bad outweighed the good in the situation, I guess. I think I learned to not settle, and then to also know for the future that I don’t have to have someone with me at all times to feel like I’m okay. I can be secure on my own as well, and love myself enough to do that, too.

**Lorraine:** That’s great, MaKayla. I think you are on the right path to loving yourself and learning to be secure in who you are.

**MaKayla:** Yes, I agree. I feel somewhat empowered, because I was able to step away from the situation that could have grown into something worse, I think.

**Lorraine:** What about you, Fundi? Tell us about your process.

**Fundi:** For me, it made me really grateful that the experience is over…. The time that I could have been spending with friends that I wasn’t. I thought about the grades that I let slip.

**Lorraine:** Yes… that can be difficult to come to terms with. I, too, am glad that you all are no longer in those toxic situations. It is okay to feel that you wasted time and neglected the things and the people in your life. It’s also okay to feel empowered by your experience too. Do you see yourselves as survivors?

**Fundi:** If I were to think about that, I would think that, yes, I would be a survivor, but if someone would have asked, I don’t think I would ever describe myself as a survivor. At times I thought like, “Oh, thank God I survived that without there being worse, no consequences, no conclusion. I could have been worse off.” I guess I’m glad that I had gotten out of there before it had gotten worse.
**Lizzie:** I don’t like to identify myself as [a survivor] because I’m afraid of what people will think. I don’t want to be, “Oh, she’s abused.” I don’t mind sharing my story, but I don’t want a lot of people to know.

**Lorraine:** Makes sense

**Lizzie:** It’s hard to put yourself in that bubble…

**Lorraine:** Yeah, especially when you’re dealing with trying to make sense of what that means for your life now, moving forward. It’s like, if you’re not ready to talk about or answer some of these questions, it can be difficult to… for people to understand

**Lizzie:** Yeah.

**MaKayla:** I feel like a survivor. I don't know if that’s an identity, but I feel like that’s one that I hold. Just even from what I went through in sexual abuse as a child, and even with the emotional abuse recently, the fact that I’m still surviving and not necessarily a victim is an identity that I hold.

**Fundi:** When I think of survivor I think of that house I lived in on Moore Street, which was a home for women who had gotten out of jail, who had come from abusive homes or drug problems. I saw a lot of what I would consider those women survivors…

**Gina:** I would say that I transformed from being a victim into a survivor in feeling a sense of power over the situation that I went through, control over myself in the sense of feeling whole again, to a certain degree… I think that I found courage by seeing how people respond, and realizing that I can either cry about it every day, or help other people, and essentially help myself in the same sense.
Lorraine: Making sense of your abuse is important to your ongoing healing process. Whether you see yourself as a survivor or feel empowered or feel a sense relief from your abuse, it is important to reclaim your sense of self. I have asked each of you to come prepared with a resolution statement that captures how you have made meaning or continue to make meaning of your experiences as Black college women impacted by relationship violence. What would you want others to know about your experience?

MaKayla: I want people to know that understanding the intersectionalities of my identities matters. I am Black, but I am also a woman. We [Black women] aren’t all the same, and we don’t need all the same help… We need emotional support, just as much as academic support!

Fundi: For me, I want people to know that abuse is more than physical; it’s verbal and it’s emotional… I didn’t really [see] the [red] flags until it was too late… I didn’t really know that some of those flags were coming.

As if on cue, the women snap their fingers in appreciation for Fundi’s statement.

Lizzie: My resolution statement has to do with love. I want people to know that I love myself. I think about me more… I have been on this journey of learning how to love myself, and it has not been easy, but I am in a much better place today than I was when I first came to college.

Sounds of “Amen” echo throughout the house. The women shower Lizzie with finger snaps to acknowledge that, yes, they too have learned to love themselves more on their journey.
**Gina:** My resolution statement is about finding purpose. I’ve found purpose in my pain…it’s become like one of my greatest strengths and that I find a lot of joy in. I just feel like a lot of my strength is found in knowing that I am a survivor and helping others find their voice…

The women acknowledge Gina’s statement with finger snaps and chants of “Yes” and “Amen.” The smiles on their faces and the hope in their eyes fill the space with love and appreciation for community.

**Lorraine:** I am extremely humbled by this experience. I appreciate all you have shared with me and within this group, and hope that I continue to be a resource for you during your time in college. My resolution statement is for people to know that Black college women’s lives matter, their names, their stories, and their emotional health matter, and we/they need to pay attention and respond accordingly.

**Poem and Narrative Summary**

The poem “Rooted” speaks to the growth process by which the women in the study made sense of their abuse. As I read through their narratives, there was a sense of hope and purpose in how these women processed their abuse. Although they were hurt and mentally bruised from the abuse they had endured, they could still see their purpose as more than just enduring their abuse. The abuse was not the defining moment in their lives, so the lines in the poem, “Bent, but not broken/ Scarred, but healing/ Afraid, but walking” illustrate the journey they are on to regain their purpose, which is to put themselves first and relearn to love who they are. This poem speaks to the notion that the women are grounded and rooted in their individual self-identity despite their circumstances, but they have not ignored nor will they forget their abuse.
Reclaiming agency

Having agency meant having control and ownership of their narrative. The reality for the women in this study was an attempt to turn their pain into action as a way to re-liberate themselves and regain control of what was taken from them. These women were interested in telling their stories, but on their own terms. They understood that reclaiming their agency required an assessment of the messages associated with being Black and women and the meanings attributed to being an abuse survivor/victim. There was also a collective understanding that regaining control of their narrative would allow them to engage differently within the college environment.

The women also connected their process of reclaiming agency to how they used their stories to help others. For Lizzie, reclaiming agency was connected to her decision to disclose her abuse, and Gina believed her abuse is part of her life’s purpose. While she recognizes the pain that her abuse has caused her, she also recognizes that her purpose in life is to use her experience to help others, so she takes her identity as a survivor very seriously. The lines “Unapologetically purposeful/ Purpose filled” describe the turning point for each woman after her abuse. Knowing that the abuse experience will be forever etched in their minds, they spoke about their future by recognizing their past and by moving forward to create new stories. Saying, “I found purpose in my pain,” Gina spoke candidly about her process of making meaning of her abuse. While she recognizes that she is continually growing and learning to make sense of her victimization, she believes that she has found purpose in her pain by using her story to inspire and educate others. This was Gina’s way of making meaning, just as the other women all spoke about how
they are making sense of their circumstances as a way of moving forward as Black college women and as survivors.

**Survivor vs. victim**

The subtheme *Survivor vs. Victim* describes the ways in which the women in this study made meaning of their abuse. For Black women, being categorized as a survivor or victim can be a re-victimizing process. The narrative reflects the participants’ process of differentiating between whether or not they see themselves as survivors or victims. While Gina and MaKayla both saw themselves as survivors, Lizzie did not want to be categorized as such, and Fundi didn’t believe she experienced real abuse. MaKayla talked about being a survivor, and not a victim, as a part of her identity. She indicated that she is still surviving, meaning she continues to struggle on a daily basis to empower herself and not let her trauma consume her outlook on the world. Similarly, Gina also saw herself as a survivor, but talked about her transformation from being a victim to being a survivor. Her transformation involved feeling a sense of power, having more control over her life, and feeling like a whole person.

For Gina, being a victim meant lacking control over her emotional responses to her abuse, feeling helpless and unstable. Gina’s transformative experience has empowered her to speak out against abuse and to motivate other women to share their stories. Gina believes that her abuse is part of her life’s purpose. While she recognized the pain that her abuse has caused her, she also recognizes that her purpose in life is to use her experience to help others. Lizzie and Fundi, however, did not see themselves as survivors and did not want to be categorized as such. Lizzie was concerned about being outed as an abuse victim. While she wanted to tell her story, she wanted control over the
narrative being told – she was not interested in having others define her as an abuse victim, because in her eyes, she was much more than that.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter has presented the five findings of this study, which were organized into analytical poems followed by thematic composite narratives derived from meetings with the participants as a group, following their individual interviews. Data from the individual interviews and the participants’ journals were analyzed to document the four college women’s relationship violence experiences. These narratives were intended to capture the individual and collective experiences of how four Black college women responded to their relationship violence, through their own initiative, others’ support, and campus counseling. The five overarching themes that informed the participants’ narratives were (a) self-definition, (b) naming, (c) survival, (d) support, and (e) meaning making. Collectively, these five themes revealed how MaKayla, Lizzie, Fundi, and Gina experienced and responded to their relationship violence (mainly emotional abuse) in college. In the context of narrative research, data shared are typically in story form and represent the words, emotions, and personalities of the participants. My aim was to accurately represent the lived experiences of the four college women who participated in the study, using their own words.

These four college women described their racial and gender identity and some of the challenges they experienced as Black women in the college environment. They discussed understanding and acknowledging their relationship violence experience, managing the abuse in their own way, and navigating the university resources in order to get help for their victimization. In addition, the narratives describe how these participants are continually making meaning of their relationship experiences as college women and
helping other women in similar circumstances. Their stories, although shared individually in their interviews, were presented as a collective dialogue in the form of composite narratives that emerged from their “meet-ups.” Chapter 5 provides an in-depth discussion of how these composite narratives answered the research questions and the problems that guided this study.
CHAPTER 5: ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION

My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living.

Audre Lorde (1984), Sister Outsider, p. 120

This narrative study explored the racialized and gendered perspectives of four Black college women who experienced relationship violence. The study employed narrative inquiry to document the stories as told by the participants and provide them an opportunity to reflect on how they have made sense of and/or are making meaning of their relationship violence experiences. In addition, the study sought insight into how Black college women navigate campus resources in order to deal with their encounters of relationship violence. I used in-depth interviews, participant journals, and my own analytical poems to capture the stories and the meaning the participants made of their experiences. The women in the study attended a predominantly White institution (PWI) in the Midwest and entered college with a prior history of abuse. Two of the participants were graduate students, one was a first-year student and another was a senior. The four women in the study all identified as Black women and while there were commonalities among their stories, there were also differences in how they understood their Black identity and their gender identity. The home life and family background of the women in the study also varied and served as an important element in understanding their relationship violence experiences.

This purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings presented in Chapter 4 within the context of the literature, as presented in Chapter 2. The chapter will connect
the literature on higher education, relationship violence, and Black college women to thematic narratives with the goal of providing interpretive insights into the study’s findings. The implications of these findings are intended to augment the understanding of the how Black college women experience relationship violence. This chapter’s discussion will be guided by the following research questions: (a) How did the four Black women in this study experience relationship violence in college? (b) How did the four Black women make meaning of their relationship violence experiences in college? and (c) How did the four Black women navigate campus resources related to their experiences of relationship violence in college?

The Black College Women’s Experiences of Relationship Violence

The first research question sought to determine how the Black college women experienced relationship violence. The four women in the study experienced relationship violence through a racialized and gendered means and in the form of emotional and psychological abuse.

