The (In)Visible Road Map: The Role of Mentoring for First-Generation Black Female Doctoral Students at Predominantly White Institutions

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THE (IN)VISIBLE ROAD MAP: THE ROLE OF MENTORING FOR FIRST-GENERATION BLACK FEMALE DOCTORAL STUDENTS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Education

by
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ABSTRACT

Although women’s status in higher education has vastly improved over the past decades, invisible barriers remain that disenfranchise first-generation Black female doctoral students at predominantly White institutions (PWI). Specifically, the sparse literature base constricts existing knowledge and understanding about the mentoring relationships of first-generation Black female doctoral students and the barriers they face in the academy. Using the theoretical framework of intersectionality, this study sought to address the ways in which first-generation Black female doctoral students navigated the academy through mentorship and the ways in which mentoring relationships were formidable to construct.

Five first-generational Black female doctoral students and two former first-generation Black female doctoral students participated in this study. Using a phenomenological design, personal reflexive experiences were provided by these women, reflecting what emerged as most salient to their success in the academy. Findings suggest that Black female faculty, staff, and administrators should actively engage in constructing mentor relationships with first-generation Black female doctoral students. In addition, implications such as support groups that cater specifically to doctoral students and fostering an inclusive sisterhood amongst Black female doctoral students are needed in the academy.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Being a Black woman in the academy is like dancing the merengue in six inch red stilettos...it looks really sexy but it's hard as hell. (Baszile, 2011)

This study was created in response to my own experiences as a first-generation Black female doctoral student in order to identify and highlight the barriers that Black female doctoral students face and the need for mentoring. Essentially, this study was a direct result of my own questions as I embarked on the journey to earn a doctorate asking: “Why am I here, alone, so far away from the comforts of home, in a school entrenched in the Deep South, in a place that is subliminally loyal to a Western Eurocentric male educational norm? Where were my mentors, my supporters, my role models?” While the life of any female doctoral student is generally challenging, it has been my experience that the life of being a first-generation Black female doctoral student is daunting. For most Black female doctoral students, the journey to a doctorate has not been clearly mapped out. My biggest challenge was not that I was a graduate student but that my identity encompassed multiple barriers. In essence, I was Black, female, from a low socioeconomic background (SES), and first-generation in an unfamiliar territory not previously charted by myself, my family, nor my friends. With all of these elements in question, what role could/would mentoring play in my development as a first-generation Black female doctoral student?

During the summer of 2012, I again found myself experiencing a similar, parallel dissonance of experience; I was alone in a big city fearing the unknown. Having finished my coursework, I was chosen as a summer intern with a federal agency in Washington, DC. Working in a big city was a major adjustment as I was working in an office environment where I was the youngest and most inexperienced. The office in which I interned was full of White
female senior executives. Thoughts of breaking the glass ceiling permeated my mind until I realized the only two Black women in the office were low ranking administrators. The few staff members that I could potentially identify with were part of an office clique that did not welcome outsiders — me. Unfortunately, my experiences inside the academy were no different. My first assistantship was in an office led by a Black woman in a highly influential position. I can recall requesting a brief 15 minute informational interview regarding her career choice and path for a class project. She quickly rejected me stating that she was too busy and pawned me off on someone unaffiliated with the university and whom I had never met before. I could not understand how a person of her stature could not make time for a brief informal informational interview. These experiences led me to question the cogency of what it meant to be a woman compounded by the dual disparities of what it meant to be a Black woman. Feeling frustrated, I wondered if I would ever find a mentor in a high ranking position, with a vested interested in helping others succeed, who looked like me?

The following week, I attended intern orientation. Arriving early, I had the opportunity to silently observe the behavior of others. I noticed the interns would only sit by those who looked like them and the full-time employees never interacted with the interns. Then, through the glass doors, I saw her. She was tall, slender, well dressed, every piece of hair was in place, she looked so professional and polished; but most importantly, she looked like me, she was a Black woman. I watched as she entered the room with poise, smiling confidently, welcoming every intern to the organization. I was so intrigued by her demeanor and character that I knew that I had to meet her. At the close of the program, the master of ceremony introduced the director of (Office U). To my astonishment, Mrs. Kim (a pseudonym) stood, took her stance behind the podium, and addressed the audience. Once the program concluded, I like every other eager intern, swarmed the speakers
for a chance to introduce myself. Thinking to myself there was no way she would remember my introduction in a sea of hungry interns, I introduced myself and asked for her contact information informing her that I would be in contact soon. That same day, I arrived back to my office and sent Mrs. Kim an email in which I formally introduced myself and requested that she mentor me. Fearing she would say no, citing work obligations or personal reasons, I left work for the evening without any hope of finding a quality mentor. The next morning, I read the reply message from Mrs. Kim. It simply read, “I would be happy to mentor you.” At last, I finally found a mentor.

Over the next 10 weeks, she exposed me to various opportunities within Office U. For instance, she included me on special projects, invited me to meetings and presentations with high ranking officials, and sought my input frequently. She ensured that I was properly introduced and shook hands with everyone she came in contact. She realized that I was an extreme introvert and allowed the relationship to progress slowly and naturally on my terms. She was never forceful nor did she make me feel uncomfortable. She accepted my differences and allowed me to be me. She always remained transparent, with a kind of maternal instinct, by encouraging and applauding my work efforts while providing criticisms and critiques when needed. All of these defining characteristics allowed me to appreciate her receptive tone and accept her guidance as critical to my career development.

Although Mrs. Kim played a vital role in my career development, I was still a first-generation Black female doctoral student struggling to find my way — a path Mrs. Kim had never traveled. It is through my lens of experience in doctoral studies and my experiences in the working world with Ms. Kim that I understand the importance of mentoring and the many ways that it can be denied. Thus, it is imperative that this scholarly work be done. While in the academy, I never had a positive interaction with professional Black women like I did with Ms.
Kim. Smith (2003) wrote, “If mentoring is denied or blocked, individual personal stories, rather than statistics or anonymous narratives, must be told” (p. 121). Therefore, it is through this lens, that I must tell my story.

Sexist ideology teaches women that to be female means to be victimized. However, Black women have been more than victims. Myers (2002) argued that “Black women live in a society that devalues both their sex and their race” (p. 5). Black women have been so suppressed by a White patriarchal class structure that their presence in the academy is filled with limitations. Turner (2002) characterized Black women’s experiences inside the academy:

Women in the minority inhabit a context characterized by being more visible and on display, feeling more pressure to conform, to make fewer mistakes, becoming socially invisible, finding it harder to gain credibility, being more isolated, having limited sources of power through alliances, having fewer opportunities to be sponsored, being stereotyped, and facing misperceptions of their identity and role in the organization. (p. 76)

Relatively few studies have focused primarily on the experiences of Black female graduate students, and there is a dearth of studies that have directly examined the important role of mentoring as it relates to first-generation Black female doctoral students. In a study by Schwartz, Bower, Rice, and Washington (2003), the authors suggested that student success is measured by an earned degree. Therefore, understanding the environment in which these students embark upon is necessary to recruit and retain students of color, or in my case, first-generation Black female doctoral students.

**Brief History of Black Women in Higher Education**

Blacks, specifically Black women, have a long and troubling history with US higher education replete with discrimination and deprivation. Gregory (1999) described the history of Black women in US higher education as a struggle for survival, a struggle for identity, and a desire to support their family. In order to understand why the experiences of Black women in
higher education differs dramatically from that of Black men and White women, specifically those of Western European descent, an exploration of the historical ideology of the US educational system, since the foundation of the nation’s first university in 1636, Harvard, is reviewed.

During the Colonial period, the height of Western European colonization practices, (17th and 18th centuries), European and US political leaders constructed themselves as being the superiorly intelligent creator of human civilization (Anderson, 2002). As a result, college was meant for upper class elite White men making the education of women unachievable due to their sex (Solomon, 1985). This alienating form of US higher education excluded the majority of Black women due to their intersecting identities (Black and female) and valueless presence in a patriarchal class society. Furthermore, enslavement prohibited the education of Blacks of any gender in the South, creating an arduous battle against the White supremacist ideology of education (Anderson, 2002; Watkins, 2001).

During the antebellum period (the period between the War of 1812 and the Civil War when slavery was primarily located in the South), the emergence of the ‘cult of true womanhood’ shaped women’s education (Perkins, 1983). It was during this period that Whites developed an educational philosophy that corresponded with their attitudes towards women—to be subservient (Nidiffer, 2003; Perkins, 1983; Solomon, 1985). Subsequently, the purpose of female education was to reinforce the idea of women’s natural position of subordination and bearing children (Solomon, 1985) while men were educated to become part of the political, economic, and social spheres of their communities (Nidiffer, 2003). Most Whites viewed the education of Blacks as threatening to their “position of dominance” (Perkins, 1985, p. 19). This educational patriarchal class structure constrained women as a whole, negatively impeding the progress of Black
women. Specifically, Black men were relegated to menial positions while Black women were primarily domestic workers (Perkins, 1985).

Socialization, implied by Coleman-Burns (1989), was the purpose for educating women. The true womanhood model emphasized innocence, modesty, piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity strictly designed for upper and middle class White women (Nidiffer, 2003; Perkins, 1983; Solomon, 1985). Traditional college served no useful purpose for women as it was assumed they “lacked the intellectual capacity to handle the rigors of a classical curriculum” (Nidiffer, 2003, p. 16) and had “smaller brains and weaker minds” than men (Solomon, 1985, p. 2). Because Black women were considered to be less than human (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Perkins, 1983), they were perceived as being inadequate members of society. With the Eurocentric ideology of intelligence in the forefront, the racial divide of subordination denied Black women access to higher education.

First-generation Students at Predominantly White Institutions

First-generation Black female doctoral students, as well as women in other racial/ethnic groups, are a unique population because colleges and universities were not founded for them. It is important to note that most scholars who study first-generation students typically focused on the undergraduate experience (Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007; Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Ishitani, 2003/2006; Kohler Giancola, Munz, & Trares 2008; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Orbe, 2004; Owens, Lacey, Rawls, Holbert-Quince, 2010; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996) while a select few (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Lunceford, 2011) focused on the graduate student experience.

Numerous studies suggest that first-generation students at predominantly White institutions (PWI’s) face a number of challenges such as poor academic preparation, inadequate
funding, limited family support, and disproving negative stereotypes (Carroll, 1982; Engle, 2007; Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Gibbons and Shoffner’s (2004) work concluded that first-generation college students faced the overwhelming task of applying to college without the assistance of parental experience, were more likely to leave college, and had differences in family support. In addition, the academic family structure of first-generation students can prove detrimental given those who have not experienced graduate school, nor understand its rewards, may inadvertently become obstructionist for their lack of knowledge about graduate school and the complexities of doctoral studies. As such, I assert that these challenges and characteristics are generalizable to include first-generation doctoral students, which epitomize the need for mentoring. However, I postulate that for Black women, this is particularly acute. To conceptualize, mentorship in higher education is needed to address issues ranging from socialization, adapting to graduate school, retention, work/life balance, and professional development.

Through a review of the literature, I discovered that it is still a very tough undertaking for Black women in higher education. This statement is juxtaposed to the following statistics. Nationally, students in higher education were predominantly White female. In 2010, there were a total of 1,824,900 White students enrolled at degree-granting institutions compared to just 362,300 Black students. 1,080,000 were White females and 256,000 were Black females (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, p. 331). Although White female graduate student enrollment decreased from 85.8% in 1976 to 62.5% in 2010, and Black female graduate student enrollments increased from 7.5% to 14.8 %, White students still outnumber any other racial group in enrollment rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, p.331). Unfortunately, few universities keep precise statistics on the number of first-generation students enrolled (Zalaquett, 1999), none of which kept statistics on first-generation graduate students.
Furthermore, the increase in Black enrollment rates can be attributed to the current economic state of the United States (US). In the special report on graduate and special degrees, Melton (2003) claimed a strong correlation between the week job market and an increase in minority students’ enrollment in postgraduate programs. Findings revealed that most minority students viewed graduate school as a platform to upgrade their current skills and enhance their resumes. However, as previously mentioned, no report directly identifies the percentage of first-generation graduate students.

**Defining First-generation Students**

For the purposes of this study, descriptors of first-generation students are presented. First-generation students, those students whose parents did not graduate from college, are typically from low-income backgrounds, female, older, either Black or Hispanic (Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007), and generally have access to fewer resources. Findings from a study conducted by Choy (2001) indicated that first-generation students were less likely to enroll in doctoral degree programs. Despite the rise in Black enrollment rates, first-generation Black female doctoral students were at a disadvantage due to their parents’ lack of knowledge about graduate school and plagued with challenges to which their counterparts (students who are not first-generation) were unable to relate.

In 2010, only 11% of full-time faculty and instructional staff were Black women compared to 69% White women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, p. 380). This creates an abysmal percentage of Black women who hold senior level administrative or tenured positions thus negatively impacting the likelihood for Black female doctoral students to find mentors of color. Table 1.1 highlights post baccalaureate enrollment of students based on race (Black and White), highlighting the potential need for mentoring. Table 1.2 highlights
employment trends of women based on race (Black and White), highlighting the need for more faculty and administrators of color (Black).