Being Black and a woman

Firstly, the Black college women experienced relationship violence as seen through a racialized and gendered lens, as they were in constant negotiations with themselves and members of the campus community about their racial and gender identity. The negotiations manifested as the women attempted to distance themselves from perceived stereotypes, attempted to prove themselves as legitimate members of the campus community, and searched for visible representations of themselves. The participants’ narratives support Collins’ (2009) assertion about the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression.
To understand Black women’s lived experiences means to recognize and acknowledge the ways race, gender, and class are interlocking components of most Black women’s identities. Collins (1986) argued that Black women are socially constructed as the “other” or different from the assumed norm of white male behavior” (p. S18). Furthermore, Black women experience interlocking oppression, because they are both Black and women and experience through intersecting identities (Collins, 2009). Fundi’s narrative in particular describes the duality of her identities, and she views herself as a whole person and not through segmented frames. She made it clear that her race, her gender, her abuse, her class, and other aspects of her identity make her whole, and viewing her and her experiences through only one of these provides a limited snapshot of her reality. Fundi’s explanation of how she views herself as a Black woman echoes the notion that Black feminist scholars have made – for Black women, race and gender cannot be divorced from each other – Black women’s racial and gender identity are one and the same and to talk about their experiences using the single lens of Blackness distorts the lived experiences of who Black women are and the issues that impact them based on race and gender (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1984).

Like Collins (2009), Crenshaw (1989) talked about the interlocking systems of oppression within the context of intersectionality. “Intersectionality refers to the intersection of race, gender, and social class as a source for domination and control over people of color” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). Crenshaw (1989) asserted that structures that ignore the multiple forms of Black women’s identity, namely race and gender, cannot adequately address the needs of Black women because they provide a distorted view of
Black women’s lived experiences, thereby “theoretically erasing their experiences based on a single-axis approach” (Crenshaw, 1989). It is important to note that Black women can experience relationship violence in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by other women of color and White women. Moreover, the practice of viewing relationship violence as only experienced by White women leaves Black women at a disadvantage. This study’s findings suggest that Black women are not experiencing relationship violence within a single axis.

**Is it really abuse?**

Secondly, the Black college women in this study experienced relationship violence in multiple forms, including emotional or psychological abuse. O’Leary (1999) defined psychological abuse as “acts of recurring criticism or verbal aggression toward a partner, and/or acts of isolation and domination of a partner” (p. 19). Few and Scott (2002) described verbal abuse as “name calling, insulting, degradation, intimidation/threats, attempts to frighten, threats of harm to self or others” (p. 60). My study participants described being verbally attacked, criticized, and invalidated in addition to blaming themselves for the abuse. Although these women now acknowledge their emotional abuse, they did not categorize their experience as abuse when it initially occurred, mainly because they believed that, since what they were experiencing was not physical (hitting, shoving, beating) or sexual abuse, then it was not real abuse.

While colleges and universities have focused their attention on rape and sexual assault, the Black women in the study shared how emotional abuse was a significant factor in their college experience. Naming the abuse, acknowledging the abuse, and seeking help for their abuse were major factors in how the participants experienced their
relationship violence. The four women in the study were not only conflicted in managing the emotional effects of their abuse, but they all went through a process of recognizing their experience as abuse. This conflict in naming or defining a particular type of abuse is also seen throughout the literature. Since many terms are used interchangeably and simultaneously to define and describe issues of violence and abuse, it’s not surprising that students may be unsure about whether their experience matched one of those definitions.

As noted in Chapter 2, colleges and universities have not adopted a standardized definition of relationship violence (Banyard, 2014), but describe it as coercive behavior used by one person to gain power and control over another (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). These behaviors include stalking, verbal, emotional, and economic abuse, as well as physical and sexual violence. Much of the research on relationship violence on college campuses has centered on a seemingly monolithic view (e.g., White women) and experience (e.g., rape) – ignoring the realities of the intersection of race, class, and gender with other relationship violence experiences.

College and universities have also shifted how they define the wide range of violence that college students encounter. Often used interchangeably, the terms used to denote violence experiences on college campuses have included domestic violence, intimate partner violence, dating violence, and courtship violence (Burns, 1999; Chez, 1994). In addition to naming and defining abuse, there is an emphasis on sexual assault on college campuses. There has been an influx of programs, services, and resources to prevent rape and sexual assault. It has also been well documented that approximately 1 in 5 women are survivors of rape or attempted rape (Fisher et al., 2000). This statistic is not only significant, but has revealed a national problem at U.S. colleges and universities.
Unknown are the rates for emotional and psychological abuse or how colleges and universities educate students about such abuse. If universities are committed to creating campus communities that are safe for all students, then a culture shift is needed in addressing other forms of violence, namely emotional abuse.

There is a significant gap in the research literature about the experiences of Black college women and emotional abuse. However, the belief that emotional abuse is not real abuse or as significant as sexual abuse or rape supports current research on the effects of emotional/psychological abuse. Clark et al. (1994) concluded that psychological abuse was so prevalent that it almost appears to be “normal” behavior and takes place much more frequently than physical aggression in intimate partnerships. Although research suggests that psychological abuse alone is more prevalent among college students than physical and sexual violence and often occurs with other forms of abuse such as sexual (Aosved & Long, 2005; Murphy & Hoover, 1999; Murray & Kardatzke, 2007), there is little to no emphasis on other forms of abuse that students may encounter, or the long-term emotional impact of sexual assault and rape on abuse victims. Murphy and Kardatzke (2007) stated that “psychological abuse plays a large role in the stability of a college student’s mental health, and furthermore the negative effects of psychological abuse impact the victim’s self-esteem, and these effects outweigh those of physical violence” (p. 81).

Focusing solely on rape and sexual assault sends messages about what is valued in the college environment. While colleges and universities have not explicitly stated that emotional abuse is not abuse, the messages students receive paint a different picture. Especially, these messages about what is considered “real abuse” are rooted in systems
that shape Black women’s socialization. Bandura’s (1977) Social Learning Theory attributes these messages to personal, environmental, and behavioral factors through observation. Bandura (1977) stated that personal factors are the beliefs and attitudes that affect learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) – e.g., how the women in this study thought about abuse in general, their beliefs about relationship violence based on past and current experiences, and how they feel about themselves. The environmental factors are the outside influences that impact learning, such as family, peers, school, and community (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) – and influenced their understanding of the ways in which the environment shaped their attitudes and beliefs about relationship violence. The behavioral factors are derived from how the women in the study responded to their relationship violence trauma (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Similarly, Bronfenbrenner (1979) theorized that individuals’ behaviors are influenced by how he/she interacts within five systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem). From an Ecological Systems Theory perspective, the multiple dimensions of the Black college women’s identity contributed to how they experienced and respond to relationship violence trauma, including disclosing, reporting, seeking help, and navigating the campus environment. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory (1979) also illustrates how racism and sexism have shaped Black college women’s relationship violence experiences. Within each ecological system, Black women receive messages about how they should respond to their relationship violence experiences. Within the microsystem, these messages are shaped by interactions with members of their immediate environment, including family, friends, professors, and advisors.
This study’s participants exemplified how prior victimization within their families had influenced how they approached their own relationship violence experience. Within the mesosystem, Black college women find themselves interacting with a racist and sexist system (college campus) that has stereotypically preconceived notions about what it means to be a Black woman.

**Making Meaning of Their Relationship Violence Experience**

The second research question asked how these Black college women made meaning of their relationship violence experiences. Not only were they experiencing relationship violence from a racialized and gendered perspective, they were also making meaning of their experiences through a racialized and gendered view by understanding the survivor versus the victim identity, practicing self-care, and reclaiming agency. Their shared narratives both explicitly and implicitly illustrated how the women understood their abuse in relation to their race and gender.

**Survivor vs. victim**

In order to capture the Black college women’s meaning making, they were asked if they saw themselves as “survivors.” Some participants described themselves as survivors, while others did not, nor did they ascribe to themselves victimhood. Being a survivor, a widely used and acceptable term, describes individual abuse victims who are actively engaged in using their trauma to empower themselves and help others to make sense of their own trauma. Some abused women have advocated for the use of both terms and allowing individuals to use whichever term they feel best describes their situation. While the two terms refer to individuals that are recovering from an abusive situation,
they are often used interchangeably and can provoke very different meanings and reactions.

In order to not essentialize the women’s experiences or reduce them to one single experience of violence, I wanted to capture how participants described their trauma. Asking the women in the study to discuss whether they saw themselves as a survivor and not a victim was not meant to place value on whether one choice was better than the other, but to allow space for the women to articulate for themselves how they interpreted their abuse. For abused Black women, describing themselves as “survivors” can reinforce stereotypical messages of the strong Black woman (Robinson, 1983; Romero, 2000; Thompson, 2003) and Black women being unscathed by violence. In the same breath, being categorized as a victim or claiming to be victimized is not a culturally acceptable response for Black women. To be described as a victim is often associated with negative behaviors, low self-esteem, and a defeatist attitude towards recovering from the abuse. It also categorizes the individual abused as lacking the mental and emotional capacity to move on from the abused situation. Others have argued that being described as a victim put the ownership of the abuse back on the abuser.

Black women are in constant negotiation with their racial and gender identity. They have to negotiate their identity within the spaces (or ecological systems) they occupy as well as in interaction with their social environment. While complex, Black women’s meaning making process is compounded by both individual and community implications. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory offers an additional perspective to understanding Black women’s making meaning process. For example, the macrosystem describes the culture in which individuals live, including the cultural values
and belief systems that informs an individual interactions within society as a whole, including, race, gender, and class (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within the macrosystem, there is a systemic narrative that continues to portray Black men and men of color as dangerous sexual predators who engage in acts of violence against White women. Examples of these stereotypical messages are often reinforced in the media. For instance in 2008, Vogue magazine feature NBA star LeBron James on the magazine carrying model Gisele Bundchen on this shoulder. The image drew a striking resemblance to the popular film King Kong, where the giant gorilla is seen carrying off actress Fay Wray. While some may view these images as satire, it continues to push fort stereotypical messages about who are victims and who are perpetrators, which often equate Black men and men of color as sexual deviants who prey on vulnerable White women.

The images that are often lost or forgotten are the victimization of Black women. Black women are never viewed as victims of abuse. According to Donovan and Williams (2002) Black women are more likely to be blamed for their abuse and less likely to report their abuse. Wooten (2016) also suggest for Black women, there are serious racial and gendered repercussions about claiming to be abused by a White man on campus and she may not be believed. Similarly identifying Black men and other men of color as perpetrators is viewed as contributing to the pervasive racist stereotypes about Black male. Black women’s awareness of their positionality within each of the ecological systems provides them the agency to push back and reject stereotypical and false claims about Black womanhood.
The literature supports the strong Black women persona, which claims that Black women are socialized to believe that they can withstand struggle (racial, physical, mental, etc.) and maintain control, so they are less likely to think of themselves as victims (Beaufoeuf-LaFontant, 2005; hooks, 1993; Romero, 2000; Thompson, 2003). According to Collins (2009), Black women often contend with controlling images of mammy, jezebel, sapphire, and the matriarch, or over-strong black women. These negative stereotypes, created by the White elite, place Black women at a disadvantage because they deny Black women individual agency. As (Collins, 2009) wrote, “[the] dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group’s interest in maintaining Black women’s subordination” (p. 79).

In response to these negative controlling images, Black women created the strong Black woman persona that hooks (1993) described as “built-in capacities to deal with all manner of hardship without breaking down, physically or mentally” (p. 70). As noted in Chapter 2, ascribing to the strong Black woman persona is considered a badge of honor within the Black community. The Black woman is often described as nurturing, self-reliant, strong, and has the ability withstand impossible life situations (Robinson, 1983; Romero, 2000; Thompson, 2003), including various forms of abuse, particularly those with the invisible scars of emotional abuse (Collins, 2009). Moreover, as a culture, Black women have continued to cling to the strong Black woman persona as a strategy to deal with issues of racism and sexism in America (Barrett, 1999; Bryant-Davis, 2010; Few & Bell-Scott, 2002; Thompson, 2003).
The Black college women in the study not only refuted this claim of being emotionally and physically resilient, but actively sought out resources to survive in college. Surviving meant taking ownership of their healing, and whether they saw themselves as a survivor or victim, the women all shared a willingness to own their truth, despite the messages they were receiving from their peers, faculty, and other entities within the university. There was a strong sense that these women were not interested in having others define or label them as survivor or victim because they were much more than their abuse. Taking ownership of their narrative meant deciding what to disclose, when to disclose it, and whom to disclose to. It also meant being emotionally ready and available to disclose their abuse. There is an unspoken reality for abused women to turn their pain into action as a way to re-liberate themselves and regain control of what was taken from them. While this may be true for some, the journey of finding purpose in the pain may not be as easy.

For Black women, being outed as a survivor or victim can be a re-victimizing process. What’s at stake for Black women is survival and safety. Collins (1986) made it clear that “enduring the frequent assaults of controlling images requires considerable inner strength” (p. S19). The strength that Collins (1986) described occurs both internally and externally. Black women essentially are required to participate in daily activities that celebrate their Black womanhood, but also re-tool their minds to think differently about what it means to be Black and a woman. Developing inner strength is not an exercise that Black women can opt out of; it is a necessary requirement for survival (Collins, 1986).
The practice of self-care

Survival was also discussed by the study participants from the point of view of self-care and spirituality. It was also noted within the narratives that, as a collective, the women found inner strength by connecting with members of the campus community that looked like them. The research points to both formal and informal processes to help abuse victims reconnect with themselves, develop self-acceptance, and feel empowered to cope with the aftermath of their abuse, which may provide survivors with a holistic approach to addressing the physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual aspect of their lives (Barrett, 1999).

The research also tells us that Black women use different coping strategies to deal with abuse trauma, including support groups, seeking emotional support from friends, journaling, and spirituality (Barrett, 1999; Bryant-Davis, 2010; Few & Bell-Scott, 2002; Thompson, 2003). Conversations about the critical need for self-care and self-love were discussed throughout the narratives. The women in the study described their making meaning process – through the lens of healing, which is an ongoing process. The use of counseling, family, friends, faith, and positive self-talk contributed to their process of moving forward.

The narratives provided a snapshot of the continuous emotional struggles these women were battling. The hidden pain, vulnerability, and perseverance were very apparent as they shared how the abuse impacted their quality of life as college students. In addition, the women described self-care as actions that positively contributed to their mental, physical, and emotional health. In my conversation with the women, they revealed how their continuous practice of self-care allowed them to regain a much
healthier outlook on who they were. There was a collective understanding of recognizing the trauma, but doing what they needed to do emotionally/psychologically to move on from it.

Survival for the women also meant developing a stronger self-definition and self-valuation by reclaiming their agency as a Black woman and acknowledging their trauma. For Black women, the act of survival goes beyond the daily practice of self-care. It also involves developing an individual and collective agency. The Black women in this study were attempting to reclaim their agency within a predominately White institution that, from their accounts, did not see them for who they were.

**Reclaiming agency**

The women made meaning of their relationship violence experience through reclaiming their agency. Having agency means having control and ownership of your own narrative and your lived experiences. Being an agent of your narrative requires both an assessment of the messages and lessons learned about who you are, but also being able to sift through those messages that are meant to empower you to individually and systematically make change. Messages about being a Black woman, about being victims of abuse, and about responding to it are connected to how the women were developing their agency.

From a Black Feminist Theory perspective, the process of self-definition is described as “challenging the political knowledge-validation process that had resulted in externally defined, stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood” (Collins, 1986, p. S16). Self-valuation requires Black women to replace negative controlling and stereotypical images with more authentic images of themselves (Collins, 1986). The
lives of Black women are often shaped, defined, and neglected by White dominant culture. Thus, Collins (2009) encouraged Black women to redefine their culture through their relationships with Black women, creative expression, and activism. Black women’s culture is directly linked to self-definition and self-valuation, in that it provides Black women a framework to view race, class, and gender oppression (Collins, 2009). For Black women, finding ways to validate their experiences from a racialized and gendered perspective can be difficult, especially because these negative images have been continually reinforced and embedded in their minds. The act of reframing and rethinking Black womanhood is both an individual act and a collective necessity.

Collins (2009) described this very act of reframing Black womanhood in her discussion of the importance of African American culture, the third tenet of Black feminist theory. Collins (2009) also noted that “there is no monolithic Black women’s culture—rather, there are socially-constructed Black women’s cultures that collectively form Black women’s culture” (p. 312). In redefining and explaining Black women’s culture, Black women are actively engaging in the practice of creating agency by authoring a frame of reference that can help guide other Black women. In essence, Collins (2009) is encouraging Black women to develop interpersonal relationships with other Black women in the form of sisterhood, which she defined as “a supportive feeling of loyalty and attachment to other women stemming from a shared feeling of oppression” (p. 22). Finding support from other Black women means they no longer have to carry the burdens of abuse on their own. Instead, they can share their stories and collectively learn ways to further develop their agency.
The women were asked about the messages they would share with other Black college women dealing with similar relationship violence situations. The women shared that finding ways to validate themselves, setting priorities, remembering the reasons they came to college, and having a positive outlook on life were all messages they would want to share with other Black women. The internal and external conflict of reclaiming agency is an ongoing struggle for Black women. However, the recent #SayHerName, #BlackGirlsRock, #BlackGirlMagic and #BlackGirlsMatter campaigns have been used to help redefine Black women’s culture. These campaigns are committed to uplifting and empowering Black women by acknowledging their self-definition and self-valuation, as well as recognizing the day-to-day impact of violence against Black women. In addition, this movement to redefine Black women’s culture and others like it have challenged the master narrative that continues to silence the names, faces, and experiences of Black women. While the women in the study did not set out to create Black women’s culture, the willingness to share their own stories served as a vehicle to empower other Black college women who may be experiencing similar situations.

**Navigating Campus Resources for Relationship Violence**

The third research question asked how these Black college women navigated campus resources for relationship violence. The findings of my study indicated that the participants did so by connecting with individuals and offices within the university that understood their racialized and gendered experiences. In addition, the women were navigating campus resources as survivors of childhood abuse. The goal of this question was to ascertain the ways in which race and gender influenced how the women accessed
campus resources, interacted with individuals within the campus community, and the messages they received about managing their abuse.

**Connecting with women of color**

The women in this study navigated campus resources for relationship violence through one-on-one interactions with Black women and other women of color and through interactions with counseling services. For Black college women to see visible examples of other Black women is an empowering experience. Whether it was having a Black woman faculty for an instructor, a therapist and advisor of color, or not being the only woman of color in class, it gave these Black college women a sense of hope, in that they were not navigating the college experience alone, and that there were other women of color who they could look to for support. Reflected in the stories are both the rewards and the challenges of being a Black college woman. The women in this study recalled feeling empowered by their participation in programs such as the women of color retreat, and when they were lucky enough to meet with other women that looked like them – “like finding out your therapist is a woman of color.” They also shared experiences of when they were expected to speak on behalf of their race, or prove themselves academically, and when they felt isolated and alienated participating in campus events. All these experiences set the context for the campus climate, which the Black women have to navigate, because they understood that they were different and the campus environment treated them as such.

For these women, seeing the visible presence of someone who not only looks like them, but also has the ability to understand the implications of race and gender in the college context, makes a world of difference. The literature supports this finding, noting
that Black college women face isolation, invisibility, stereotypes and a lack of faculty and staff support (Banks, 2009; Patton & Catching, 2009; Robinson, 2013; Robinson & Franklin, 2011b), and recommends that institutions provide visible representation of faculty, staff, and students of color to reduce feelings of isolation and alienation (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Patton & Harper, 2003).

Black college women are in essence like the coal miners’ canaries where they must navigate the halls of the university not only as relationship violence survivors, but also within a system that does not recognize their needs as Black women. Guinier and Torres (2002) used the metaphor of the canary in the coal mine and its role in discovering noxious gases to argue that if the canary is exposed to poisonous gases, it is only a matter of time before the miners are also poisoned, noting “their distress is the first sign of the danger that threatens us all” (Guinier & Torres, 2002, p. 11).

Like the canaries that alerted miners of poisonous gases, systemic racism points to the underlying problems with American higher education and society as a whole that ultimately affect everyone, not just Black women. As the study findings indicated, Black college women are dealing with a wide range of issues including, racial microaggressions, sexism, and abuse, which can lead to border implications that can affect all women. While colleges and universities continue to ignore the experiences of Black college women – often associating their success to being unscathed by relationship violence, they continue to fail Black women and other women impacted by relationship violence. The invisibility that Black women experience is real, and whether intentional or unintentional, the impact can have lasting implications and determine how Black college women navigate their college environment.
The participants in the study were also dealing with their abuse in isolation, meaning they were relying on their own experience to guide them through the process of navigating the campus environment. Feelings of isolation and alienation speak to what Collins (1986) called the “insider-outsider” phenomena, where Black women are card-carrying members of their college, but find themselves on the margins. Black college women’s presence and experiences on college campuses generally remain invisible. Their continuous fight to be heard, the work to create welcoming spaces, and the process of being recognized as valid members of the campus community create a system in which Black women have to continue to question and second guess their very existence. Questions such as: Was I abused? Was it really abuse? Am I pretty enough? Am I being too loud? Am I too dark? Or being asked to justify why you chose to where you hair in an Afro—all point to the internalized struggle that challenges Black college women’s self-definition. Having a strong self-identity matters to Black women and made a difference in the lives of the women participating in this study. As they reflected on how they viewed themselves and how others within the university interacted with them, those interactions sent both a conscious and unconscious message about Black women’s identity. The participants in the study had to reconcile how they were experiencing relationship violence in relation to the messages they received about their racial and gender identity and their abuse.

From an ecological standpoint, a college campus is no different from society, as it is made up of diverse groups of individuals within a stratified system of dominance and privilege based on race, class, and gender. For Black college women, the challenge of understanding how their identities are connected to how they view their positionality on
campus and within society is critical to how they view their victimization. The messages they have received as college women and as members of society about what it means to be a Black woman, what it means to be a Black college woman, provided a framework for how these women thought about their abuse, who they chose to disclose it to, and what resources they sought out for help.

For Black women, proving to themselves, their white counterparts, and others within this stratified system of dominance that they belong, is a daily struggle. There are those who are expected to be in college and those who must prove they are supposed to be in college. Banks (2009) stated that “. . . Black undergraduate women may occupy the bottom rungs on ladders of privilege and power, causing navigation both literally and figuratively through college and university to be an ongoing, dynamic, and complex process” (p. 9). Furthermore, the women provided a different perspective on how they understood relationship violence compared to how society (the college environment) views relationship violence, specifically emotional abuse. As previously stated, colleges and universities are concerned about acts of rape and sexual assault and less about emotional abuse, leaving some women, including Black women, unsure about the resources available, and place different acts of violence within a hierarchal system of importance.