Table 1.1 Enrollment based on race in degree granting institutions in the United States.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total enrollment</td>
<td>1,824,900</td>
<td>362,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(62%)</td>
<td>(12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Students</td>
<td>1,080,000</td>
<td>256,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(63%)</td>
<td>(15%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table produced by author using data from *Digest of Education Statistics.* (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

By examining Table 1.1 and Table 1.2, it is evident how the disparities between the enrollment rates of Black female graduate students and the employment rates of successful Black female administrators and faculty can impact the likelihood of first-generation Black female doctoral students obtaining mentors. Successful Black women in the academy, those in high ranking administrative and tenured positions, are viewed as more attractive mentors given their status in the academy (Black, Suarez, & Medina, 2004). Because there are limited numbers of Black women serving in these roles at PWI’s, first-generation Black female doctoral students who enroll in PWI’s do not have a consistent opportunity to participate in mentor relationships with successful Black women in the academy. This disenfranchises first-generation Black female doctoral students and stifles participation in doctoral programs.

It is important to note, that while this qualitative study does not deny the existence of multiple mentoring platforms, this research is solely focused on the singular mentoring relationship of Black women. Specifically, this study focused on the relationships between first-generation Black female doctoral students and successful Black women in the academy.
Table 1.2. Employment Based on Race in Degree Granting Institutions in the United States.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Employment</strong></td>
<td>2,586,098</td>
<td>366,324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(69%)</td>
<td>(10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women</strong></td>
<td>1,393,144</td>
<td>229,312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(54%)</td>
<td>(11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive/administrative/managerial</td>
<td>1,015,872</td>
<td>128,844</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(77%)</td>
<td>(11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty (instruction/research/public service)</td>
<td>95,641</td>
<td>13,394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(74%)</td>
<td>(8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Full-time</strong></td>
<td>1,690,443</td>
<td>264,497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(45%)</td>
<td>(7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive/administrative/managerial</td>
<td>175,482</td>
<td>21,397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(74%)</td>
<td>(8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty (instruction/research/public service)</td>
<td>551,271</td>
<td>39,7135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(71%)</td>
<td>(11%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table produced by author using data from *Digest of Education Statistics* (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

**Statement of the Problem**

Hill (1995) defined mentoring as a person who “guides, trains, and supports a less skilled or experienced person” (p. 72). In the book *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave*, the authors (1982) conveyed that the intellectual void surrounding Black women was related to the politics of a White society. Society does not recognize, and
denies, the importance of Black women’s lives and contributions through racial, sexual, and class oppression (Howard-Vital, 1989). As a result, mentoring has been defined from a White supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure that denied the importance of Black women. In order to best benefit Black women, mentoring must be redefined and re-envisioned from a Black woman’s viewpoint to address the needs of a population that has largely been omitted from the scholarly literature and society — due to race and gender.

Patton and Harper (2003) argued that mentoring is the foundation for success in graduate school. Particularly, Black women often look to those that are mirror images of themselves to create and foster mentor relationships. However, the limited number of Black women faculty and administrators at PWI’s has proven to cause difficulties when seeking a mentor for first-generation Black female doctoral students. Participating in a mentoring relationship with someone who looks like them, who has similar personal, professional, and scholarly interests and is devoted to their holistic experience and personal success as a graduate student in their chosen field, is keenly important for Black women (Jackson, Kite, & Branscombe, 1996, as cited in Patton & Harper, 2003). Drawing on the works of Simms Bishop (1990) and Gangi and Ferguson (2006) who posited that children should see themselves reflected through “mirrors and windows” in children’s literature in order to see themselves as readers, I am advocating for an analogous, comparative relationship in that first-generation Black female doctoral candidates deserve the same in terms of mentoring — they need mentors that resemble them. This need for mentoring from those who resemble themselves is highlighted by Hughes (1988) who suggested “minority female students have limited access to ethnic role models and mentors like themselves” (p.65); thus creating an environment of exclusion that lacks diversity. In tandem with Hughes, Smith (2003) detailed the cognizance of Black women and mentorship:
Lack of mentoring is one of the biggest barriers to advancement. You don’t climb to the top—you’re coached, counseled, pushed and supported into senior ranks...the reality is that Black women are denied opportunities to initiate mentoring relationships with senior colleagues because of age-old stereotypes and myths that portray Black women, as a whole, as unintelligent, angry, threatening, intimidating, and not in need of coaching, support, and other career assistance. In essence, Black women are denied mentoring because we are perceived as modern-day Sapphires (i.e., angry, threatening, intimidating, unintelligent, Black, and female). (p. 120)

Stereotypes are harmful because they do not allow others to view Black women as individuals with unique skills and strengths. As a result, Black women tend to experience negative relationships and interactions due to their presence in the academy.

I experienced similar perceptions of myself by others while attending a PWI research institution in a southern state. I felt shunned, misguided, and out of place. It seemed as if my graduate student colleagues perceived me as uneducated and intellectually inferior. No one would engage me in intellectual conversation or ask for my opinion. I could recall one particular course taught by a liberal White feminist that illustrated my feelings of isolation. The course was comprised of predominantly White females with one White male who self-identified as an extreme feminist. I was the only doctoral student in the course while the others were master’s level students, an element that added more dissonance. The lack of diversity in the room automatically granted me the privilege of being the voice for the entire Black race as I was often looked to as an expert in the hip-hop/rap culture. Whenever, I would express my point-of-view, I was often looked at as being the angry Black woman or being overly sensitive. My professor was very demeaning. She took it upon herself to further expound upon the “train of thought in which I was trying to make,” which changed the context of my stance completely. I shut down mentally and emotionally from this experience. I felt devalued, as if my views did not matter, and dehumanized, as if my presence went unnoticed. I felt angry in the sense this course was focused
on women’s rights; however, I (a Black woman) was excluded. Sensing that my colleagues accepted the professor’s conduct, the biases expressed by Smith (2003) soon became my reality.

Patton and Harper (2003) noted that “mentoring is particularly important on the graduate level because emerging scholars and practitioners who intend to excel in their respective professions need the opportunity to make connections and learn how to successfully maneuver within their areas of specialization” (p. 67). After completing my required coursework and preparing to take general exams, I felt overwhelmed with the expectations of: presenting at conferences, publishing before graduation, writing a dissertation, networking for career opportunities, and finding balance when interacting with colleagues. Social interactions, between colleagues, soon became hindered by the veiled competitive nature of the program and campus environment. From my experiences, graduate mentors are needed to offer resources such as conference recommendations, networking and career development opportunities, and advice on work-life balance.

Contrarily, by the end of the twenty-first century, Black women were found to be the largest minority population attending PWI’s (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Unfortunately, the literature does not clearly document the journey of first-generation Black female doctoral students nor the barriers they face at PWI’s in order to achieve doctoral degrees. This study examined the mentoring experiences that first-generation Black female doctoral students encounter as they searched for and engaged in the mentoring process. In order to facilitate this study, I relied on the theory of intersectionality.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study focused on identifying the ways in which first-generation Black female doctoral students navigated the academy through mentorship. Given that first-generation Black
female doctoral students are marginalized inside of the academy for being Black, female, and educated (Collins, 2004; Gregory, 1999; Turner, 2002), intersectionality provided the best framework to explore the ways in which multiple interlocking systems of oppression created invisible barriers that limited social interactions and hierarchical progressions within the academy for Black women.

Gregory (1999) documented that the importance of contextualizing frameworks occurred through analyzing the historical components of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Similarly, Coleman-Burns (1993) explained:

We discuss racism, a concept and ideology nearly all students are able to understand, though we have to struggle a little to get over the tendency to make the term synonymous with racial prejudice and bigotry. Racism is an historical and political ideology. In these countries this ideology is systemic and is based on White supremacy and power. Key to understanding this ideology is understanding the historic oppression and dehumanization of people of African descent and the creation of an underclass or a second-class hierarchy below that of Whites and those new immigrants aspiring to become “White.” (p. 141)

This acknowledgement illustrated how the intersecting identities of first-generation Black female doctoral students at PWI’s have the potential to negatively influence their perception of the campus environment. Because first-generation Black female doctoral students encompass multiple intersecting identities, acknowledging their existence in the academy is necessary in understanding the complexities of mentor disparities for a population who have been historically oppressed. Therefore, the central framework that guided this study was the theory of intersectionality.

Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression (hooks, 1984) and to understand the nature of gender inequality. Intersectionality is a way of understanding multi-layered systems of oppression. Collins (2004) defined intersectionality as:

An analysis claiming that systems of race, economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age from mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape
Black experiences and in turn, are shaped by Blacks...intersectionality paradigms view race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age as mutually constructing systems of power. (p. 11)

Based on historical vicissitudes of slavery (Staples, 1970), Black women were reared to be subservient to both men and White women. hooks (1984), a prominent voice in feminism, described Black women’s unusual position in society as, “collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder...our social status is lower than that of any other group” (p.16). As a result, Black women bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression through intersectionality (Collins 2004, Crenshaw 1989, 1991; hooks, 1984). Simply stated, both White women and Black men have it both ways of being oppressed and being an oppressor, yet Black women will always be oppressed. For example, “Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of women. White women may be victimized by sexism, but racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of Black people” (hooks, 1984, p. 16). Therefore, the intersecting society of the Eurocentric educational system created invisible systems of oppressions for Black women in the US.

The concept of intersectionality addressed the intertwined social and cultural categories of Black women which exclude the dynamics of power. Crenshaw (1989, 1991), who is widely regarded as the originator of the term “intersectionality,” believed that social power excluded those who were different, thus marginalizing Black women. Analytically, intersectionality was meant to theorize Black women’s oppression and the intersecting powers of racism, sexism, and classism. Crenshaw (1989) urged that the value of feminist theory “evolved from a White racial context that is seldom acknowledged. Not only are Black women overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when White women speak for and as women” (p. 154). Simply stated, feminism obscured the multi-layered characteristics of Black women by eliminating the essence of their
experiences, placing the value of privilege on a hierarchical pedestal governed by race, gender, and patriarchal class structures. When used as a feminist framework, intersectionality revealed how Black women were “theoretically erased” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139) through multi-layers of systems of oppressions that devalued the importance of Black women as a whole.

Simon, Roff, and Perry (2008) asserted that, “race, ethnicity, and gender influence the mentoring of and by Black women in academia” (p. 11). Since the issues of Black women in the academy are distinct from Black males and European White women (Simon, Roff, & Perry, 2008), given the experiences of discrimination based on the interlocking nature of race and gender, “listening to the voices of Black women’s experiences in America is a complex task characterized by the intersection of race, gender, and social class” (Etter-Lewis, 1991, p. 43). With Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) theoretical framework of intersectionality in the forefront, Simon, Roff, and Perry’s (2008) assertion that the intersection of race and gender negatively affect Black women, provided the foundation to understand how Black women are marginalized and excluded from mentoring opportunities assessed to members of the privileged society. Thus, the understanding of intersectionality is imperative to eliminate instances of oppression. For me, my experiences of racism and sexism in the academy were intertwined. Specifically, my race was more significant than my sex when the perpetrator was a White female, as previously discussed when interacting with a White female professor. This treatment was indicative of the era of the “true womanhood” (Perkins, 1983), where White women were placed on a pedestal with the erroneous belief that Black women did not fit the ideal of a “true womanhood”. In today’s society, the true womanhood has been replaced by a patriarchal class structure mentality of all that suppresses the progression of Black women.
The literature on Blacks at PWI’s has not been positive. Specifically, the journey of Black women in higher education was described as challenging (Allen, Guillory, Suh, & Bonous-Hammarth, 2000; Coker, 2003; Holmes, Land, & Hinton-Hudson, 2007; Moses, 1989; Zamani, 2003). According to the study of Holmes et al (2007), when it came to mentoring, preference was given to mentors having the same ethnic, racial, or cultural background; which has been proven difficult given the limited number of Black faculty and administrators at PWI’s (Bova, 2000; Patton & Harper, 2003; Henderson Daniel, 2009; Grant, 2012). Intersectionality allowed me to understand how institutional policies and procedures create an “invisible knapsack” (McIntosh, 1990), of power and privilege that restricted the mobility of Black women and placed them at the bottom of a societal hierarchy yet again.