Social Learning Theory suggests that individuals learn through observing, but what is being observed are systemic forms of oppression that determine how an individual understands his/her place in the world. The messages about relationship violence as it relates to women, particularly Black women, are directly linked to patriarchy and racism. Unfortunately, Black women have seen first-hand that oppressive
systems have done more harm than good to Black bodies and Black communities. From both a Social Learning Theory and an Ecological Systems Theory perspective, Black women have learned through first-hand experiences that trusting social service agencies and law enforcement can lead to further victimization and, in some cases, losing your life.

**The residual effects of childhood abuse**

There was an overall understanding from the women in the study that their mental and emotional well-being mattered to how they navigated the campus community. Navigating the campus as a survivor of childhood abuse significantly impacted how they engaged with their peers, sought out resources, and interacted with faculty and staff. In addition to experiencing relationship violence in isolation, these women entered college with a prior history of relationship violence. They shared stories of sexual assault, molestation, physical and emotional abuse. This finding added another layer of complexity in understanding how these Black college women experienced relationship violence, as it pertains to providing resources for students who have already been traumatized. With the national conversation centered on the rape and sexual assaults of college students, there needs to be a shift in understanding how pre-college relationship violence experiences shape the overall student college experience. In addition, this finding challenges the current practice of how colleges and universities provide resources for students with a prior history of relationship violence.

This finding corroborates Tanis et al.’s (2014) research on the Black Women’s Blueprint Report, which noted that 60% of Black women experience abuse before the age of 18. Similar research also supports this finding that Black college women who experience various forms of violence before entering college are at increased risk of re-
victimization (Smith et al., 2003; West, 2002). Similarly, Smith et al. (2003) found that women in their study who were assaulted in high school were at greater risk for re-victimization during their first year of college.

The women in my study revealed circumstances in their backgrounds as well as interactions within the college environment that informed their responses to their own victimization and re-victimization. Similar to the interlocking nature of oppression, the Black women in this study could not separate their current from their prior victimization. As the women navigated the campus resources to address the impact of their current abuse, they were also experiencing the residual effects of their prior victimization. The women in this study were seeking ways to regaining their sense of self and self-worth in a male-centered space. Trust or lack of trust resonated across the women’s stories, specifically their ability to trust men. The women could not decipher good men from bad men, so their interactions with men were another form of re-victimization. Their narratives reflected their lack of trust in men, but also revealed how their emotional wall became a significant barrier as they navigated the college environment. While their emotional walls provided a sanctuary for healing and regaining control, they also created barriers, which affected their interactions with friends, family members, and counselors.

In addition to current or recent experiences of violence, the women’s prior abuse impacted how they interacted with men. While the women recognized that not all men are bad, they also acknowledged that their prior abuse impacted their current relationships with men, and the work to unlearn some fears and perceptions of them that had been developed before was an ongoing process. Learning to trust men and interact with them without the constant fear of being attacked or abused in some way has been a
continuous challenge for some of the women in the study. These two examples point to the internal emotional trauma of navigating the campus environment as a childhood abuse survivor.

Like race, patriarchal beliefs and attitudes about gender are continually reinforced within the college environment. As noted in Chapter 2, patriarchy pertains to “any practices and systems that oppress, control, or dominate women” (Goldrick-Jones, 2002, p. 5). Individuals learn at a very early age what is expected based on their race and gender-role socialization. These messages are transmitted through media that reinforce male privilege. Colleges and universities help to reinforce traditional gender roles and create negative experiences for women (Risman, 2004), including how they should respond to acts of relationship violence on campus. Women are trained to not put themselves in situations where they will get raped, assaulted, etc., while men’s negative behaviors are often described as “boys being boys.” This practice reinforces negative messages to women about their place in society by the media’s objectification of them, the use of sexist language, and restrictive traditional gender roles (Sue, 2010).

While it would be easy to put the ownership on these women to prevent their future re-victimization, the real issue that needs to be addressed is the climate that currently exists within the patriarchal walls of the university. Colleges and universities often approach violence awareness and prevention from a patriarchal perspective – where women are criticized for causing their own victimization, instead of educating men not to perpetrate acts of violence. Students, namely women, are instructed on how to be safe on campus, provided rape whistles, and told to walk in groups at night. As these and other forms of sexism accrue over time, they have “a damaging cumulative impact, creating an
environment that dampens women’s self-esteem, confidence, aspirations, and their participation” (Sandler et al., 1996, p. 10). Negative attitudes towards women that continue to go unchallenged send messages that reinforce women’s low self-worth, which can lead to more instances of relationship violence.

In addition, the education and awareness of men’s roles in perpetrating violence are often absent from violence prevention efforts on college campuses. [B]ell hooks (1984) asserted that “men have a tremendous contribution to make in the area of exposing, confronting, and transforming the sexism of their male peers” (pp.83). Similarly, feminist scholars have argued that gender and power are essential components for understanding violence because both have historically allowed men to use their power to control women (Dwyer et al., 1996). Furthermore, the acceptance of stereotypical feminine and masculine roles is associated with the perpetration and perpetuation of relationship violence (Collins, 2004; hooks, 2004; Marin & Russo, 2005; Sugarman & Frankel, 1996). While the women in the study did not suggest how acts of privilege and patriarchy were salient, MaKayla shared her interactions with the male students in her class, not being taken seriously by them and her responses not being deemed credible.

From a Social Learning Theory perspective, the women provided a context for their understanding and interpretation of relationship violence based on their background and experience in contrast to what they had learned from their college. A clear distinction was made about what the women had previously experienced and what they had learned from their college experience. While they pointed to emotional abuse and prior victimization (molestation, sexual assault, physical abuse) that had informed their college experience, they were receiving messages throughout the university about the type of
victimization that mattered, namely sexual assault and rape. In my conversation with the women, they shared that the only information they had received from the university was during summer orientation, where they learned about campus sexual assault and rape, and who they were expected to contact if they were to become a victim. Information about emotional abuse or other forms of relationship violence was not shared, leaving them to conclude either that there was no assistance for other forms of abuse, or emotional abuse did not rise to the same level of seriousness as rape and/or sexual assault.

**Going to counseling**

As previously noted, as an act of survival, the women in the study were constantly negotiating within these ecological systems, which denied their relationship violence experiences and questioned their race and gender. Messages became much more salient for the Black college women as they interacted within the exosystem or the formal structures (mental health, medical, legal, etc.) in an attempt to respond to the emotional and psychological effects of their abuse (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The study participants talked about their counseling center experiences from racialized and gendered perspectives. Having therapists who mirrored their racial and gender identity or receiving positive counseling center responses to their emotional abuse trauma as legitimate were messages that shaped how these Black college women experienced relationship violence in college.

Student counseling services have served as the bedrock for addressing mental health issues on campus. It is considered the first line of defense to refer students to and for students to seek help for a variety of issues, including emotional abuse (Kitzrow, 2009; Stanley & Archer, 2002). The research suggests that the effects of relationship
violence can lead to short-term and long-term mental, psychological, and spiritual effects for survivors, including anxiety, feelings of anger or worthlessness, depression with possible suicidal ideation, and decreases in self-esteem (Amar, 2008; Tillman et al., 2010; West, 2004). The women in the study talked about using counseling services to help them cope with their victimization. Table 2 illustrates how the three factors of Social Learning Theory interacted to affect the outcome of the women’s interaction with the counseling center.

What can be ascertained from the women’s counseling center experiences is that the very act of going into the center matters. How Black college women are received upon entering the counseling center and whether their issues can be addressed is a direct reflection on its environment. Sue et al. (2007) suggested that acts of microaggressions are prevalent in counseling services, and both intentional and unintentional acts of prejudice and discrimination can do more harm than good in working with clients of color relationships, and can impact whether they seek counseling or even trust the therapeutic process.

While individuals learn from observing behavior, their behaviors/performance are often predicated on systemic forms of oppression. It was also important to show that while those factors influenced the day-to-day experiences of the women in the study, the overarching theme that surfaced throughout the narratives were informed by systems of oppression—within this context, systems of race, class, and gender. The stories shared by these Black women all mirrored the narratives of Black women’s lack of trust of help-seeking agencies.
Table 2
Factors Contributing to the Black College Women’s Counseling Center Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Black College Women’s Counseling Center Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Factors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MaKayla visits the counseling center for help because she is having a difficult time dealing with her abuse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundi, although hesitant based on her past experiences with counseling, goes to the counseling center for help for her abuse situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina talks to her professor about her abuse and decides to seek counseling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizzie is worried about classes, so goes to academic coaching, but gets referred to counseling instead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environmental Factors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MaKayla is not able to see a counselor, because they deemed her situation not serious enough. She is referred off campus and has developed a negative attitude towards the counseling center.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundi had a positive experience with the counseling center because her counselor identified as a woman of color, and she feels she can relate to her much better versus if she had a White counselor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina enjoys counseling. She even attends a therapy group with other students who are experiencing similar situations. She feels like she has a support system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizzie is happy with the referral to the counseling center. She now has a better understanding of her symptoms as they relate to her emotional abuse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behavioral Factors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MaKayla sought help from her academic advisor who identifies as Latina, but she has not sought help from a licensed therapist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundi feels empowered by her counseling session and has been able to make significant improvements towards recovery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling empowered Gina to use her story to help other women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizzie feels empowered to take steps to focus on her overall wellbeing. She is determined to find ways to love herself more. She takes up yoga and meditation, both recommended by her therapist.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The women in the study learned through a variety of experiences whom they could trust to share their experiences and who were committed to helping them understand their experience as college women and without judgment. Confidentiality means trust, and finding people who are trustworthy is important to the recovery process. For Black women, trust and confidentiality are critical elements to their decision to disclose their victimization. As previously noted, from a Black feminist perspective, Black women are skeptical and critical of individuals and oppressive systems that have a proven history of marginalization (Amar, 2008; Donavan & Williams, 2002; Fisher et al., 2003). The research also suggests that some Black women are often reluctant to disclose their abuse because of oppressive racist practices of police and social service agencies and the inherent mandate to protect Black males from further persecution (Washington, 2001; Wyatt, 1992). Furthermore, Black college women are reluctant to disclose their abuse out of fear of being blamed, questioned, and having to identify Black males as perpetrators (Amar, 2008; Donavan & Williams, 2002; Fisher et al., 2003). Washington (2001) made the claim that “in the aftermath of sexual violence Black survivors are generally unlikely to seek assistance from predominately White-run and White-staffed rape crisis agencies or battered women’s shelters” (p. 1257). For Black women, trusting a system that has continuously demonstrated that their experiences are invalid, and lacked acknowledgement of their presence within the university, is a real concern in their decision to disclose their abuse. The messages they have received as college women and as members of society about what it means to be a Black woman, and what it means to be a Black college woman, provided a framework for how these women thought about their abuse, who they chose to disclose it to, and what resources they sought out for help.
Chapter Summary

The goal of this chapter was to discuss the findings presented in Chapter 4 and answer the research questions within the context of the literature, as presented in Chapter 2. I also presented a theoretical analysis of the study findings. The study was grounded in Black Feminist Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory. I also specifically used the tenets of Black Feminist Theory (Collins, 2009), self-definition and self-valuation, the interlocking nature of oppression, and the importance of African American women’s culture, to show how race and gender are aligned with narrative research. Further, I used Social Learning Theory to analyze the personal, behavioral, and environmental factors that influenced what the Black college women in this study learned about relationship violence, what their response to relationship violence is, and the resources they sought because of their own abuse. I employed the Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) to understand how its five systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) shaped the Black college women’s experiences.