Applying Collin’s (2000, 2004) theory of intersectionality in the field of higher education provided the framework to identify racialized barriers that hinder Black women’s success in the academy. It gave a voice to a group who had been systematically marginalized, oppressed, and who continues to struggle to gain identity in today’s society. Given the historical implications of power, gender, sexism, and racism in the academy, what does the mentoring relationships between Black female doctoral students with faculty and staff actually looks like? Understanding the experiences of first-generation Black female doctoral students has the potential to affect change in institutional policies, procedures, and most importantly the environment of the academy.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe how select first-generation Black female doctoral students navigated the academy through mentorship. I chose this particular group because there are countless studies about undergraduate education and the Black
student experience as a whole (Allen, 1992; Foster, 2005; Harlow, 2003; Lindsey, Reed, Lyons, Hendricks, Mead, & Butler, 2011; Schwitzer, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999; Centra, 1970; Davis, 2009; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Robertson & Mason, 2008), but relatively little is known about the experiences of first-generation Black female doctoral students. In addition, I lived this experience. As a first-generation doctoral student, I had no clue what I signed up as I was oblivious to the intricacies of doctoral education. All too often I would notice the same key individuals receiving countless opportunities that others, myself included, were not privy to. I had professors that would only engage the elite few by choosing to only write and research alongside the members of that secret society—a society that I did not belong to. Those who were able to navigate the academy graduated with numerous publications and employment opportunities. They did so with support of faculty and staff, support that is not readily available to students like me for reasons unknown. I theorized that I did not receive equal amounts of support by Black male and female faculty and staff based on preconceived notions related to my demeanor, the way in which I spoke, or overall unwillingness to allow me to progress within parameters of my own comfort zone.

Marginalizing Black women and expecting them to fit into the Eurocentric dominant system tends to be the norm in today’s higher education system. With so many differing characteristics of doctoral students, it is important to note that graduate students are not part of a homogeneous group and cannot be generalized to a larger population. Understanding the needs of such a unique group and their experiences in the academy is critical in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment. It is vital that the needs and concerns of current first-generation Black female doctoral students in PWI’s be addressed. Doing so will make visible a formally
invisible roadmap of social support — through mentorship — for future first-generation Black female doctoral students.

If there are no Black students in the pipeline, there can be no new Black faculty/administrators emerging from the pipeline. If there are no emerging young Black females in the faculty/administrative pipelines, then who will serve as mentors for future generations of young Black women (Mabokela & Green, 2001)? If an individual has not been mentored, how then can that individual effectively mentor someone else? It is essential that Black female first-generation doctoral students receive suitable mentors, despite their oppressions.

Methodology

This study presented the experiences of five first-generation Black female doctoral students and two former first-generation Black female doctoral students, who majored in the social science and humanities field while studying at a PWI. I chose this particular field based on my own research interests and experiences; therefore, I eliminated the hard sciences (science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Becher (1981) indicated that, “disciplines are cultural phenomena: they are embodied in collections of like-minded people, each with their own codes of conduct, sets of values and distinctive intellectual tasks (p.109).” Understanding that experiences and perceptions vary by discipline, I chose to only incorporate experiences from those whose discipline were within the humanities and social sciences field to ensure that I captured the true essence of the phenomena.

Creswell (2007) affirmed that we conduct qualitative research to empower individuals to share their stories and to hear their voices. Therefore, phenomenology (Moustakas, 1984; Creswell 2007) provided the richest design opportunity to explore the experiences of first-generation Black female doctoral students through the lens of mentorship. The primary means of
data collection was an individual open-ended structured interview process as “depth interviews can help fill in historical blanks” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 3). Because there are relative few studies exploring the experiences of first-generation doctoral students in the literature (Gardner & Holley 2011; Lunceford, 2011), none of which focus directly on first-generation Black female doctoral students’, for this study, I employed Moustakas’ modification of Van Kaam's method of phenomenology to analyze data and created an essence of the experience of first-generation Black female doctoral students.

The central research question that guided this study was, "How do first-generation Black female doctoral students receive adequate support?" Adequate support, for the purposes of this study, is defined as guidance through mentorship as it relates to academic, career, and personal life\work balance development opportunities. Thus, this study was built on the following three sub questions:

1. In what ways did Black female graduate students receive support through mentoring?
2. How and in what ways did mentoring impact first-generation Black female doctoral students experiences and persistence in higher education?
3. How did Black female doctoral students define mentorship and where did they find available mentors?

Creswell (2007) discussed “data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion” (p. 148). The transcripts from the interviews were coded to identify common themes that were generalized using the theoretical framework of intersectionality.
Summary

This chapter outlined the importance of mentoring for first-generation Black female doctoral students. A summary review of the literature revealed that first-generation Black female doctoral students were disadvantaged because of their race, gender, and family unit. Specifically, the university was one that excluded, rather than included, the importance of first-generation Black female doctoral student’s lived experiences. The theory of intersectionality was used as a framework to guide this study. By gaining a better understanding of the experiences of current first-generation Black female doctoral students, this research increased data on the personal characteristics and barriers that first-generation Black female doctoral students encounter as they progressed in their doctoral studies. This research will provide new and insightful information regarding first-generation Black women who engage and earn doctoral degrees, encouraging more Black women to pursue education beyond the baccalaureate and master’s degree. After all, “those who have made it through the halls of higher education comprise the next generation of the Black intelligentsia” (Coleman-Burns, 1993). Specifically, this study provided a roadmap to guide future Black female students through the doctoral phase and ultimately degree completion.

In chapter 2, I extensively reviewed the literature pertaining to the historical evolution of the US education system, the experiences and attrition rates of Black graduate students, the experiences of Black women in the academy, the mentoring relationships of Black women, and first-generation students in the academy. In chapter 3, I presented the research particulars of the study including the study including the research methodology, study participants, and limitations of the study. In chapter 4, I reported the findings of this study. While in chapter 5, I offered implications of the study as well as implications for further research.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I reviewed literature pertinent to Black female graduate students’ experiences in higher education, specifically, their experiences with mentoring. In particular, I included a brief historical overview of Black women in higher education in the US, institutional diversity, Black graduate students first-generation Black students in higher education in the US, US Black graduate students attrition rates, mentoring graduate students, and Black women mentoring Black women in higher education in the US. The review of literature presented an ideology of what it means to be Black, female, and educated in the US which justified the need of mentoring of first-generation Black female doctoral students.

Black Women’s Search for a Voice

Historically, Black women have been oppressed by being both Black and female (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989, 1991; hooks 1984; Tobin, 1981; Walker, 1983). Walker (1983) wrote “Black women have been oppressed almost beyond recognition—oppressed by everyone” (p. 149), which created a sexist divide within the Black race. Unlike White women, Black women were encouraged to become educated to aid in the improvement of the Black race (Perkins, 1981, 1983). Black women saw themselves not only as teachers but as leaders of their race. Their purpose was to enable Black women to become self-reliant and economically self-sufficient (Mabokela & Green, 2001). Unfortunately, this objective, known as “race uplift” (Perkins, 1985), fell solely on the shoulders of Black women, even though it was expected that all educated Blacks would implement this philosophy. Consequently, this constraining notion alienated Black women subjecting Black males to adopt the patriarchal stance of superiority. Simply stated, knowledge and power created situations of exclusion with knowledge being defined by and from a White male (Baszile, 2006). Because of this, dual oppressions of race and
gender “intersectionality” formed and the subordinate status was assumed and enforced by White and Black men as well as White women (Collins, 2000; Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Cooper (1892) confronted this issue of intersectionality in her book, *A Voice from the South*. Cooper wrote:

> Women may stand on pedestals or live in doll houses, but they must not furrow their brows with thought or attempt to help men tug at the great questions of the world. I fear the majority of colored men do not yet think it worthwhile that women aspire to higher education. (p. 75)

Unfortunately, Cooper’s (1892) assumption was correct regarding the way in which Black men viewed education and the status of Black women. The 14<sup>th</sup> amendment (1868), which granted Black men the right to vote, provided a lens for Black men to cultivate a superior nuanced view. Black men considered themselves powerful and inferior to Black women by adopting the prevailing notions of the White society, “the natural subordination of women,” which marked decades of sexist discrimination within the Black race (Perkins, 1985, p. 24). Furthermore, Perkins described instances in which Black women were removed from their leadership positions and replaced by Black men citing they were “intellectual subordinates and not capable of leadership positions” (p. 24). Contrary to the Black men’s viewpoint, Black women have made revolutionary contributions to the aid of the Black race during the Civil Rights movement, yet they are invisibly absent from the literature. Cleaver (2003) described how immersions of Black women’s leadership capabilities are historically overlooked in written text:

> …Black women sat in at lunch counters, boarded the buses that became Freedom Rides, walked in the boycott lines, marched in demonstrations, went to jail, and became civil rights leaders in their communities. The visual record always documents the presence of women, but in the printed texts of academic accounts women’s participation tends to fade. Yet it was the women in the movement who insisted on the more radical approaches, showed the most determination, and kept the fires for radical change lit. And it was Black women in the movement whose example transformed White women’s understanding of what women could do. (p. 49)
In synthesizing Cleaver’s work, previous generations cherished education and family but in today’s society we’ve been so distracted by capitalism that we have failed to connect to our past and the values that it once possessed. As a result, both the feminist and civil rights movement affected Black women profoundly which resulted in Black women receiving less than their Black male and White counterparts.

**From Feminist to Womanist**

In chapter five of *Ain’t I am Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981), hooks gave the historical background of the racial nature of the feminist movement in the US. hooks wrote:

> While it is true that White women have led every movement towards feminist revolution in American society, their dominance is less a sign of Black female disinterest in feminist struggle than an indication that the politics of colonization and racial imperialism have made it historically impossible for Black women in the United States to lead a women’s movement. (p. 161)

Throughout the chapter, hooks recounted on the social, economic, and domestic issues that faced Black women in the US since the 19th century which included, but were not limited to, racism, suffrage, poverty, and education. But because the problems of Black women and poor White women, these two groups did not fit into the agendas of White feminist movements – agendas that catered to wealthy and aristocratic women – these issues did not find their way to the platforms of White feminists essentially creating a rift between Black and White feminists. In spite of the factual information available to these groups regarding their misconception of race, they still believed the power and privilege they enjoyed was rightfully theirs because of their Whiteness (Baszile, 2006; Lehman, 2009), thus the concept of womanism, unique to the struggle of Black women, evolved.

The concept of womanism, an alternative to feminism specific to Black women, was coined by Walker in her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983). Walker
developed the term womanism to distinguish the struggles of Black women from those of the women’s rights movement; which focused solely on the issues of White women. In order to broaden the understanding of feminism to include the unique experiences of Black women, Walker (1983) defined womanism as:

A Black feminist or feminist of color. A woman who loves other women, sexually, and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Sprit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (pp. xi-xii)

Rooted in Black culture (Walker, 1984) womanism marked the place where race, class, gender, and sexuality intersected while honoring Black women’s strength and experiences. As Walker (1984) said, “it is the Black woman’s words that have the most meaning for us, her daughters, because she, like us, has experienced life not only as a Black person, but as a woman” (p.275).

A prominent womanist, hooks (1981) described Black women’s groups gravitation toward racial advocacy as a necessity and not by choice because, “It was a reaction to the racism of White women and to the fact the US remained a society with an apartheid social structure that compelled Black women to focus on themselves rather than all women” (p.163). Subsequently, the work of hooks’ illustrated how the dynamics of race, class, and gender (intersectionality) manifested themselves into the higher education system creating systems of oppressions that limited the stance of Black women. As a result, the theoretical frameworks of Black feminist thought and intersectionality emerged to address the unique experiences of Black women’s intersecting identities.
Black women have unique histories at the intersections of oppressions and systems of power. Understanding these differing perspectives and systematic oppressions are critical in transforming the campus environment to an environment of inclusiveness:

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (hooks, 1994, p. 207)

Given the diverse nature of women, the study of difference moved beyond simple comparisons of women and men to a more complex, nuanced view. Using the notion of racialized gender, hooks and Collins accounted for the works of how personal identity and choices of intimate associations revealed the heteronormative controls of gender and sexuality. Race and gender are socially constructed, intricately operating together, profoundly influencing life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships for Black women in the academy thus the need for mentoring is curtail. Allen (1997) shared here opinion for Black women to serve as role models/mentors:

Racial insensitivity, prejudice, and racism are facts of life. For Black women, sexism and sexual harassment magnify race-related burdens. Black female students have much to learn from Black female professors. We know what it is to experiences insecurity about the stereotypes of Black women as fit only for sex and servitude, or having faces that belong on cookie jars or syrup bottles than on the pages of journals. (p. 82)

Concisely, following Allen’s and the authors mentioned above, this author assert that universities must confront the disparities that continue to undermine the professional development of first-generation Black female doctoral students and stop discounting the realism that discrimination, based on intersecting inequalities, is still prevalent in today’s society and campus environments.
Black Women in Higher Education

Black women are placed at the bottom of the educational hierarchy class system (Howard-Vital, 1989), creating stereotypes based on racism and sexism at all levels of academic life; which creates biases that target the underrepresentation of Black women in higher education. Carroll (1982) concluded:

Black women in higher education are isolated, underutilized and often demoralized. They note the efforts made to provide equal opportunities for Black men and White women in higher education, while they somehow are left behind in the work of both the Black and feminist movement. (p.115)

Black women faced multiple challenges when entering college. They had little experience in public or community affairs, had internalized traditional beliefs about women’s roles due to gender-bound upbringing, and adopted a self-defeating perspective on life (Howard-Hamilton, 2003); which prevented the opportunity for Black women to build practical mentor relationships. For these reasons, the stereotypes (angry, threatening, intimidating, unintelligent) and inequalities (imbalances in the distribution of power, economic resources, and opportunities) that our foremothers fought to eliminate still plague Black women in the 21st Century—negatively affecting the status and value of Black women in the academy (Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro, 2013; Smith, 2003).