In summary, the prior discussion connected the literature on higher education, relationship violence, and Black college women to the thematic narratives by providing interpretive insights into the study’s findings. The discussion reveals the complexity of the Black college women’s experiences in regard to their race, gender, and prior abuse trauma. While each of the women experienced and responded to relationship violence differently, which cannot be generalized to the experiences of other Black women, their stories provided another perspective for interrogating race, gender, and relationship violence within the college environment.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

Chimamanda Zgozi Adichie (2009)

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore how four Black women experienced relationship violence in college. In this final chapter, I provide an overview of the study, the study limitations, implications for future research and recommendations practices, and my personal reflection as the researcher and a participant in this study.

Overview of the Study

This study grew out of my own experience of working with Black college women impacted by relationship violence, with the hope of filling the gap that exists in the literature on Black college women’s experiences with relationship violence and how colleges and universities can support them. Previous research tells us that 60% of Black women experience abuse before the age of 18 (Tanis et al., 2014). Similar research also supports the finding that Black college women who experience various forms of violence before entering college are at increased risk of re-victimization (Smith et al., 2003; West, 2002). However, while most colleges and universities claim success at academically retaining Black women, they have failed to more fully recognize these women’s day-to-day challenges of navigating the university campus, particularly as survivors of relationship violence. The face of relationship violence in higher education has been predominantly that of White women and has excluded the voices of Black college women and other women of color.
This dissertation is organized into six chapters. In Chapter 1, I provided the foundation and overview of the study, which includes the problems and significance, the purpose of the study, the research questions, and a brief methodological overview. The research questions that guided this inquiry were (a) How did the four Black women in this study experience relationship violence in college? (b) How did these Black women make meaning of their experiences of relationship violence in college? and (c) How did these Black women navigate campus resources related to their experiences of relationship violence in college?

Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature in three main sections. The first section, Defining Relationship Violence, focused on the different kinds of and definitions of relationship violence, including physical violence, psychological abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual violence (Kaukinen et al., 2012; Nabors & Jasinski, 2009; Palmer et al., 2010; Shook et al., 2000). However, I used the U.S. Department of Justice (2014) definition of relationship violence—also referred to as dating violence, domestic violence, or intimate partner violence—as being a pattern of violence in any intimate relationship where one person inflicts physical or emotional pain on a partner in order to gain or maintain power and control over their partner.

The second area of the literature review examined the social construction of gender, violence, and patriarchy. This section examined the socialization of gender’s influence on the sexual victimization of women (Anderson & Collins, 2007; Glenn, 1999; Grant, 2006; Hollander, 2014; Lorber & Farrell, 1991; Sokoloff, 2008). The third section addressed violence among Black men and women, with specific emphasis on the history of systemic racism and violence in African American communities (Bent-Goodley, 2001;
Dennis et al., 1995; hooks, 1984). I specifically focused on the sexual exploitation of Black women (Collins, 2004; Jacobs, 2001; hooks, 1984; Sommerville, 2005), rape laws (Roberts, 1997; Sommerville, 2004; West, 2006), and the impact of the Black family (Billingsely, 1992; Collins, 2009; Jones, 1985).

The fourth section of the literature review specifically explored relationship violence in college in general and among Black college women in particular. The literature indicated that 1 in 5 women are survivors of rape or attempted rape (Fisher et al., 2000). This number is not only significant for women in general, but has also revealed a national problem at U.S. colleges and universities. The research on relationship violence among Black college women is minimal and current studies have focused on their experiences of psychological aggression (Clark et al., 1994; Few & Bell-Scott, 2002; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Rouse, Breen & Howell, 1988), disclosure patterns (Washington, 2001; Wyatt, 1992), and coping strategies (Barrett, 1999; Bryant-Davis, 2010; Few & Bell-Scott, 2002; Thompson, 2003). What is missing from the literature is an understanding of how Black college women have been affected by relationship violence and how they have made meaning of such experiences.

The literature review also discussed the three theoretical frameworks used in this study: Black Feminist Theory (Collins, 2009), Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), and Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). All three frameworks were directly connected to the research questions and were used in the analysis of the study. I specifically relied on Black Feminist Theory to understand how race and gender influenced the participants’ experiences with relationship violence in the college context. Social Learning Theory was helpful in understanding the personal, environmental, and
behavioral factors that influenced Black college women’s relationship violence experiences. Ecological Systems Theory addressed the interactions between each of the five ecological systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem), which was specifically helpful in understanding the ways in which the college environment both helped and hindered the participants’ relationship violence experiences.

In Chapter 3, I presented a detailed description of the study’s research design and discussed the following: (a) epistemology, (b) methodology, and (c) methods. I also addressed goodness and quality throughout the study. My epistemological approach to this study was grounded in Black feminist epistemology as it centered on race and gender to critically understand the Black women’s lived experiences. The methodology I employed for this research study was narrative inquiry (Andrews et al., 2008; Chase, 2005; Riessman, 2008), which is based on the premise that, as human beings, we come to understand and give meaning to our lives through telling stories (Andrews et al., 2008; Chase, 2005; Riessman, 2008). This method of inquiry helped inform the participant selection process, data collection, and the data analysis processes.

I recruited a purposeful sample (Patton, 2002) of four participants through the referral process and my personal contacts in student affairs, namely as director of the women’s center and multicultural center. The four participants attended two different predominately White universities in the Midwest. Two of the participants were undergraduate students, one a first year and the other a senior. The other two participants were first-year graduate students. All four participants self-identified as Black or African American and had experienced relationship violence in college. My data collection
methods included participant surveys, reflective journals, three semi-structured interviews of each participant, and my researcher journal (Seidman, 2013). The three semi-structured interviews occurred via telephone for the graduate student participants and face to face with the undergraduate student participants. The first set of interviews focused on getting to know each of the participants and how they experienced college as a Black woman. The second set of interviews focused on how the participants made meaning of their experience of relationship violence. The third set of interviews centered on how the participants navigated the campus resources for relationship violence. All of the interviews were between 45 and 90 minutes long and were conducted one week apart, and recorded on Voice-Recorder. I kept a researcher journal throughout the data collection process and wrote analytical poems to capture the essence of the participants’ stories.

My data analysis for the study consisted of four phases: (a) collecting and transcribing the data, (b) encountering the data, (c) analyzing the data, and (d) reconstructing the participants’ narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995). To evaluate the study’s trustworthiness I used the five criteria of authenticity: (a) fairness, (b) ontological authenticity, (c) educative authenticity, (d) catalytic authenticity, and (e) tactical authenticity (Lewis-Beck et al., 2003). I also chose to represent the data as a collective conversation between the four participants and myself, which is grounded in Black feminist theory. Thus I constructed sister circles (Boyd, 1993; Giddings, 1984; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011) to capture the essence of these collective conversations.

The findings for the study were presented in Chapter 4 and are organized around the five themes (Self-Definition, Naming, Survival, Support, and Meaning Making) that
emerged from the interviews, which I fictitiously constructed as a composite narrative in the form of sister circle meet-ups between all four participants and myself at the women’s center (but using the women’s actual words in the interviews, and pseudonyms). An analytical poem that I developed through my reflective journaling process precedes each of these narratives. Although I had conducted the interviews individually, I wanted to collectively represent the messages I heard in the stories being told and how I was experiencing them as the researcher. The stories I shared and created from the interview data, reflected the participants’ similarities and difference around race, gender, and relationship violence.

In Chapter 5, I engaged in an analytical discussion, which connected the findings presented in Chapter 4 in the context of the literature, as presented in Chapter 2. Specifically, I connected the literature on higher education, relationship violence, and Black college women to the composite narratives to answer the three research questions. The first research question sought to determine how these women had experienced relationship violence. The findings indicated they had experienced relationship violence through a racialized and gendered lens and in the form of emotional/psychological abuse. The second research question was intended to understand how these Black college women made meaning of their relationship violence experiences. The findings indicated that in addition to making meaning of their experiences in a racialized and gendered context, the women also made meaning by taking ownership of their healing and reclaiming their agency. The third research question ascertained the ways in which race and gender influenced how the women accessed campus resources, interacted with individuals in the campus community, and what they learned about the campus
environment as it related to their abuse. My findings indicated that the participants navigated the campus resources for relationship violence by connecting with individuals and offices in the university that understood their racialized and gendered experiences. In addition, the women were also navigating campus resources to address being survivors of childhood abuse.

**Limitations**

The present study explored how four Black college women experienced relationship violence. While the participating students yielded important results that can benefit practitioners, administrators, and other Black college women, there were two main limitations to this study. Firstly, the study focused on relationship violence in its broadest context. While relationship violence encompasses a variety of abuse trauma, focusing on a specific type of abuse may have yielded different results. In addition, college campuses are primarily focused on sexual assault and rape, although there is an increasing awareness and advocacy directly linked to prevention efforts. Therefore, the findings from my study may not be immediately transferrable to the college context, especially since the current federal mandate requires colleges and universities to focus their efforts on preventing sexual assault and rape (VAWA, 2013).

Secondly, the methods I used to collect data for this study included both telephone and face-to-face interviews. The sole use of face-to-face interviews might have produced a different set of results and provided different kinds of data. In my study, I conducted the interviews with the two undergraduate students face to face, but the two graduate women by telephone for convenience. While using telephone interviews with the graduate students provided them flexibility, it presented obvious limitations, including my inability
to observe their non-verbal cues, body language, facial expressions, and level of engagement during the interviews. There were points during these phone interviews when the participants were engaged in other activities. The circumstances around developing meaningful relationships with my participants was critical to producing rich descriptive data, so I was intentional in my follow-up conversations with the four participants to ask probing questions and additional follow up during the member checking process. I also spent time at the beginning of each telephone call socially engaging these participants before beginning the interview.

**Implications**

This study captured the experiences of four Black college women who were brave enough to discuss in detail their experiences of relationship violence in their college environment. Their narratives documented how self-definition, naming, support, survival, and meaning making were instrumental in illustrating the similarities and differences in their experiences. Despite the current federal mandate to improve how colleges and universities address relationship violence on college campuses, qualitative research on the experiences of Black college women involved in violent relationships has been slow to emerge. As college and universities continue to address issues of campus sexual assault, it is my hope that the findings of this study will lead to further inquiry. Implications for both research and practice are presented below. Implications for practice that are aimed at specific research that dismantles the single story narrative allowed me to think differently about the role of college administrators in addressing issues of relationship violence, but also attend to the broad needs of the Black college women. The following section discusses how the results of this study can inform practice, policy, and future research.
Future Research

This study aimed to fill the gap in the relationship violence/campus sexual assault literature by examining how four Black college women have addressed relationship violence in their college. While the findings from this study cannot be generalized to all Black college women or to those at predominately White institutions, it does provide critical information to begin to understand the needs of Black college women affected by relationship violence. The study findings, methodological frameworks, theoretical frameworks, and limitations can serve as catalysts to help inform further research.

Firstly, the study took a broad approach to defining relationship violence. However, future researchers who examine the interconnectedness of different forms of relationship violence may offer new insight into the ways Black college women experience violence in college. This study did not intend to focus solely on emotional abuse, which is often a residual effect of sexual assault, rape, and physical abuse. However, although the women in the study had experienced various forms of abuse, emotional abuse was a salient experience throughout all four of their narratives. Since relationship violence broadly encompasses sexual assault, rape, physical abuse, and emotional abuse, future researchers should explore how multiple forms of abuse impact the lives of Black college women, particularly emotional abuse.

Secondly, this study focused on the experiences of Black college women. I would be interested in exploring how relationship violence affects other women of color in college, especially since they have different and racialized experiences. According to my findings, MaKayla shared how she was able to connect with other women of color at the
women of color retreat. Thus, it would be interesting to tap into how this population has experienced relationship violence and conduct an analysis across racial groups.

Thirdly, research examining the experiences of women of color across institutional contexts (historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic serving institutions, or all-female institutions) is needed. In previous sections of this study I noted the absence of literature on the experiences of Black college women. However, there is a gap in the literature on other women of color at predominately White institutions or other types of institutions. In an effort to build research that examines the breadth of how women of color experience relationship violence, examining the various contexts that cater to the success of these populations (e.g., minority-serving institutions) can serve as a means to help direct campus sexual assault policy and practice.

Fourthly, although this study focused specifically on race, gender, and relationship violence experiences of four Black college women, further exploration is needed as related to other social identities, including class and sexual identity. The women in the study shared factors in their backgrounds that shaped how they responded to relationship violence and how they navigated the college environment. What is understood is that relationship violence or Black women themselves are not monolithic, so examining the role of intersectionality is the foundation for capturing the breadth of Black college women’s experiences, which will lead to further insight into their persistence in college. Further examination of intersectionality as it relates to class and sexual identity can unearth the interlocking forms of oppression that inform Black college women’s relationship violence experience, simultaneously recognizing the multiple dimensions of Black college women’s identities.
Lastly, feelings of isolation and belonging were salient experiences of the women of color in this study. One of the participants specifically talked about feeling connected through her participation at a woman of color retreat. An examination into campus resources specifically for Black women can help us begin to understand Black college women’s resilience. The current research points to Black women’s retention and persistence in college, but further research is needed to identify the factors contributing to their overall success in college. Research on programs such as the women of color network can add to the retention literature on Black college women.

**Recommendations for Practitioners**

In this section, I offer three key recommendations to practitioners and higher education institutions to improve how they can better meet the needs of Black college women, especially those who have experienced relationship violence.

**Acknowledging Black college women’s abuse experiences**

Acknowledging and understanding the experiences of Black college women is needed as colleges and universities begin to re-evaluate how women experience rape and sexual assault in college. The national spotlight on campus sexual assault provides an opportunity for institutions to expand the scope of addressing relationship violence in the lives of Black college women and other populations left out of the conversation by including other forms of physical abuse, and especially psychological/emotional abuse.

Acknowledging Black college women’s relationship violence experiences means providing additional resources beyond university counseling and multicultural student affairs to attend their needs. In this study, Gina, for example, talked about her first point of contact, her professor, when seeking assistance regarding her violence experience. It
also means investing in ongoing cultural sensitivity training for frontline staff and culturally relevant prevention models that are representative of the campus population. This shift in focus will require colleges and universities to think about relationship violence from a student development model and less from numbers.

While student counseling services have served as the bedrock for addressing mental health issues on campus, it should not be the only resource available for students. Kitzrow (2009) recommended that counseling centers not be solely responsible for caring for the mental health needs of students; instead, the entire institution (administrators, faculty, and staff) should be responsible for prevention, providing support, and offering students opportunities to succeed in college. This collective institutional effort can help alleviate some of the burden felt by counseling centers in providing adequate counseling to a diverse student body that “includes multicultural and gender issues, career and developmental needs, life transitions, stress, violence, and serious psychological problems” (Kitzrow, 2009, p. 166).

Acknowledging the experiences of Black college women also means including them in the larger university conversation on relationship violence. Currently, the conversations to improve campus climate around sexual assault have left Black women out of the conversations. Institutions of higher educations have all but ignored the experiences of Black college women, and the task of addressing their needs have been left to historical Black colleges and university (HBCUs). As previously noted, there is a tremendous diversity among Black women regarding the prevalence, nature, and impact of relationship violence (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005; West, 2005). From the data we know that these women, while having similar situations, have different responses, and how they
engage with the university is different. Research suggests that students are more likely to seek help for their abuse trauma if they trust their college system and administrators (Garcia, Lechner, Frerich, Lust, & Eisenberg, 2012; DeGue et al., 2014; Reingold & Gostin, 2015). Black college women need to feel that their experiences of violence matter and that their college and university are genuinely interested in their success, and that responsive to working towards integrating them back into the campus community after their abuse trauma. This responsibility should not be left to the students to figure out.

**Expanding relationship violence to include other forms**

The focus of relationship violence has been on sexual assault and rape. These two violent acts are at the forefront of campus safety; however, the scope of addressing relationship violence should be expanded to adequately address other forms of violence, specifically physical abuse and psychological/emotional abuse. The “bootstrap narrative” around emotional abuse suggests that survivors should pull themselves up emotionally and move on. This attitude further perpetuates the lack of recognition of the severity associated with emotional abuse because it fails to recognize the visible and invisible trauma that impacts the daily lives of abuse survivors.

Emotional abuse was evident in the narratives of three of the four participants, and all four women shared examples of depression, low self-esteem, self-blame and guilt as they reflected on their abuse. All four pointed to the abuse having had a psychological toll on their mental and emotional wellbeing. From this we can assert that relationship violence is more than sexual assault or rape. While sexual assault and rape awareness/prevention have received both national attention and resources, there is also a
need for awareness, education, and resources to address other forms of relationship violence, namely emotional/mental and psychological abuse.

Steps to achieving this goal have been laid in a report titled *Addressing Gender-Based Violence on College Campuses* produced by the Center for Changing our Campus Culture (2017), indicated that a “culturally relevant, survivor centered approach (1) is grounded in the experiences of all survivors on campus. This requires the campus to understand not only the dynamics of the crimes, but the nuances that each crime presents and how these crimes are experienced by diverse groups of survivors on campus; (2) takes into account cultural contexts needed to adequately understand survivors’ experiences and how they may affect such actions as a survivor’s decision not to report or seek services; (3) is flexible and adaptable to the needs of survivors so they are not re-traumatized by the campus’s efforts; (4) prevents the creation of processes, protocols, and systems that support institutional interests over survivor’s needs”


**Resources to address prior victimization**

All four participants disclosed their experiences of prior childhood abuse and being re-victimized in college. I believe that colleges and universities need better campus resources to help minimize the risk of re-victimization and to provide resources for students with a history of relationship violence. According to West (2002), “Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) is defined as the occurrence of at least one incident of sexual abuse during childhood followed by a subsequent incident of adult physical or sexual victimization” (p. 8). The Black women’s victimization prior to college adds another
layer of complexity for colleges and universities to consider, as it pertains to providing resources for students who have already been traumatized. The national conversation about relationship violence on college campuses is centered on the rape and sexual assaults students experience while in college, but does not consider pre-college traumas they may have had.

**Recommendations for Policy**

In this section, I offer three recommendations for local and state policy makers and college administrators that would benefit from applying a culturally and ethnically relevant approach to campus relationship violence awareness and prevention response. The need for cultural and ethnically relevant approaches to address campus sexual assault was noted in the Black Women’s Blueprint (Tanis et al., 2014), although the report focused on the experiences of Black women at HBCUs to work with policy makers and administrators on culturally appropriate language and to develop culturally relevant bystander inventions strategies to assist abuse survivors. While this focus currently applies to HBCUs, other campuses, including PWIs, should take a forward-thinking approach to attend to the needs of Black women on their respective campuses.

**Policy acknowledging other forms of relationship violence**

The national conversation has focused primarily on rape and sexual assault, which have informed policy and guidelines that govern how college campuses have approached addressing campus safety. While these two issues are important and deserve attention, other forms of relationship violence should be given serious consideration and be included in policies that inform practice. Acknowledging other forms of relationship violence, centering on race and gender as critical elements within policy/guiding
documents, and using campus climate data to inform policy could significantly improve how college campuses address relationship violence.

**Prevention policy acknowledging race**

Secondly, as previously stated, colleges and universities have not only focused solely on sexual assault and rape, but they have yet to expand their prevention and awareness efforts to include race and ethnicity. This study’s findings suggest there is a need for campuses to engage in conversations and policies that attend to the racial and ethnic identities of relationship violence survivors as well as to the cultural competency of frontline staff. Current policies that address campus sexual assault and other forms of violence tend to be race-neutral which privileges and normalizes the experiences of White survivors (Amar, 2008; Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Wooten, 2016). Opting for a color-blind approach to addressing relationship violence leaves Black college women and other women of color to navigate an environment that does not see them as relationship violence survivors.

**Campus climate data**

Thirdly, colleges and universities should use campus climate data not only to uncover problems plaguing their campuses but also to develop policies and inform practices for effectively responding to relationship violence. Using campus climate data to address relationship violence among Black college women can begin the process whereby college administrators understand the scope of their experiences and how they have navigated campus resources to address their abuse. Campus climate data can also help universities identify and fill the gaps in relationship violence services.
Closing Reflection and Conclusion

You cannot, you cannot use someone else’s fire. You can only use your own. And in order to do that, you must first be willing to believe that you have it.

Audre Lorde (1984)

My involvement in this project has been both a labor of love and at times an emotional rollercoaster. My journey began about eight years ago as Assistant Dean for Women’s Programs, when I was entrusted to provide programs and services to college women affected by relationship violence. Since then, I have been committed to expanding the discourse to involve that of Black women and other women of color. I began this research project with the goal of adding the voices of Black college women to the national discourse surrounding campus sexual assault. Who were the faces in the crowd that were being overlooked because they did not fit the current profile of being an abuse victim/survivor, i.e., having been physically or sexually assaulted? I wanted my study to illuminate the Black faces and stories that are continually being ignored on college campuses. I chose to do a narrative study because I wanted it to reflect the voices of Lizzie, Fundi, MaKayla, and Gina, as representative of Black college women who have experienced relationship violence. I hope that this study authentically honored their voices.

Throughout this study, I was captivated by the resilience of these four women because, despite all they have been through as Black women at a predominately White institution, where daily experiences of racism and sexism were commonplace, they were also dealing with managing the residual affects of their prior abuse trauma. Listening to their stories and hearing them relive the emotional scars endured from their abuse traumas at times became emotionally overwhelming for me. There were many occasions
when I questioned whether I was the right person to do this research or whether my study would matter, but in those moments of doubt, I would think back to my four participants and all that they had accomplished and were still motivated to accomplish. And I also turned to my faith and reconnected with my ordained purpose.