Presently, Black women outnumber Black males in both higher education settings and degree obtainment (Allen, 2006), yet inequalities still remain. In terms of gender, Black women significantly outpaced their male counterparts. According to recent data from the Council of Graduate Studies (2008) women employed in higher education outnumbered male employees by 1,797,589 to 1,581,498 respectively in 2008. Despite these numbers, female senior-level administrators and tenured faculty continue to be below that of males. If we outnumber our male
counterparts in degree attainment, then why do our male counterparts outnumber us in the workforce?

**Institutional Diversity**

Institutions of higher education have long been concerned with the goal of achieving diversity (Muthuswamy, Levine, & Gazel, 2006). Interacting with a diverse campus environment was important to the socialization and development of one’s self (Golde, 1998; Griffin & Muniz, 2011; Muthuswamy, Levine, & Gazel, 2006). People are not interchangeable. They differ by race, class, gender, creating a pool of diverse talent. Alvin and Breinig (2007) claimed “talented faculty brings innovation, disciplinary expertise, new research perspective, and successful pedagogical approaches to the table. Talented administrators enhance institutional capabilities through innovation, speed, efficiency, technological know-how, and social capabilities such as leadership, collaboration, communication, and a shared mind-set” (p. 5). With diverse talent brings positive institutional change that leverages multiplicity, inclusion, and innovative ideas.

Increasing the campus environment to reflect a more diverse population as represented in mainstream society, creates opportunities to foster diverse relationships, open dialogue to discuss racial and taboo topics, and ultimately creates a well-rounded individual (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Muthuswamy, Levine, & Gazel, 2006). The need for an increase in Black women administrators and faculty at PWI’s is a valuable component to the success of first-generation Black female doctoral students. “Black administrators and faculty at PWI’s can play a greater role in keeping Black students enrolled once they are recruited…we can never establish too many mentoring relationships with students” (Moses, 1989, p. 10). Justifiably, it is imperative that mentors receive proper training prior to serving as a self-appointed or assigned mentor (Kutilek, Gunderson, & Conklin, 2002).
From these readings, it can be attested that having a strong institutional commitment to diversity is the first step in creating an inclusive environment of equality and fairness. Expecting Black students to assimilate into the dominant Eurocentric, patriarchal class structure violates individuality and cultural identities. Institutional policies and practices point toward the importance of mentoring first-generation Black female doctoral students. Through this process, socialization will allow them to successfully compete within the world of academia. This creates an environment that is conducive for growth and development to successfully complete a doctoral degree and progress towards a career within the university setting. This creates a positive influences on the campus community as a whole, as more professors and administrators will be retained, thus creating a pipeline of successful Black female images to serve as role models and mentors that for others to aspire to. As such, Black female administers and tenured and tenured track faculty remain an ideal, mentoring is an ideal strategy to increase their numbers in the academy. The portrayal of Black women in the media conveys stereotypical views that lack “intellectual prowess, creativity, strong work ethic, and effective organizational/interpersonal skills, all of which are essential for a successful career in academics and research” (Daniel, 2009, p. 300). If more Black women are seen on campus to serve as role models, more first-generation Black female doctoral students will have the opportunity to develop mentoring relationships with aspirations of one day serving as college administrators and faculty.

**Black Graduate Students**

In the half-century since the Brown ruling (1954), many traditional PWI’s have attracted significant numbers of Black students, yet inequalities remain. Black students are underrepresented in doctoral programs and Black faculty members/administrators are scarce
(Hebel, 2004). Many college students experienced their first substantial interracial contact when they arrived on college campuses. The climate in which these interactions occurred influenced the learning and social outcomes students derived, which made the campus climate an important area of understanding for higher education administrators, policy makers, and researchers (Rankin & Reason, 2005). Building an environment of inclusion, that resists the influences of the marginal norm, is vital for making the campus environment more representative of the diverse nature of our society.

Hunt, Schmidt, Hunt, Boyd, and Magoon (1994) argued that Black students seem academically, culturally, and economically incompatible with the PWI model of education. The PWI model catered to those with high grade point averages and standardized test scores, who have culturally assimilated into mainstream society, and who possessed the financial resources to pay for the rising cost of education (Benton, 2001). Many Black students encountered barriers such as pressures to disprove stereotypes, greater interactional tensions in university settings, a lack of support and an unwelcoming environment, and cultural alienation and isolation (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). In addition, from the authors’ personal experiences, many minority students encountered struggles when it came to finding available human resources, identifying persons of color to establish mentor relationships, a lack of support from faculty in vital roles such as academic advisors or department heads, and a noticeable lack of diversity in key roles in academic affairs, student affairs, and the classroom. They are taught in classrooms where the teaching styles were constraining and reflected the notion of a single norm. With so many barriers that negatively impacted student success, what motivational factors increased student retention and what role did mentorship play in the development of successful scholars and researchers?
First-generation Students

Copious researchers have examined the risk factors associated with first-generation college students; however, most studies only focus on the undergraduate experience. Generally, this research can be summarized into three categories: demographic attributes and academic preparedness; degree attainment and retention rates; and college experience.

The first category is summarized as demographic attributes and academic preparedness (Choy, 2001; Kohler Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005). The authors’ findings resulted in the notion that first-generation students were unprepared for college and often took remedial courses once enrolled in college. In addition, first-generation college students often lacked the rigorous academic preparation of their peers with college-educated parents because their parents lacked the understanding of the importance of a college education. Typically, first-generation students were from a low socioeconomic background, a minority, and relied heavily on financial aid which aided in the difficulty of college accessibility.

The second category is summarized as degree attainment and retention rates. Findings from Ishitani’s (2003, 2006) work on first-generation retention rates revealed many first-generation college students failed to complete a baccalaureate degree within five years. Specifically, the retention rates of first-generation students plummeted by the second year at a four year university. Additionally, first-generation students lacked the necessary skills to develop good study and time management skills; which made degree attainment more difficult. Lastly, first-generation college students often equated a college education as a means to obtain a good job. This mindset often led first-generation students to attend college close to home, even if it was not a good fit, which obstructed completion rates (Reid & Moore, 2008).
The last category is summarized as the college experience (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Orbe, 2004; Owens, Lacey, Rawls, Holbert-Quince, 2010; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Reid & Moore, 2008). Researchers studying the experiences of first-generation college students exposed flaws such as a lack of social skills and the inability to interact with peers. Findings suggested first-generation students had different personality traits (differences in self-esteem) and often lived at home and worked part-time, while attending college. In terms of race and gender, Black males were found to have less access to career development opportunities.

Based on the literature, first-generation students are at a higher-risk of dropping out of college due to a lack of knowledge (academic under-preparedness) and skills (study and time management) needed to be successful in college. If left unaddressed, these risk factors can also impact the motivation and desire for first-generation college students to aspire to enroll and complete a doctoral degree program reinforcing the value and importance of mentorship, as a mentor can offer opportunities for personal, academic, career, and professional development.

**First-generation Doctoral Students**

In 2008, 21% of doctoral recipients reported that neither parent had completed a college degree (Fiegener, 2009, p. 11). Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research on first-generation Black female doctoral students. Because first-generation students are the first in their family to attend college, many challenges such as personal, academic, and financial exist (Engle 2007; Fiegener, 2009; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Thayer, 2000). First-generation doctoral students are more likely to be female and an individual of Color (Gardner & Holley, 2011). Being a first-generation graduate student and achieving degree completion can be a formidable task given the obligation of time and financial expense of graduate school. I
experienced firsthand the daily financial stressors of life’s basic necessities. Although my family would assist when they could, by sending the occasional $20-$50, the financial obligation of graduate school far exceeded my family’s ability to offer financial assistance on a consistent basis.

The results of a study by Centra (1970), indicated that the majority of Black students received little to no financial support from family due to the large disparities in socioeconomic backgrounds between Black and White students. Pike and Kuh (2005) discovered that first-generation students were less engaged, perceived the college environment as being less supportive, and had little development in their intellectual development. Based on my personal experiences, these at-risk characteristics hindered student’s commitment, motivation, and persistence in higher education which resulted in students entering into doctoral programs, underprepared and overwhelmed, and at risk for never completing them.

As I progressed through completing the first phase of my doctoral program (Gardner, 2009), I wondered if my admission was a horrible mistake. The stress, demands of coursework, working an assistantship, and financial obligations had taken its toll. I soon felt defeated and wanted to give up. Understanding that my family could not offer any type of financial support, I turned to them for moral support in which they responded with words of encouragement. However, I still longed for someone who I could relate to, someone who: truly understood the perils of completing a doctoral program, could help guide me through the walls of the academy, understood the importance of building relationships and who possessed the knowledge of how to do so effectively, and could help feel the void that I experienced when attempting to talk my frustrations out with family who could not relate to my struggles. Basically, I longed for a person
who understood my daily struggles and could offer sound advice based on past experiences. My experiences mirrored the findings presented in the literature.

Findings from a study conducted by Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004), which focused on first-generation college students inside the academy, highlighted that first-generation college students were significantly handicapped in the types of institutional choices and the kind of experiences they had during college. Typically living off-campus, they were at a greater disadvantage of interacting with peers. This interaction played a significant role in both intellectual and personal development during college. I can recall on several occasions when I realized that my academic world and that of my family/friends world did not coexist. Being that I was first-generation, I had added responsibilities, pressures, and unrealistic expectations subliminally placed upon me by family and close friends. All of a sudden I was an expert in everything — including life. I can recall an instance where I was having lunch with a friend and we were having a candid conversation about my research interest. I made a comment in which I referenced “disparities and dissonance.” My friend quickly pointed out “that was a doctorate word” and asked if that was what they were teaching me down there? I felt humiliated. I did not know how to respond. I did not want to be viewed as thinking I was better than anyone or that I had disgraced the golden rule of “forgetting where I came from.” Whenever I had conversations with family, I constantly had to repeat, reword and/or re-explain myself which was quite irritating. This led me to experience a feeling of guilt for not knowing how to effectively communicate with family and exclusion in the sense that I felt as if I no longer belonged to an environment that I once called home.

Greene and Walker (2004) classified this experience with language use as code-switching. Growing up in an urban environment I developed the use of Black English. I had
seldom opportunities to interact and engage with others outside of my community so I became accustomed to being the majority. My first tangible interaction with being a racial minority came when I entered college at a PWI. I often found it difficult to broaden my speaking proficiencies as I struggled to understand the social complexities associated with living in two worlds. Consequently, constant struggles of discerning the appropriateness of academic versus non-academic language negatively impacted my social skills. In addition to issues related to language, vocabulary, and concepts, there were other issues I faced that surface in the literature. My family did not understand that constantly asking “when are you going to graduate” was more harmful than good. This was especially true when your personally set goals did not map out the way in which you planned. When I returned to the academy, I spoke of my experiences with colleagues. They reassured me they, too experienced similar interactions with family and friends. When asked how they combated the situation, they informed that they had to “dumb down” their vocabulary when they returned home. Living in two worlds was difficult. As I read issues about difficulty and dissonance in the literature, I continually asked myself, “Why could not my worlds simply coexist?”

**Attrition and Black Graduate Students**

Larger numbers of students are attending college today than in previous generations (Johnson-Bailey, Cervero, & Baugh, 2004); however, not all graduate. These researchers (2004) suggested issues of retention, graduation, and enrollment in advanced degree programs continued to plague Blacks in the US. With Johnson-Bailey’s ideas at the forefront, how then do Black females experience advanced degree programs, more specifically doctoral programs? Even more specific, how does the guiding mentor/mentee relationship facilitate the journey through doctoral studies? Gregory (1995) argued that the relative absence of Black women scholars on campus
can lead to the erroneous belief that Black women are not qualified to be scholars, professors, administrators, or even doctoral students. Thus, if there are no Black women on campus, how can we convince future Black female scholars that the doctoral degree is a viable option? Even more so, how can we mentor each other if the validity of our presence on campus is unknown?

Completing a doctoral program is a major challenge and commitment that involves researching and writing. New doctoral students often find the first year of graduate school very stressful, intimidating, and at times a breaking point. Startling is the national epidemic that many students began a doctoral program but failed to complete them. With the underrepresentation of first generation Black female doctoral students, this epidemic is a grim reminder for the need of Black female professionals inside the academy. The Council of Graduate Schools (2008) reported that only about 57% of female students and 47% of Black students, who started a Ph.D. program in the humanities and social sciences field, completed them within 10 year. Since making the decision to enter graduate school on the doctoral level requires significant financial and human resources, what barriers hinder degree completion?