On this incredible journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance as a researcher, I found my fire. While my interest has always been the experiences of Black women, this study solidified for me the fact that I am a qualitative feminist researcher. It is a belief that I did not always have, but I have come to appreciate the lessons that I have learned about the research process and the unequivocal responsibility and potential of qualitative feminist research. One such lesson was letting go of my own expectations of how the process should go and allowing the study to take shape in its truest form. During my data analysis process, I sat in the coffee shop re-reading interview transcripts and grappling with my emotional responses from my participants’ stories, and I began to cry. Was anyone watching? I hope no one sees me sitting here crying! I thought. As I gathered myself together, I paused, took out a pen and paper and decided to document my emotions, which developed into the analytical poems I shared in Chapter 4, which accompanied the women’s narratives. I reflect on this experience because that was the exact moment during this process when I found my voice as a researcher. The fact that these four women had entrusted me with their stories is a responsibility I took seriously, and my hope is to continue on this journey to bring voices of Black women and their stories to the forefront in order to serve them better, help alleviate their suffering, and enhance their college experiences.
REFERENCES


Hull, G. T., Scott, P. B., & Smith, B. (Eds.). (1982). *All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave: Black women’s studies*. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist.


http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/dear_colleague_sexual_violence.pdf


CALL FOR STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Relationship Violence Among Black College Women

This study is seeking Black college women (recent graduates) to participate in a study about relationship violence. The study will examine the experiences of Black college women who have encountered and experienced relationship violence prior to or during their college career. Relationship violence, also known as intimate partner violence, is a pattern of coercive behavior that is used by one person to gain power and control over another. It may include the use of physical and sexual violence, verbal and emotional abuse, stalking, and economic abuse. Sexual, emotional and psychological intimidation may also occur.

Results will be used for the purposes of producing vital research on the experiences of Black college women and to inform and improve the educational practices with this particular population.

Participation will involve 3 semi-structured interviews, which should take about 30-60 minutes each and 3 reflection journals.

To learn more about the study or to serve as a participant, please contact Lorraine Acker at ldacker@iastate.edu. Lorraine is a doctoral candidate in the School of Education, studying Higher Education at Iowa State University in Ames, IA. Her research interest primarily focuses on the experiences of college women of color.
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Date:

Dear: 

My name is Lorraine Acker and I am a doctoral candidate in Higher Education in the School of Education at the Iowa State University.

I am writing to invite recent college graduates to participate in a narrative research study to explore and understand how Black women have addressed relationship violence throughout their college careers. The study will use individual interviews and journals to document the stories as told by the participants and provide them an opportunity to reflect on how they have made sense of and/or are making meaning of their relationship violence experiences. In addition, the study will seek insight into how Black college women navigate campus resources in order to deal with their encounters of relationship violence.

The following are the criteria for participation in my study:

1. **Self-identify as a woman.** While this study acknowledges that men also experience relationship violence, the overall purpose is to describe and discuss the experiences of women.

2. **Self-identity as Black and/or African American.** This study will focus on capturing the experiences of participants who self-identify as Black women. While it is known that relationship violence impacts men and women of all races, the interest of this study is to illuminate the experiences of Black women. In order not to essentialize all Black people’s experiences, the participants will be asked how they identify their race within the context of their Blackness, including such ethnic groups as African, Black, African American, Black Caribbean, and Black Latino.

3. **Has experienced some form of relationship violence prior to or during college.** For this study, relationship violence, also known as intimate partner violence, is a pattern of coercive behavior used by one person to gain power and control over another. It may include physical or sexual violence, verbal or emotional abuse, stalking, or economic abuse. Sexual, emotional, or psychological intimidation may also occur. I specifically chose this definition because it encompasses a broad definition of violence. As a researcher, I do not want to assume that these Black women have only experienced a particular form of violence, but to look at relationship violence broadly. Also, this definition is used by the federal government and by colleges and universities to describe the various acts of violence women often encounter.

4. **Recent college graduates (1-3 years post bachelor’s) from a 4-year U.S. college or university.** The setting for this study focuses specifically on the college
environment, so it is critically important for me to cast a broad net to capture the experiences of Black college women who have recently graduated from college. I chose recent college graduates because they are removed from their undergraduate experience and may be better able to reflect on their encounters with relationship violence during their college years.

5. *Has access to relationship violence resources.* The goal of the study is not to re-traumatize the participants as they reflect on their experiences, so it is critically important for each participant to know the resources available and understand how to access them should they have an undesirable reaction.

To participate in the study, please email me ldacker@iasate.edu or via phone at (704) 778-2664. Also, I would appreciate you forwarding this email to others who you think may be interested in participating and who meet the criteria for the study.

Thank you for your attention to this request. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Lorraine D. Acker
Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education
Iowa State University
APPENDIX C: INTRODUCTORY MEETING

An introductory meeting will be used to introduce participants to the research study and to talk about the expectations between researcher and participant throughout the duration of the study. I will also review informed consent (Appendix D), the participant’s bill of rights (Appendix E), how to file a complaint if necessary (Appendix F), and answer any questions about the study for the participant. I will also use this time to get to know the participant and to disclose information about myself and share my background and why I am interested in the research topic in order to foster a sense of trust and rapport between the participant and myself.

Introductory Meeting Agenda:

- Introduce Myself
- Introduce Study
- Review of Informed Consent
- Obtain signature for informed consent (Give participant a signed copy)
- Review Participant’s Bill of Rights (Give participant a copy)
- Ask general questions of participants
  1. Tell me about yourself
  2. How did you learn about the research project?
  3. Why have you chosen to participate?
  4. Do you have any questions or concerns about the research project?
  5. What is your preferred method of communication?
  6. What is your preferred email address?
- Review Journal Prompt #1 and schedule first interview time and location.
APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: Relationship Violence Among Black College Women
Investigator: Lorraine D. Acker

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand how Black women have addressed relationship violence throughout their college careers. The study will employ narrative inquiry, using individual interviews, to document the stories as told by the participants and provide them an opportunity to reflect on how they have made sense of and/or are making meaning of their relationship violence experiences. In addition, the study will seek insight into how Black college women navigate campus resources in order to deal with their encounters of relationship violence.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in one introductory meeting, two interviews, and respond to three reflective journals. These interviews will be conducted in-person, via telephone or using the computer program Skype. These interviews will include you as the participant as well as myself as the researcher.

The introductory meeting will introduce you the participant to the research study and to talk about the expectations between researcher and participant throughout the duration of the study. I will also review informed consent, the participant’s bill of rights, and answer any questions about the study. I will also use this time to get to know you and I will share a bit about myself, my background, and why I am interested in the research topic.

After the introductory meeting, you will be asked to respond to the following journal prompt 1: How have you as Black college woman experienced relationship violence? You will be sent a Qualtrics link to your email address asking you to respond to the journal prompt. You will be given one week to respond to the journal prompt. After you have completed the journal prompt – we will schedule a time for our first interview.

The first interview will last approximately 30-60 minutes. I will use a semi-structured interview approach and a uniform set of open-ended questions related to being a Black college woman about how you experienced relationship violence while in college. Specifically, addressing the direct and indirect messages you received throughout your college experience about relationship violence. In addition, probing and/or follow-up questions will also be asked, when necessary, to encourage you to elaborate on responses. I will also ask follow-up questions from your journal response.
Immediately following the first interview, you will be asked to respond to the following journal prompt 2: How have you made meaning of your relationship violence experience? You will be sent a Qualtrics links to your email address you initially provide asking you to respond to the journal prompt. You will be given one week to respond to the journal prompt 2. After you have completed the journal prompt 2, I will contact you to schedule a time for our second interview.

The second interview is expected to last approximately 30-60 minutes and will focus on how you made meaning of your experience of relationship violence. The goal of this interview will be to allow you to reflect on what your experience of relationship violence meant (or means) to you as a college student, as a Black woman, and a member of your community. Open-ended questions will also be used throughout the interview so you, the participant, can respond freely and openly to queries. In addition, probing and/or follow-up questions will be asked, when necessary, to encourage you to elaborate on responses. In addition, the second interview will be used to follow-up on questions from interview 1 and journal prompt 2.

Immediately following the second interview, you will be asked to respond to the following journal prompt 3: Describe how the college environment (individuals, offices, departments, and peers) has helped or not helped you cope with your experience of relationship violence? You will be sent aQualtrics links to your email address asking you to respond to the journal prompt. You will be given one week to respond to journal prompt 3. After you have completed journal prompt 3, I will contact you to schedule a time for the final interview.

The third interview is also expected to last 30-60 minutes. You will be asked questions about how you navigated both campus and community resources to deal with your experience of relationship violence. I will also ask follow-up questions related to interview 2 and your journal prompt 3 response. Open-ended questions will also be used throughout the interview so you, the participant, can respond freely and openly to queries. In addition, probing and/or follow-up questions will also be asked, when necessary, to encourage you to elaborate on responses. In addition, the third interview will be used to follow up on questions from the second interview and your journal prompt 3.

**RISKS**

This study requests that participants think about resources available to them surrounding relationship violence. As a result of your participation, you may recall events from your own life that you may find difficult to discuss. The results of this study will be used to gather information as well as to obtain a better understanding of how Black college women experience relationship violence in college.

The following steps will be taken should you become psychologically or emotionally distressed during the interview:
• You will be informed that you can stop or choose to end the interview at any time and your responses will be discarded.
• You will be referred to Counseling Services and provided with additional support during this time.
• You will determine the location of our in-person interview, which will allow you to have control in deciding a safe and secure place to share your story.
• You will receive a resource packet containing the available relationship violence resources

Please remember that you may withdraw from the study at any time.

**BENEFITS**

If you decide to participate in this study, you may benefit from sharing your experiences as a way to help others who have experienced or are experiencing relationship violence. Another benefit is the opportunity to share how colleges and university can improve their programs and services to better support Black College women who have experienced relationship violence. You will also have the opportunity to learn about the violence prevention resources available to you within your local community. It is the hope that information gained in this study will benefit the greater society by providing insight into a topic that is becoming more prevalent in higher education.

**COSTS AND COMPENSATION**

There will be no cost or monetary compensation associated with this study

**PARTICIPANT RIGHTS**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. Additionally, if you choose to withdraw from the study, your data will be deleted and not included in the written findings.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Please note that your identity cannot be completely protected. However, records identifying you will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

Every measure possible will be taken to protect your confidentiality to the best of my ability and minimize your risk in your participation in this study. However, your identity
cannot be protected when results of the study are disseminated. In situations where a participant informs the researcher of abuse/neglect of a minor or dependent adult or the imminent harm to themselves or others, the researcher may break confidentiality and inform the appropriate authorities (e.g., Department of Human Services, local police) as permitted or required by law.

Although confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, I plan to use the following protective measures to maintain confidentiality:

- The interviews will be audio recorded on the researcher's digital recorder (which is password protected). Data will be transferred and stored on the researcher’s personal laptop computer which is also password protected. All data will be encrypted for additional security measures - laptop uses whole drive encryption - File Vault. Back up data will be stored on the university controlled server, CyBox.

- Legal names will be extracted from the data upon completion of the interview; pseudonyms will be given to all participants.

- The transcripts will be kept by the researcher in two different locations – electronically on the researcher’s personal laptop, which is password protected, and on the university controlled password protected server (CyBox).

- Extracting your name from any data and using a pseudonym.

- Results from this study will be shared and disseminated to my Program of Study Committee, and other interested parties.

- The results of the study will focus on patterns of experiences and themes shared by more than one participant.

- The use of summaries, categories, and major themes will be used to describe experiences shared by participants.

- Personal identifiable data will not be reported in the final report.

- The study report will not contain any details that will disclose your identity as a participant.

- When direct quotes are used, all identifying markers linking the participant will be removed to protect the participant’s identity. (For example, dates, times, references made to other individuals, etc.)