Golde (1998) asserted that new doctoral students “feel stupid and incompetent, believe their admission was a horrible error, live in poverty, cannot imagine how they will get the reading done, and wonder whether they have not made a terrible mistake” (p. 55). After the first semester of graduate school, my experiences resonated with Golde as I was completely overwhelmed. Class discussions rendered mute because I did not talk the lingo like others who were nearing the end of their required course load. I was not a walking dictionary and could not tell you about any leading authors in my area of interest yet. There were so many chapters to read, so many books to purchase, and so many assignments with deadlines within days of each other. There was also the added burden of presenting or attending conferences in my field. I had
no idea what it meant to be a good writer or how to conceive, write, and perform research. I had no one to show me the ropes. I was a novice graduate student desperately seeking guidance through mentorship. I received no mentoring on how to submit conference proposals, how to create PowerPoint presentations based on my research, nor did I receive guidance on how to turn my presentations into manuscripts. I was never invited to co-author journal articles or encourage to join writing groups. I never felt validated as a scholar which led me to question my abilities as a researcher. Through these experiences, I develop a sense of self-doubt.

Although I always wanted to attend the leading conferences, due to financial obligations, I had to settle for conferences that were within local driving distances. Coincidently, a national Black studies conference was being held in a city that was within driving distance. Desperately seeking guidance to my unanswered questions, I considered this conference as a means of support with hopes that I would find a mentor external to my university. In addition, this particular conference had a graduate student paper competition component so I sought the assistance of my major professor. At the time, I did not know what type of assistance I needed, I just knew that I had never written a scholarly paper outside of course. I was told to simply write the paper and my professor would provide feedback. I proceeded as instructed but never received feedback. Not feeling confident about the quality of my work, I reluctantly entered the competition. In the following month I received notice that I won the graduate student competition and that my paper was the main focus for the conference. I relayed all information to my major professor in which I again sought assistance in turning my paper into a PowerPoint presentation. I was also seeking guidance on presenting as I was extremely shy and relied on my writing as my voice. I again, received no feedback. While I understood this individual’s time
commitments, and that I was one of many, I also lamented that the college in which I was enrolled had no formal structures or opportunities to graduate students either.

At the conference, I felt isolated and insecure as presentations were an added barrier to my long list of self-doubts. I was grouped on a panel of three which ironically one of the presenters was a fellow classmate. I was never informed of this information by my classmate which left me to wonder if he was part of a secret brotherhood that I did not belong to because I was female. Feeling unprepared and incompetent, my presentation was a complete failure. My PowerPoint had too much useless information filled with invalid points. My voice trembled uncontrollably and I kept losing my train of thought. Mortified that there was no way of redeeming myself, I resulted in reading my paper line-by-line. After my presentation, I vowed to never subject myself to such horrendous conditions ever again. As I sat in my seat oblivious to the realities around me, I started to question the value of a mentor. Would I have been better prepared? Would I have had someone which I could vent to and who in turn, would offer sound advice on how to improve in the future? The obvious answer is yes. A mentor would have molded me to develop analytic writing skills, encouraged me to continue to reach outside of my comfort zone, and urged me to keep presenting my research so that it would no longer be a barrier but an opportunity for personal growth. Mentoring opportunities would have better prepared me.

Golde confirmed that my feelings were valid and had been experienced by others; however, this did not ease the feeling of dejection. I still wondered why my experiences and expectations were so different between obtaining my master’s degree and doctoral degree. I found my answers in the literature.
Using data from a larger study conducted on doctoral attrition, Golde (1998) interviewed students who left graduate school from the departments of geology, biology, history, and English. Students who departed the humanities department cited three reasons for leaving: intellectual difficulty (course content differs significantly from their undergraduate studies and they were expected to master theory and method), practice of the discipline did not meet expectations (exposed to a life of isolation and seclusion), and the faculty life did not meet expectations (students were advised that teaching would not be a central part of their lives as faculty). As such, graduate students need structure, a committed advisor, and an open line of communication with faculty and administrators in order to be successful in a doctoral program.

Furthermore, key findings from a study conducted by Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, and Abel (2006), supported Golde as they indicated that the departmental program structure contributed to high attrition rates in doctoral programs. Specifically, doctoral students became frustrated when they felt a program failed to answer their questions or respond to their expressed needs. This created a feeling that they were wasting their time and that no one really cared. Furthermore, a lack of community within the program was also cited as a reason for high attrition rates:

The absence of a sense of community in a doctoral program has the effect of isolating students from one another and from faculty. Without a sense of community, doctoral students gain less support from their peers and experience greater competition among students. (p. 22)

Although the decision to leave a doctoral program is personal, departmental structures and norms can affect a student’s decision to stay or leave a university. Lipschutz (1993) study revealed that factors such as the student selection process, program structure or a lack thereof, ineffective or non-caring advisors/mentors, lack of program flexibility, and lack of community within the program itself were all factors related to high attrition rates among degree programs. Therefore, I
assert that mentoring is the key to success in the doctoral degree attainment. Through mentorship, the path to degree completion becomes transparent through guidance, reassurance, and an increase in self-confidence.

**Mentoring Graduate Students**

Simon, Roff, and Perry (2008) positioned mentoring is a critical component to career advancement, especially for women of Color in academia. Yet, “the limited body of literature available does not reflect mentoring’s stated importance to women of color in higher education” (p. 9). The idea and evolution of mentoring Black women began surfacing around the 1980's. The review of literature exploring the experiences of Black female doctoral students revealed that Black women are doubly oppressed and are unable to relate to White women or Black men. As such, the awareness that Black women are more successful when they are mentored is not a new concept. With the limited amount of Black women on college campuses and universities, cultivating mentoring experiences within one’s own race and gender has proven beneficial, yet difficult to foster. Furthermore, the environment in which these relationships forms can either hinder or aid in the development of first-generation Black female doctoral students.

At the keynote address delivered at the *Louisiana Summit on Male Educational Success*, held at Louisiana State University in December, 2012, keynoter, Dr. Lomotey delivered a speech on *Black Males in Higher Education*, wherein he asserted that mentoring is an overused and often misused term. However, “true mentoring” is critically important in the success that doctoral students receive. Mentoring, according to Lomotey, consists of relationships, formal or informal, that create conditions for success. Lomotey’s notion of true mentoring involved the following: exposing the mentee to opportunities to publish, making the mentee aware of opportunities to do research, providing teaching and graduate assistantships equitably,
encouraging the mentee to attend and present at professional meetings, and providing substantive
guidance in dissertation writing. However, it is important that before beginning a mentor
relationship, clear expectations are set and agreed upon by both the mentor and mentee.
Relatively to Lomotey’s views on mentoring, Grant (2006) similarly categorized mentoring as: a
peer mentor (a person who will help you learn the ins and outs of your current position), a career
development mentor (someone much more senior in your organization, often a person in
management), and a personal mentor (a person who offers support and input on issues that are
not directly relations to your particular field).

While Lomotey and Grant shared analogous perceptions of mentoring, it is important for
doctoral students to understand that one mentor cannot meet all categories of a need. In terms of
first-generation Black female doctoral students, I defined personal mentors as family members
and friends who offered support and encouragement but lacked the experience of graduate
education. Peer mentors were colleagues who were usually at least one-step ahead in the
program (Gardner, 2009) and offered advice based on their own personal experiences with
writing general exams or preparing for an oral defense. Lastly, career development mentors were
that of advisors. Their primary roles were to strengthen students’ abilities through mentorship
and offer information on career and professional development opportunities that would equip
students with best practices for a lifetime of success. In the dissertation work of Ellis the
aforementioned aspects of mentoring coalesced:

Mentoring, advising, and departmental environments were the top concern of all the
participants, and these issues were very closely related to each other. The relationships
that participants had with their primary advisors or mentors within their academic units
appeared to have a significant impact on their satisfaction levels. Students who reported
good relationships with advisers generally felt the environments of their departments
were good. Those who had poor relationships with their advisors reported negative
feelings about their departments. Advisers and mentors were key links to departmental
resources, both human and financial. When such links did not exist, students did not
make academic and social transitions into their departments as well as did those students who had good relationships with their advisers. (Lomotey, 2012)

Maintaining a positive mentor relationship between student and advisor is crucial to academic success, especially for first-generation Black female doctoral students given the challenges asserted by Golde (1985) of self-doubt and isolation. Additionally, it is imperative for doctoral students to realize that advisors and mentors are not synonymous, although the two roles overlap more often than not. Advisors should understand the role they chose with clearly stated expectations. If the advisor chooses to serve as both advisor and mentor, he/she should understand the time commitment, the demand of acting in dual roles, and the needs of each individual student.

Davidson and Foster-Johnson’s (2001) suggested that schools of graduate education in the US have difficulty attracting and retaining students of color. Arguing that little attention has been paid to the motivational factors utilized to retain students once they begin their doctoral studies. This study focused on a review of the literature regarding the mentoring aspects, the importance of mentoring, issues related to cross-race mentoring, and the cultural aspects of mentoring. Simply stated, many graduate programs failed to acknowledge the specific needs of students of color as it related to mentoring (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001). The authors postulated that effective mentoring within a department can improve minority students' graduate school experience and better position them for success in their postdoctoral careers. To be an effective mentor, a faculty member must cultivate understanding of the experience of students from various cultural backgrounds. This task might be especially challenging for White faculty members who lack cultural knowledge and sensitivity and who are confronted with societal intersecting dynamics of race, gender, and ethnicity. Therefore, understanding the need for
mentoring first-generation Black female doctoral students is vital in the retention of an underrepresented body of students.

Green and King (2001) studied the Sisters Mentoring Sisters (SISTERS) Project which was designed to help Black women, at PWI’s, develop career plans and strategies for their personal growth and professional development. Focus group participants discussed topics such as the needs of Black women at all levels of the academy, strategies for developing their leadership abilities, and opportunities for their career advancement. Focus group data were used to plan group mentoring sessions that focused on empowering participants to obtain administrative and professional positions in higher education. Afrocentric concepts and principles provided a framework for didactic and experiential activities that emphasized three types of individual and organizational support: emotional, informational, and structural. Black women, as a whole, are an invisible pillar to a society that’s foundationally incomplete. Collins (2000) suggested “Black women’s full empowerment can occur only within a transnational context of social justice” (p. 19). Although Black women have already made great strides of empowerment though consistently enrolling in colleges and universities, there is still great disparity in Black women’s economic and social status in society. In order to influence societal change, empowerment was developed as a platform for Black women to utilize in order to achieve equality amongst men and women and to reduce the race and gender gap in society, education, and in the workforce. Therefore, as Black women, we not only need to be empowered but we need to empower each other.

In the empirical study, Neumark and Gardecki (1998) examined the gender disparities of women in economics. The authors claimed that the encouragement of role-model or mentoring relationships between female faculty and female graduate students was a potential method to
increase the success of women in traditionally male dominated academic fields. Furthermore, an increase in hiring female faculty may aid in the promotion of such relationships. Alternatively, having female faculty members serve as dissertation chairs for female graduate students can also promote such relationships. Green and King’s (2001) work on empowerment coupled with Neumark and Gardecki (1998) work on role-modeling were central components to strengthen the future of women in the US, specifically Black women. As Black women, we have the responsibility to live up to the legacy set by our foremothers by doing all that we can to help those who come after us. It is hard to imagine yourself as something that you cannot see; therefore, Black women should be willing to serve as mentors and role models in order to encourage the next generation of scholars.

In summary, mentoring interactions for doctoral students are important for all doctoral candidates but are especially critical to first-generation Black female doctoral students’ success in the academy. Mentors, who are culturally aware of the historical barriers that plague first-generation Black female doctoral students, can help eliminate intersecting systems of disparities caused by oppressions. Therefore, more women, particularly Black women, are needed to serve as mentors, role models, and advisors. Doing so will both dispel the notion of inferiority and publicize positive images of successful Black women.

**Black Women Mentoring Black Women**

Mabokel (2001) discussed networking and the need for mentoring of Blacks in graduate and professional education. Blackwell (1988) found that “If Black students are excluded from social and educational networks and if they are not included in the network spawned by mentor-protégé relationships, their movement through and up in the world of professional ranks may be impeded and perhaps, unnecessarily traumatic” (as cited in Mabokela, 2001). Mentoring is
particularly important on the graduate level because emerging scholars and practitioners who intend to excel in their respective professions have the opportunity to make connections and learn how to successfully maneuver within their areas of specialization (Harper & Patton, 2003). Black women in graduate and professional schools often find it difficult to locate suitable mentors with whom to build such connections given the lack of Black faculty and administrators. Black women who are senior administrators and professors should serve as role models and mentors to those that succeed them.

Like any other race, Black women look to those that are mirror images of themselves to create and foster mentor relationships (Patton & Harper, 2003). Participating in a mentoring relationship with someone who looks like them, who has similar personal, professional, and scholarly interests and is devoted to their holistic experience and personal success as a graduate student in their chosen field, is keenly important for Black women (Patton & Harper, 2003). Patton and Harper (2003) confirmed Hughes’ (1988) findings on the dismal presence of minority women mentors. According to Hughes (1988), minority female students have the most limited access to ethnic role models and mentors like themselves. Black women in graduate and professional schools often find it difficult to locate suitable mentors with whom to build such relationships (Burgess, 1997, as cited in Simon, Perry, & Roff, 2008) due to a lack of Black university faculty (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). With so many barriers, how then can first-generation Black female doctoral students be molded into a professional member of the academic world? Ultimately, first-generation Black female doctoral students will one day become first-generation Black female faculty or administrators. First-generation is an eternal characteristic that does not stop at the collegiate level. Forming mentoring relationships are limitless and key to both personal and professional development, not just degree attainment.
Summary

Through this review of the literature, a common finding of a lack of mentors, peer support, and role models contributed to high attrition rates of doctoral students. Black women were found to be incapable of serving as influential members of society causing a trivial presence in the academy which justified the need of mentoring of first-generation Black female doctoral students. Relatively, more women administrators and professors are needed in the academy throughout the nation. An increasing number of women hold certifications and degrees to qualify for top administrative and faculty positions; however, qualifications do not seem to be enough. Support systems are needed in the form of mentors, role models, and networks. Additionally, women in leadership positions need to accept the responsibility of mentoring other women rather than creating additional barriers. After all, successful Black women did not do it alone, it is important that we, as Black women, motivate and encourage the next generation of future scholars. It begins with people connecting to their past and the values it once possessed. In previous generations, there was a love for education and family but in today’s society we’ve become distracted by capitalism.

In chapter 3, I presented the study design, participants, and analysis of this study. In order to understand the concept of mentorship, I employed a phenomenological research design. It is essential to explore the lived experiences of first-generation Black female doctoral students, as they represent a minute portion of the student body present on college campuses, but have been relatively omitted in the literature. Because of their scarce presence, it is important to understand the barriers that these unique individuals face (as outlined throughout this chapter), to better support and prepare these scholars for their future careers inside and outside of the academy.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter described qualitative research, specifically phenomenological method, and the phenomenological process utilized in this study. The purpose of this study was to understand and explain how first-generation Black female doctoral students navigated the academy through mentorship. The focus of this study was to describe the lived experiences of first-generation Black female doctoral students and their experiences with mentoring. This study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways did Black female graduate students receive support through mentoring?
2. How and in what ways did mentoring impact first-generation Black female doctoral students experiences and persistence in higher education?
3. How did Black female doctoral students define mentorship and where did they find available mentors?

Rationale for Qualitative Research

As discussed in Chapter One and Two, this study sought to understand the role of mentoring for first-generation Black female doctoral students. Specifically, “How do first-generation Black female doctoral students received adequate support?” Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) indicated that we conduct research in the social sciences to “satisfy our own curiosity about a phenomenon of interest” and to “empower disadvantaged groups or constituencies” (pp. 113-115). Given the nature of my study, a qualitative approach was the best method to utilize in order to gather data and knowledge about a population that has been absent from the literature.

A review of the literature revealed that, while mentoring is not the only contributing factor to the successful completion of a doctoral program, it is cited as one of the most prominent
for student’s advancement in the academy. Creswell (2007) discussed the foundation for conducting qualitative research:

   We conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored. This explanation is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that can then be measured, or hear silenced voices. We also conduct qualitative research because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature. We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study. We conduct qualitative research because we want to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue. (pp. 39-40)

The focus of this study provided new findings that aids in the development of strategies to implement a support system, through mentorship, that enabled first-generation Black female doctoral students to enroll and successfully complete a doctoral program. According to Creswell (2007), a phenomenological study describes in detail, "the meaning of the lived experiences for several individual about a concept" (p. 51) which in this proposed study, was mentorship. Therefore, the implication for a phenomenological framework was evident.

**Phenomenology and Phenomenological Research Method**

A phenomenological approach was chosen to gather an in-depth look into the lived experiences of first-generation Black female doctoral students. The key element of phenomenology is to “understand how people experience a phenomenon from the person’s own perspectives” (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 48). The purpose of this study was to understand and explain how first-generation Black female doctoral students navigated the academy through mentorship. Given the historical implications of power, gender, sexism, and racism present in the academy, I wanted to document what mentorships between first-generation Black female doctoral students looked like between faculty, staff, and others outside of the academy. Merriam (2002) clarified the essence of phenomenology in research:
With its roots in philosophy and psychology, phenomenology focuses on the subjective experience of the individual. Although all qualitative research is phenomenological in the sense that there is a focus on people’s experience, a phenomenological study seeks to understand the essence or structure of a phenomenon. Phenomenological research addresses questions about common, everyday human experiences (for example, love), experiences believed to be important sociological or psychological phenomena of our time or typical of a group of people (for example, being a cancer patient), and transitions that are common or of contemporary interests (such as becoming a parent or changing gender roles). The defining characteristic of phenomenological research is its focus on describing the “essence” of a phenomenon from the perspectives of those who have experienced it. (p.93)

Experiences, perceptions, and self-reflections, through language, were essential concepts of phenomenology (Merriam, 2002). In order to encourage first-generation Black female doctoral students to share their stories, interviews (conversations) provided the richest lens to gather an in-depth look into the mentoring perspectives of the participants.

**Sample and Criteria**

Given that my study focused on both “aiming to improve society and institutions in general” and “empowering specific groups or constituencies” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p.115), I used two strategies for selecting participants. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) outlined the characteristics of purposeful sampling:

> Purposive sampling addresses specific purposes related to research questions; therefore the researcher selects cases that are information rich in regard to those questions. Purposive samples are often selected using expert judgment of researchers and informants. Purposive sampling procedures focus on the depth of information that can be generated by individual cases. Purposive samples are typically small (usually 30 or fewer cases), but the specific sample size depends on the type of qualitative research being conducted and the research questions. (pp. 173-174)

Through this process, I approached colleagues who, based on personal knowledge of their background, fit the parameters of my study criteria. In doing so, I acquired three participants for my study. To enlist additional participants, an email (Appendix A) was sent to fellow colleagues describing the details of the study and participant requirements. Colleagues were then
encouraged to provide names of individuals who fit the study criteria. This technique is known as snowball sampling (Berg, 2004; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

This study resulted in a purposive sample of five first-generation Black female doctoral students and two former first-generation Black female doctoral students who are now doctoral degree recipients. Inclusion criteria were (a) first-generation Black female doctoral student, (b) willingness to participate in an audio-recorded interview, (c) ability to articulate their experiences in graduate school (Creswell, 2007), and (d) majoring in the humanities or social sciences field. To ensure variation in doctoral experiences, I solicited and selected five participants who were currently pursuing a doctoral degree and two former first-generation Black female doctoral students who were now professors at a PWI (as shown in Table 3.1).

Table 3.1. Research Study Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education Background of Parents</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Mother (Some college) Father (Unknown)</td>
<td>Completed Ph.D. in 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandy</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Mother (High school) Father (High school)</td>
<td>3rd year doctoral student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Mother (High school) Father (High school)</td>
<td>3rd year doctoral student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Mother (High School) Father (High School)</td>
<td>Completed Ph.D. in 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natasha</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Father (Master’s degree) Mother (Some college)</td>
<td>1st year doctoral student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The average age of participants was 34 years. It is important to note that my original data point was to solicit only first-generation college students whose parent(s) had no collegiate experience; however, finding available participants who fit within those confining parameters proved to be problematic. As a result, study participants were selected based on a specific criterion, being a first-generation doctoral student, as described by Collins, Onwuegbuzie, and Jia (2007). Under the ethic of confidentiality, all participants were given pseudonyms, no university name or location was reported, and participants had the option to discontinue the study at any given time.

**Data Collection**

After approval from Louisiana State University’s Institutional Review Board (Appendix D), I contacted participants who met the inclusion criteria to schedule an interview. Drawing upon feminist theory (intersectionality) as the guiding framework of this study, Rubin and Rubin (2005) summarized the rationale for conducting interviews:

To feminist researchers, surveys are disempowering because they do not allow the interview to explain what he or she feels and because the pretense of neutrality ignores the cultural assumptions that shape the survey questions. Further, the reduction of information to summary numbers and the interchangeability of interviews dehumanizes, while the stripping away of context obscures the structures that perpetuate unjust systems of dominance…feminist researchers argue that a more open, loosely structured research
methodology is necessary to learn about women, to captures their words, their concepts, and the importance they place on the events in their world. (p. 26)

To help fill in “historical blanks” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p.3) I implemented the interview guide approach, in which “the interviewer enters the interview session with a plan to explore specific topics and to ask specific open-ended questions of the interviewee (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 208). Through a standard set of questions (Appendix C), this process ensured that the same topics and questions were addressed with each participant, while the open-ended design provided further probing whenever new themes emerged. Questions for the interview were generated based on a comprehensive review of mentoring, Black women in higher education, and first-generation students’ literature as well as my personal experiences and observations.

**Pilot Study**

After obtaining informed consent (Appendix B), a pilot interview was conducted with the first interviewee (Amber). During this interview, research questions were thoroughly checked for accuracy and understanding to determine if information pertinent to the study was addressed. Amber stated that she enjoyed the questions and thought they were relevant and important. She stated that she understood all the questions and felt comfortable in her ability to verbally articulate her experiences. As a result of conducting a pilot study, the questionnaire was deemed appropriate and the interview data was used as part of the data analysis.

**Study Setting and Interview process**

I allowed each participant to select the interview location in which they felt most comfortable sharing their experiences. As a result, interviews were conducted across various geographic regions and locations: two coffee shops, three personal residences, and two over the web using Skype (a software application that allows users to make voice and video calls and chat over the internet). One-time in depth interviews took place over a one month time frame. Each
interview lasted approximately thirty to ninety minutes. During the interview process, epoche (the investigator sets aside their own personal experiences, Moustakas, 1994; Creswell 2007) and field notes were used. All interviews were audio-recorded.

Throughout the process of conducting interviews, I transcribed each interview verbatim within 24 hours of completion. When presented with the transcriptions of the interview, the participants verified the accuracy and offered no corrections or additions. This allowed me to accept the validity of their lived experiences with mentoring at PWI’s.

**Data Analysis**

First, each interview was transcribed. Then, I reviewed each transcription repeatedly and made copious handwritten notes that included comments or questions that arose throughout the review process as an initial open coding process. I further reduced this information by combining common words and phrases that I coded into categories. Using color variations of highlighters, I then coded the categories into six common themes based on the overarching trend of each participant’s experience. This process is known as horizontalization and is discussed further in Chapter 4.

Using the participant responses, I carefully read and reviewed each transcript multiple times in order to identify meaning units throughout the conversations (interviews). In order to identify meaningful themes, I clustered the relevant data from each transcript around interview questions.

To address validity, I employed the process of member checking to allow participants the opportunity to review my interpretation of the data and phenomena (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). This process enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. Once participants
accepted my transcription as accurate. I employed Moustakas' (1994) modified Van Kaam method in analyzing participants’ transcripts.

**Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations of this study. First, this study does not speak for all first-generation Black female doctoral students and therefore findings cannot be generalized; however, it is representative of challenges these participants have encountered. Second, the scope of the participants was limited. Although institutions varied between multiple states and regions, participants were selected from two areas of research (social sciences and humanities). Furthermore, the universities selected for the study were all public, land grant, predominantly White, Research Intensive schools.
CHAPTER FOUR: ORGANIZING, ANALYZING, AND SYNTHESIZING DATA

As stated throughout this study, the purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which mentoring impacted the academic success of first-generation Black female doctoral students at predominantly White institutions (PWI’s). Using Moustakas (1994) modified Van Kaam method of data analysis, this chapter is organized as follows: horizontalization, meaning of units, and themes.

**Horizontalization**

Understanding qualitative researchers can become engulfed with emotions during the interview process, Rubin and Rubin (2005) cautioned, “rather than pretend that interviewers come into the situation with no biases and can listen to answers without sifting them through their own experiences and cultural lenses…researchers need to continually examine their own understandings and reactions” (p. 31). This qualitative study emerged out of my own passion, interests, and experiences. I acknowledged that my identity (first-generation Black female doctoral student) is inherently visible throughout this study. Recognizing that I had similar experiences as my participants, the practice of self-reflection (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2005) was critical in disassociating my personal experiences and opinions during the interview process. Moustakas (1994) synthesized the practice of epoche:

> Epoche means to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things…Epoche requires a new way of looking at things, a way that requires that we learn to see what stands before our eyes, what we can distinguish and describe. (p. 33)

To ensure that I gained a deeper point of understanding, I actively listened and refrained from interjecting with leading or persuasive language in order to allow the interviewees the ability to express themselves without any guidance. I also captured field notes using a researcher’s
notebook that highlighted emerging themes during the interview process in which I cross-referenced with the transcripts to further explore potential themes.