- Quotes will only be used to support main themes and broad ideas.
• Quotes will also be edited for vernacular and phrasing that can easily identify a participant – For example, the use of the word “like”

• Removing the name and location of the institution where you attend school and instead referring to the institution and city using a pseudonym.

• Informing you that quotations from your interviews might appear in conference papers or published articles about the study and that you may request a paper or electronic copy of any paper written about the study.

In spite of this measure to protect your identity, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed when the results of the study are shared.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS
You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

• For further information about the study contact Lorraine Acker by email at ldacker@iastate.edu or phone at (704) 778.2664 or Dr. Natasha Croom, faculty supervisor, at nrcroom@iastate.edu or phone at (515) 294-4916.

• If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE
Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years or older, you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant’s Name (printed) ________________________________

Participant’s Signature ________________________________

Date ________________________________
APPENDIX E: RESEARCH PARTICIPANT’S BILL OF RIGHTS

As a participant in this research project, you have the right to:

- Be treated with dignity and respect;
- Be given a clear description of the purpose of the study and what is expected of you as a participant;
- Be told of any benefits or risks to you that can occur as a participant in this study;
- Know the researcher’s training and experience;
- Ask any questions you may have about the study;
- Decide to participate or not without any pressure from the researcher;
- Have your privacy protected within the limits of the law;
- Refuse to answer any research question, refuse to participate in any part of the study, or withdraw from the research at any time without any negative effects to you;
- Be given a description of the overall results of the study upon request, and
- Discuss any concerns about the research with the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, Ames, IA 50011-2200; Phone 515-294-1516, Fax 515-294-4267, orrweb@iastate.edu
APPENDIX F: FILING A FORMAL COMPLAINT

The following options are available to you, should you decide to file a formal complaint. While the process for filing a complaint might be different at every college/university, the three main offices that can provide immediate assistance to you are represented on most campuses.

1. Title IX/Equal Opportunity (EO) Office
   - Every college/university has a Title IX office.
   - If you wish to file a complaint with an external agency,
     - U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
     - U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights
   - To learn more about Title IX - http://knowyourix.org/title-ix/

2. Dean of Students Office
   Most universities have a Dean of Students Office that is available to assist you with filing a formal complaint or following up with a crisis situation.

3. University Police
   a. For emergencies, contact 911. In addition, your campus university police can inform you of your options on how file a formal report.

For Iowa State Students

Office of Equal Opportunity - http://www.eoc.iastate.edu
   - Any person may file a complaint against a faculty member, staff, or student with the Office of Equal Opportunity, 3350 Beardshear Hall, Monday - Friday, 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m., by phone at 515-294-7612, by email at eooffice@mail.iastate.edu or by appointment. If you decide to file a formal complaint with the Office of Equal Opportunity, you will need to complete an Intake Form in addition to submitting a written, signed complaint.

Dean of Students Office - http://www.dso.iastate.edu
   - To seek assistance and support, or to report misconduct, contact the Dean of Students Office (1010 Student Services Building, 515-294-1020, dso@iastate.edu).

Iowa State University Police - http://www.police.iastate.edu
   - For emergencies, contact 911. For non-emergencies, or if criminal behavior is involved, students are encouraged to contact ISU Police by telephone at 515-294-4428 or in person at room 55, Armory Building.
   - Contacting ISU Police does not mean you must pursue charges. ISU Police can advise you of your options and can also preserve evidence while you consider your options.
APPENDIX G: PARTICIPANT ONLINE SURVEY

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this important study on relationship violence among Black women in college. Please respond to the following questions.

1. How do you self-identify by race?
   - [ ] African
   - [ ] African American
   - [ ] Black
   - [ ] Black Caribbean
   - [ ] Black Latin@
   - [ ] Other

2. How do you self-identify gender?
   - [ ] Man
   - [ ] Woman
   - [ ] Other

3. Are you 18 years or older?
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No

4. What is your current classification?
   - [ ] Freshman
   - [ ] Sophomore
   - [ ] Junior
   - [ ] Senior
   - [ ] Graduate

5. What type of violence have you experienced?
   - [ ] Rape
   - [ ] Sexual Assault
   - [ ] Physical Abuse
   - [ ] Stalking
   - [ ] Emotional Abuse
   - [ ] Psychological Abuse
   - [ ] Economic Abuse

6. Have you sought help for your current situation?
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No

7. What kind of help have you sought out for your relationship violence experience?
   - [ ] Counseling
   - [ ] Medical
   - [ ] Peer Support
   - [ ] Family
   - [ ] Religious
   - [ ] Relationship Violence Advocate
   - [ ] Other __________________

8. Are you currently experiencing relationship violence?
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No

9. What help are you receiving for your current relationship violence experience?
   - [ ] None
   - [ ] Counseling
   - [ ] Medical
   - [ ] Peer Support
   - [ ] Family
   - [ ] Religious
   - [ ] Relationship Violence Advocate
   - [ ] Other __________________
APPENDIX H: JOURNAL PROMPT 1

Relationship Violence Among Black Women College Women

JOURNAL PROMPT 1

Please use the following journal prompt to share your story of experiencing relationship violence in college. You are free to use examples.

Journal Prompt 1: How have you as a Black college woman experienced relationship violence?
APPENDIX I : INTERVIEW PROTOCOL INTERVIEW 1

Relationship Violence Among Black College Women

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL - INTERVIEW 1

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this important study on relationship violence among Black women in college. As a reminder, this interview will be digitally recorded for accuracy.

Thank you for responding to journal prompt 1.

I have a few follow-up questions for you about some of the items you shared in your journal as well as some additional questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Proposed Interview Questions Interview 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R2: How have Black college women experienced relationship violence?</td>
<td>2. Describe your student experience thus far.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. What aspects of your identity are most important to you?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. What types of activities are/were you involved in on campus?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Share an example of a relationship violence situation you witnessed while in college.</td>
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<td>6. Did you know you were in an unhealthy relationship and how did you know?</td>
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<td>7. Tell me about the messages (formal and informal) you received about relationship violence during your college experience?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>8. In what ways did this experience affect your quality of life?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>9. How did this experience affect your college experience?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>10. Describe what you have done to cope with your experience of relationship violence?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>11. Have you, or are you going through a recovery process? Please describe it.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>12. How do you define relationship violence?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Tell me about your sense of self prior to the incident or incidents.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. How has your sense of yourself changed since the incident?</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Describe your process of making meaning of your experience of relationship violence, if you have.</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. Describe your view of college prior to the incident(s).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>17. Describe your outlook on college after the incident(s).</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. Describe your feelings as they related to being a survivor of relationship violence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Tell me about your decision to disclose your encounters with relationship violence and to whom (not by name).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Describe the messages you received about disclosing your personal situations?</td>
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<tr>
<td>21. What aspect of your identity as a student may have changed for you after your disclosed your situation?</td>
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<tr>
<td>22. What message(s) did you receive from your college about disclosing your encounter with relationship violence?</td>
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<tr>
<td>23. How have the messages you received (from your family, community, peers, etc.) informed your decision to disclose your situation?</td>
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APPENDIX J: JOURNAL PROMPT 2

Relationship Violence Among Black College Women

JOURNAL PROMPT PROTOCOL 2

Please use the following journal prompt to describe the messages you received about your experience of relationship violence.

**Journal Prompt 2:** How have you made meaning of your relationship violence experience? Specifically, speaking to the direct and indirect messages you received from church, family, school, or peer groups about relationship violence (You can pinpoint one experience or a series of experiences).
It is good to see you again. I appreciate your participation in the second interview. As a reminder, this interview will be digitally recorded for accuracy.

Thank you for responding to journal prompt 2.

I have a few follow-up questions for you about some of the items your shared in your journal as well as some additional questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Proposed Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R:2 How have Black women experienced relationship violence in college?</td>
<td>1. How do you define relationship violence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3: How have Black women made meaning of their relationship violence experience in college?</td>
<td>2. Tell me about your sense of self prior to the incident or incidents.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. How has your sense of yourself changed since the incident?</td>
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<td>4. Describe your process of making meaning of your experience of relationship violence, if you have.</td>
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<td>5. Describe your view of college prior to the incident(s).</td>
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<td>6. Describe your outlook on college after the incident(s).</td>
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<td>7. Describe your feelings as they related to being a survivor of relationship violence.</td>
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<td>8. Tell me about your decision to disclose your encounters with relationship violence and to whom (not by name).</td>
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<td>9. Describe the messages you received about disclosing your personal situations?</td>
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<td>10. What aspect of your identity as a student may have changed for you after your disclosed your situation?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11. What message(s) did you receive from your college about disclosing your encounter with relationship violence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12. How have the messages you received (from your family, community, peers, etc.) informed your decision to disclose your situation?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13. Describe your experience(s) as a Black woman in college.</td>
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</table>
APPENDIX L: JOURNAL PROMPT 3

Relationship Violence Among Black College Women

JOURNAL PROMPT 3

Please use the following journal prompt to share how your college environment helped you cope with relationship violence in college. You are free to use examples.

Journal Prompt 3: Describe how the college environment (individuals, offices, departments, and peers) has helped or not helped you cope with your experience of relationship violence.
This is our third interview. I appreciate your continuous participation throughout this research study. As a reminder, this interview will be digitally recorded for accuracy.

Thank you for responding to the journal prompt.

I have a few follow-up questions for you about some of the items your shared in your journal as well as some additional questions.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>R4: How have Black women navigated campus resources related to relationship violence in college?</td>
<td>1. What role if any has your college/university played in your experience with relationship violence?</td>
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<td>2. Tell me about some of the resources available to students dealing with relationship violence on your campus?</td>
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<td>3. What type of help/support did you receive or seek out to address your violent relationship (family, peers, institution)?</td>
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<td>4. Describe how you navigated campus resources regarding your experience of relationship violence.</td>
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<td>5. Describe the resources available to students dealing with relationship violence situations.</td>
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<td>6. As a Black woman dealing with relationship violence, what resources might be helpful to your recovery?</td>
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<td>7. In what ways did the resources on campus meet your needs as a Black student dealing with relationship violence?</td>
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APPENDIX N: MEMBER CHECK

Relationship Violence Among Black College Women

MEMBER CHECK

The member check for this research will be conducted at the conclusion of each interview and journal prompt. It will include checking with participants to ensure they are emotionally able to continue with study, ask follow-up questions, clarify information from the interview and journals, provide additional information, and obtain participant feedback about the process. Participants will also be provided a summary of all three interviews and all three journals during member check #5, and I will obtain their feedback about the process. The following are the general questions that I plan to ask each participant during the member check process.

Emotional Well-Check (Member Check 1-5)

1. How are you doing?
2. What have you been doing in terms of self-care to take care of your mental and emotional needs during the interviews?

Journal and Interview Summaries (Member Check #5)

1. I would like to provide you with a summary of your interviews and journal to review. Please review and share your thoughts.
2. What questions do you have about the information you shared during the interview or your journal submission?
3. Is there anything else you would like to share with me as I begin analyzing the information you shared?
APPENDIX O: IRB APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Date: 12/16/2015
To: Lorraine D Acker
841 Dickinson Ave #3
Ames, IA 50014

CC: Dr. Natasha N Croom
N243 Lagomarcino

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Relationship Violence Among Black College Women

IRB ID: 15-682

Approval Date: 12/15/2015
Date for Continuing Review: 12/14/2016
Submission Type: New
Review Type: Full Committee

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.
- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.
- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.