Meaning of Units

Using the participant responses, I carefully read and reviewed each transcript multiple times in order to identify meaning units throughout the conversations (interviews). In order to identify meaningful themes, I clustered the relevant data from each transcript around the interview questions. The following represents experiences and stories of first-generation Black female doctoral students. Given the sensitive nature of racism and sexism as it relates to academia, verbatim responses of participants were utilized to capture the true essence of first-generation Black female doctoral students’ experiences.

Meaning of Unit #1: (First-generation family perceptions) – How do your family and friends perceive you obtaining a Ph.D.? Has it put any pressure on you in any way? What effect did being a first-generation doctoral student play during this period of transition?

Amber: My family is extremely supportive. My cohort members were very supportive of me and many of us are still close and we write together but I definitely felt like I had to prove myself a lot and vocally say I need to have support. I need to have these experiences. I had to really advocate for myself more than other folks. Other folks also had networks like they knew a professor there or their parents were friends with this person so you realize going in as a person coming from a working class, low SES, first-generation background, even though you’ve conquered the masters you don’t realize all the networks and personal connections that you don’t have.

Brandy: My family and friends are very very supportive of me getting a Ph.D. but I think it goes back to the understanding piece of it. They’re very supportive, they love you, and they think you’re doing a wonderful thing but they don’t get it. So I find myself explaining a lot of what I’m doing to my family and friends. And then you don’t want to sound pretentious so it’s like, how do you explain it?...I was talking to my mother and she was like “oh I didn’t know you had to defend your dissertation” and I’m like yeah, you just don’t turn it in, you know you have to defend it. And she’s like I didn’t know that. It’s the pressure of you not knowing if you’re going to finish and then the expectation that they have that you’re going to be finished because they don’t understand the process. So it’s kind of like an added pressure. I do feel a lot of pressure.

Keisha: I think they’re excited for me. I don’t know that they understand why I would want to keep studying and stay in school for as long as I am but they’re happy for me.
They’re proud of me. They provide as much support as they can. It’s not a whole lot of help that they can give me because it hasn’t been their experience.

Lisa: I think my family was really proud of me... that I was working in graduate school. You know Cornell West talks about you know when your community is really proud of you when you’re pursing the life of the mind they really don’t know what you’re doing they’re like “oh that’s nice” you’re getting a doctorate. But it’s nothing like concrete so you’re not like getting a job in industry you’re pursuing the life of the mind and so they don’t quite know what to do with you. You know, you know they’re proud but they don’t exactly know what you’re doing... It was hard and I was broke. That’s like the underlining theme of the whole discourse “I was broke”. There was no family support because they’re broke too and so I literally had to figure it out, step by step, all by myself. Nobody was helping me. You’re literally on your own. You’re by yourself and that’s hard. You don’t have that history, you don’t have the people who have gone before you who have those doctorates and they’re telling you well this is how you work the system. And you’re not an insider. You began as an outsider and more than likely you’ve ended as an outsider. So you have to be a hustler. I think if you’re Black and you come from like lower class or a hood situation, you know how to hustle. So you have to hustle in grad school. And you watch. You do a lot of watching of what’s acceptable and what’s not acceptable and you have to draw those lines in the sand for yourself you know I don’t give a sh** what goes on I am not going to cross this line. I’m going to eat. I’m going to get fed. More than likely it’s going to be you feeding you and that’s hard.

Natasha: Everybody’s been very supportive but a lot of people are very confused. People were very confused as to why I was leaving my good job, especially with the economy being the way that it was, to go back to school. I have other relatives that didn’t go to college, or they may have just got an associate or a bachelor’s degree and they just could not understand why I wanted to go back to school again. But everybody has been very supportive. You know, they just have a lot of questions and they don’t really understand why it takes so long. There is this overwhelming pressure that I have to finish this program because I am the first and I don’t want to let everyone down. I don’t know if other people feel that way, but I feel like that every day and that makes it worse. Since I feel the pressure I really don’t want to tell my family and friends because I don’t want them to be disappointed. So I guess the best way to put this is I feel stressed all the time.

Terri: I think they, my family and friends, are very supportive. I don’t think that they all really know what having a Ph.D. really means and what it really entails. So they’re just like, oh, so when you finish you’re going to be doctor? Like that’s the thing. They’re just like you’re going to be doctor. Okay, cool. They don’t really know particularly. They just know that I’ve been in school forever and a day and when I’m done I’m finally going to be doctor. So they’re very supportive of that. But I definitely feel lost. I feel like I’m going to have to seek out other ways and other methods to figure out exactly what the he** I’m supposed to be doing. I really feel like I’m just flapping in the wind, like figure it out. I mean, even when I ask for help the responses are so vague and so – even when I’m listening to the response of the person that I’m getting help from; I’m like, you didn’t answer the question. I’m trying to take a note. I’m trying to write down the answer to my
question in terms of how you answered it. I’m not getting anything. So even after those meetings I’m frustrated because I still don’t have my questions answered.

Trina: They’re all excited but people who aren’t really educated about what a Ph.D. is; they don’t really engage me as far as really asking a lot of questions because I don’t think they know what to ask me. It’s always just, “you’ll be fine”, it’s okay; but never can be more specific help as far what I’m going through. Yeah, the questions aren’t very probing either. They’re just very basic…general, “So, well what year are you?” “How do you like it?” “What are you taking?” And when you try to talk to them, it stops right there because they don’t really know what to say. I have no support system whatsoever and then to get in a department where there aren’t any women of color, or people of color and then on top of that to have come from a historically Black institution; the dynamics were just very different.

Within the interviews, the women used terms such as proud, supportive, and excited to describe their family’s feelings towards a doctoral degree; while terms of frustration, confusion, and pressure were used to describe feelings of discontentment when being left to navigate a doctoral degree program on their own devices. Most participants, of this study, described having added pressures placed upon them because they are the first in their family to attend college/graduate school. In the study of Stebleton, Soria, and Huesman (2014), first-generation students were found to experience more symptoms of distress than do their non-first-generation peers and have lower ratings of “sense of belonging and satisfaction” (p.14). Additionally, first-generation students had a higher frequency of feeling stressed, depressed, or upset. These frequencies, coupled with a lack of guidance, can hinder the completion rate of first-generation Black female doctoral students, further debilitating the pipeline of educated Black female scholars.

**Meaning of Unit #2: (Outsider-Within) – How would you describe your experience of being Black in a White space?**

Brandy: I encountered this White male professor and I had such a negative experience with White males in this department and I think that makes a difference too like the field that you’re in. When I got to [my new department] my first encounter with a White male was also very negative and that made me feel like “oh here we go again.” Coming from an HBCU, it is this understanding that you had life issues. So if you went and told the
professor about my life issue, and I had to come enroll in school at the last minute, can I get into your class? They would have let you in. Even the meanest people would have gave you a hard time for 15 minutes but they still would have signed the paper to let you in because they understood that this situation was bigger and was about educating and empowering you than filing paper work. But with this White professor, I told him that and I explained to him that I just got laid off from my job, that I decided to go back to school at the last minute decision to enroll in school and that I really needed this class, can you let me in this class? And it was in front of a whole lot of people, a lot of young White people, and he told me no. That he had a waiting list, that there were Ph.D. students lined up to take his class and if anyone found out that I got into his class it would be hard on him. He was kind of nasty about it. And that’s from me not understanding how a Ph.D. program works. So now that I know that he didn’t have people lined up to take his class, it wouldn’t have been a struggle for him to add me, but I felt at the time “these White people don’t want me here so they are going to make it hard for me.”

Keisha: I asked a question in class about scheduling, and we go through this every quarter, where we try to negotiate dates and things like that, and I’ve never been a negotiator. We’ve always had like one negotiator in our class and she wasn’t there, so I asked, “Well, you know, you have nine Saturdays in a row, like, that’s not what we signed up for, that’s not what was presented to us, and it impacts my family,” so I was making that point and asking if there was anything, if there was any room to negotiate, and so this professor looked at me in front of my class and was just like, “What do you want? This is—there are other programs, there are online programs, there’s this program, there’s that program,” and she nutted up on me and I had no idea where that came from, and it was just like, it was unbelievable. I don’t know if had it not come from someone with White privilege, that it would had been received that way. But she was basically telling me, “Look, if you don’t like it, go somewhere else.” And she did this in front of my class! Just like, “What do you want? There are other programs, you know, this is, like, no, you’re not going there.”

Lisa: My graduate program was new at [my university]. I was actually on the committee that organized the graduate program and I remember asking the chair of the department if there was going to be a reading list or a written exam or if there was a reading list that we have to read and he just got real snotty with me like “we are not going to do a reading list.” I mean just read me in front of the entire class because I asked if it was going to be a reading list. “We don’t do things that way” and I remember the White girls in the class looking real smug at him like “oh he told her” and do you know the next year when he had our exams they had a reading list? And I was like hhhmmmm, it’s the little stuff like that.

Terri: Since I’ve been here I don’t think that I have experienced any blatant racism. I haven’t been called a derogatory term or nothing to my face, nothing that I know about. But I think definitely in the department that I work in and in my interactions on campus I can see how there are some things that I feel are racist or stereotypical. For example, there’s a little lady in payroll and if something is wrong with the time sheets or whatever or anything that I turn in, one thing that she did, and I hate this, is if she had a question or
she had like a problem or something that she had to tell me about, she won’t just e-mail me. She e-mails me and all of the people above me. I hate that, I think that’s so passive aggressive. Like, you couldn’t just shoot me an e-mail that will say, “Can you put the time sheets, don’t forget to put the time sheets in order when you bring them and drop them off in my box.” Really, you had to e-mail the director, the associate director? So after that when she kept doing that over and I stayed my same polite self, you know, like “How are you doing? Here you go; here are your time sheets.” But I guess that wasn’t good enough for her. I guess she wanted me to be more bubbly and talkative and in her face. So it became a conversation that she had with one of my supervisors to say, “I don’t think she likes me.” And then my supervisor who talked to me said, “Well you know, you do have a very strong personality.” I’m like; first of all, I don’t think that’s a bad thing. That’s my personality, that’s who I am, and what do you mean when I come off strong? Are you saying, I mean, like literally this is what she said. Okay, if somebody’s talking to you, I can tell that you are really concentrating on what they’re saying because you’re making direct eye contact, but then you ask questions about what they’re saying and it’s very intimidating? I said, “So in other words you said I’m paying attention to what the person is saying and processing what they’re saying, but then when I ask a question about it, that’s intimidating?” I think to me that was coming from a, “You’re a Black female, you’re typically thought of as kind of strong willed.” So just in that way; nothing blatant but, you know, just things that I notice in that way. I think it’s very insulting to have to have a conversation with a supervisor who’s a White woman because of an interaction that I’ve had with another White woman. And you’re telling me basically, you know, you’re scaring the White people. That’s what it comes across as. Really, that’s what I think of. Like, okay, so I’m paying attention to what you’re saying and I’m asking questions about what you’re saying probably because what you’re saying doesn’t make any sense, but that’s intimidating. So basically me asking questions and processing is scaring the White people.

Trina: Subtle – I’ve definitely experienced subtle racism within my department, within my seminars... I had a professor that never called me by my name for the entire semester and you’re taught to go and meet and greet so that you, you know, because it’s very political in academic space. He’s a White male, from Texas, old school working class and I wanted to establish a rapport with him because initially I wanted to work with him because we had similar interests. As it turns out, he still doesn’t call me by my name. He refers to me as, “Ma’am,” and initially I thought it was just culturally he’s from Texas; they call everybody, “Ma’am,” as I began to be in the same space with him and other students he would call other students by their names. He would never call me by my name. Even in the hallway he would call me, “Ma’am,” even in class he would call me, “Ma’am,” and I found it to be very disrespectful. I thought it was racial. I could not confirm it but in my heart I said, “Come on, you calling everybody else – you see other people in the hallway and you address them. I have been to your office. I have sat down and talked with you and you won’t even give me eye contact. I found it to be very discouraging, so needless to say, I won’t go back and I don’t talk to him anymore. I felt like that was wrong.
First-generation Black female doctoral students tend to ask more questions than their counterparts which resulted in being put on display through public humiliation. These experiences confirm the literatures’ stance that Black women and their experiences are devalued in White spaces. In the book *Voices of Diversity*, Black and Slipp (1994) cited “many Blacks say they can never get away from color as an identifier; they are always seen as blacks, not as just human beings” (p.16). This disenfranchises the empowerment of Black women.

I, like the experiences of the study participants, tended to ask a lot of questions. I asked questions out of curiosity and for clarity. It did not take me long to figure out that asking questions was negatively labeling me as not being a strong student. While working on my dissertation, I did not agree with my former methodologist’s framework for my study. When I would express my concern, through asking questions, her response to me was to hand me a student’s dissertation to read. Feeling frustrated that I was not receiving the information that I was desperately seeking, I rebelled and refused to read, which hurt me in the long run. If I had a mentor to guide me through this process, I could have been taught to always walk into a room with a potential answer in hand, even if it is the wrong answer.

**Meaning Unit #3: (Interactions between Black females) – How would you describe your experiences with other Black women on campus?**

Amber: I was the only one in my cohort.

Brandy: I think that my relationship with the other Black females on campus are indicative of my relationship with Black females my whole life. I don’t think it’s any different in the academy. I think that some Black women have that attitude that there’s only room for one sistah and I’m that sistah and you step aside because there’s only room for one me-and I’m her- and I’m not going to help you. And then I think you have some Black women, who do understand that it’s a sisterhood, and they’re good sisters and you form this bond and it’s really amazing. And then you have some Black women who y’all just don’t get along. But I do find that it’s only room for one Black woman scholar, one Black woman administrator, and it’s a dog fight to see who that’s going to be and the sister who is in that role, sometimes she helps you and sometimes she don’t.
Lisa: Ain’t none.

Terri: I haven't had any contact with any Black female professors or high ranking administrators. Experiences with other Black female graduate students it’s very – I’ve got to get mine; I’m not trying to help you. You know, I’m doing catty stuff; I’m talking about you behind your back. I don’t really like you. It’s very cliquish. I don’t like her. Let’s not include her in the circle. Oh, she don’t want to come be in our circle. It’s sad, it makes me sad. I try not to participate. It makes me not want to collaborate and interact and work with them because of all the foolish negativity, such as, “I don’t like her because of this, or I don’t like her because of that,” or as my mama would say, “Throwing slams.” You know, sneaking in little snide remarks about this person or that person when they’re not around, but when they are around. I don’t do that… I wish it could be a stronger Black female cohort.

The common theme of alienation resonated throughout the experiences of first-generation Black female doctoral students interviewed. Troubling, were the interactions with their Black female peers. hooks (1984) affirmed that “sexism is perpetuated by institutional and social structures” in which women are taught to be “natural” enemies and that solidarity will never exist between Black women (p. 43). Findings from this study exposed the lack of unity amongst Black women in the academy. Brandy (study participant, 2012) divulged the naked truth of Black women in academy stating, “Black women have that attitude that there’s only room for one sistah and I’m that sistah and you step aside because there’s only room for one me-and I’m her-and I’m not going to help you.”

It has been my experience, that interactions with Black female peers were less than enjoyable. There were instances where I would walk into a room, speak, and would be ignored by other Black women. While working at an assistantship, I was often belittled by the director of the department, who was a Black female in a highly influential position. When it came to socializing outside of the academy, forced interactions of trying to fit the mold left me isolated, distant, and feeling like a sell out to myself. If I refused to assimilate to the norms of a White space, I definitely refused to assimilate to fit into the cliquish mentality of my own race. We, as
Black women, have it hard enough without having to battle both men and women for the opportunity to excel. It is unfortunate that Black women are each other’s enemy. Instead of building a sisterhood of scholarship and support, Black women are quick to tear each other down out of fear of others succeeding. Black women must start a movement to birth a new generation of empowerment (Collins, 2000).

Meaning Unit #4: (Mentor characteristics) – What is your definition of mentoring? What qualities or characteristics do you look for in a mentor?

Amber: Mentoring comes in different forms. It’s based on the needs of the person at that moment. It can be formal, it can be informal, it could be via the internet, or it could be just a professional. A good mentor is someone who is down to earth, humble, and willing to be human and understand that you’re human…Someone that is willing to just be real. There are just so many of those I’m in the ivory tower kind of folks so that’s what I look for, someone who can just be real.

Brandy: I would describe mentoring as a one-on-one relationship and it doesn’t always have to be a person of power it doesn’t have to be a power differential like “I’m mentoring you to be like me.” I don’t think it’s training. It’s a one-on-one relationship where honesty is shared about job, life, school. I believe that it’s a reflexive process and I think it’s a giving process. They have to be genuine, caring, and considerate. I had this awesome mentor one time he said he has all kinds of mentors. He said he has people who clean toilets as his mentors; he got rich White men and women to be his mentors, all so that he could get these different perspectives on life. I think that it’s the perspective on life that you need. I don’t think it always have to be this power relationship like I’m in this position of power and I’m mentoring you to be like me. I think it’s just do you have something to give, are you giving, the mentor has to be giving.

Keisha: I think of it as somebody who voluntarily invests themselves in your success. But they have to be knowledgeable, they have to be willing to be a support and available. Somebody who’s going to give you access to the hidden curriculum, you know, tell you the stuff that other people won’t tell you; somebody you can be vulnerable with about your insecurities, and somebody who’s going to properly guide you and help you on your career path.

Lisa: Mentoring to me is commitment (a committed relationship between you and your mentee) and it’s more than just hooking up or talking once every blue moon. A mentor is someone who is successful, someone who has power. Someone who can help you. Someone who’s going to write that letter for you, open that door for you. Make that call for you. Someone who has done what you want to do and can show you the steps. Why are you going to waste your time being mentored by someone who is your equal? That’s
like a total waste of time. You need a person where everybody knows their name that’s what you need. Someone who is older.

Natasha: Mentoring is different from advising in an academic sense. Mentors are people that I identify with and that I want to emulate. Any mentor that I’ve chosen has always been somebody that I respect professionally. I respect how they got there, and I respect them as a person, I respect their values and I could see myself wanting to be that person or even some of that person and I would be happy with myself.

Terri: I think mentoring, to me the word that pops into my head all the time with mentoring is guidance. And when I say guidance, I mean in any area of life. Any guidance that you can give me, whether it is something that you already went through and that you know the role and so you can give me guidance on the path that I should take. Or if you are guiding me in terms of, “Oh, well I have this close friend and this is what she went through, this is what she told me about, maybe I could connect you to her.” That’s mentoring too, so it doesn’t have to be just something that you particularly went through. Just you saying okay, in terms of this issue this is what I can offer you. Let me guide you in this kind of way. In terms of characteristics, consistency is key for me. Honesty is key. You know, I don’t mean anybody that’s going to be like, “Oh, I don’t want to hurt your feelings.” If it’s a whack idea you’re not going to hurt my feelings. If you say, “Okay, we need to maybe think about this.” So consistency, honesty, and I need somebody that’s going to keep it real. Don’t sugar coat it for me. If this is an area that I think I want to go in this area. Don’t tell me, “These are some of the things you might encounter going in that area.” I want you to keep it real. Don’t just be like telling me little blank statements that you would tell anybody. I want mentoring to be personal. That’s a good word I think. So consistency, honesty, and the ability to make it personalized. Personalize it to me. I don’t want you to tell me the same thing that you tell every other student, of every other ethnicity, of every other background, of every other field. I want it to be personalized to me. That makes a good mentor.

Trina: They see you, they acknowledge your scholarship first and foremost, and then they acknowledging your scholarship. They invest in you. They take the time to get to know you as a person and they take the time to get to know you as a scholar and they invite you into their space. A mentor invites you, the mentee, into their space. And by inviting you into their space they’re acknowledging that there is something that they want to take the time to get to know. Because when you’re dealing with scholarships, you’re dealing with the psychological aptitude of an individual which actually funnels down into the whole self. As far as qualities, I look for honesty, integrity, and success. I like a very engaging mentor; a person that shows an interest in you. So they have to share common interests that I have, but also someone that is, when I say honest, honest in the sense that they’re going to constructively tell you what you’re deficiencies are and then upon identifying what your deficiencies are suggesting to you what it is that you need do to, to strengthen those deficiencies. Because it’s not enough to tell you how great you are. You also have to be able to give me the contrast of what my areas of weakness are so that I can actually come to a balance on both sides of the scale. So those are pretty much it. I don’t need a whole lot of bells and whistles. I need to see the proof. I need to see their efforts. Because
if you’re a good person, you have integrity I won’t be the only person that you’ve mentored. And they have to have been mentored themselves, because I’ve met his mentor and I’ve met her mentor. So to see those generations has been very impressive to me because it’s shown me that this is not something that they take very lightly. That when they bring you in they’re going to, like the commitment is going to be there for a lifetime.

Based on the definitions provided by the participants of this study, mentoring is a relationship that is built on trust, honesty, transparency, and mutual respect. Forming mentoring relationships takes time, dedication, and commitment. Both the mentor and mentee must have a vested in the relationship and in each other from an individual standpoint. Seeing that mentoring relationships entail varying degrees of assistance, having more than one mentor is ideal. In my case, I have many career mentors that have guided me along the way. I’ve had both male, female, Black and White career mentors. Throughout my mentoring relationships, I was able to build self-confidence. I speak up more and questions things that I do not understand. I know when to wear a suit and how to address senior management. These were just a few things that I had to learn, some the hard way, but was made available to me by individuals having a vested interest in my success. Although forming mentoring relationships with Black women is ideal in my case, I still advocate for cross-race, cross-cultural mentoring relationships.

**Meaning Unit #5: (Importance of mentoring) – What is your experience with mentoring? Why is it important for Black women?**

Amber: My dissertation chair mentored me emotionally and academically. My professor also mentors me. We have similar upbringing, background, and issues that we’ve gone through in our childhood so having a professor share that with me, it’s comforting to know that we have a similar background….I don’t want to say that’s its colorblind or race is not an issue, I think that because she is a person who studies social justice issues, she studies issues in racism, that’s her research area, she’s an advocate and that’s what she’s about. It’s part of her moral compass, I think that (not that she’s going to relate to everything that I experience as woman of color) but I think it put her in a better position to be able to mentor me. Plus because we have similar, culturally we did not, but class wise we had similar upbringing and background experiences.

Brandy: I think it’s useful because there’s still so few women in positions of power or are where other women want to be and it’s so hard because a lot of women do have that
mentality that there’s only room for one and I’m that one and you can’t get here. I’ve come in contact with a few Black women, who were in high powered positions, that I got nothing from them. They didn’t tell me anything about being a good person, about being a leader, about being nothing. They showed me how to wear a nice suit, how to always have your hair done, and how to be in front of people. But I never got anything about how they got there, why they got there, do they even enjoy being there? Would they recommend that this is the right path for me to be on? My first job I worked for a sistah and she was an amazing mentor and I think that has spoiled me so much to all of the bad mentors out there because it was that reflexive relationship. She gave me that information she wasn’t trying to create a little mini me. Sometime I find with women, they’ll tell you stuff to keep you away to keep you in that position. It wasn’t like that with her. She gave me a lot of stuff about being a good person, a good leader, a good coworker, being a good colleague, and what books to read. She was the one that told me you should always be reading three books: the personal development, the professional development, and then something for fun. To me that went beyond like how to be a good executive director and this is the kind of suit you should wear. I think it’s good for Black women to have good solid mentor because you are going to be in a situation where people are going to be racist; they are going to be sexist. You’re dealing with other women who are also racist and sexist and you have to be a strong person. So I think mentoring should center on teaching people how to be centered, how to be good people, how to understand your position, and then how to understand your position so you can be centered when you do get into the negative and the nasty that’s in the world. In the academy, I don’t have a Black mentor in the academy. I’m mentored by my friends in the academy. I haven’t encountered a Black woman in the academy that’s willing to take me under their wing.

Keisha: I think you can find good mentors within any race, any gender, but there is a bond between sisters that nobody else can understand, and there are experiences that we have that other people don’t experience, and provided that they can offer all of the same qualities as somebody else, it is definitely an asset to have a sister for a mentor. But the sad part is, generally, and I hope I’m not generalizing too much, but you have, you know, a good Black woman who can support you in so many different ways, but they may not have the clout to get you where you want to be professionally, because, we’re not always in those positions of power.

Lisa: Because our experiences can just be so negative so you need people in your life who are positive and who are helpful and who think that not only are you worth something but that you are one of the most amazing people that they’ve ever met in their life. Your mentor should make you feel that way. That you are the bomb. I didn’t have a mentor as a grad student. I had no idea how to do find one. But I think often times we don’t reach out to mentors as well because finding a mentor and getting hooked up is…you have to be taught how to do that kind of stuff. You don’t just know. You have to be taught that this is what you have to do and we don’t have the benefit of that knowledge coming in if you’re coming from a trying situation you don’t know.

Natasha: I think it’s not only useful, but I think it’s almost necessary for women. It’s very discouraging for a lot of women still because you’ll see women getting jobs and
everything and going in certain directions but it’s still very apparent that the more assertive women still get stereotyped as having an attitude problem and not great to work with and it’s terrible because the same stuff can come out of the man’s mouth and he doesn’t get labeled as that at all… and then the super nice women are always so nice and they’re friendly but they don’t really elevate their roles a lot of times. They just kind of stagnate where they are. You either have to be viewed as this nasty witch woman but she gets her job done or you’re this super nice softy woman and you usually remain in your role forever. I mean it doesn’t matter what your new title may be people will still always treat you like an admin and it’s awful because I always see women when they first graduate from college and they go look for their job, they get labeled a lot as the “marketing assistant or this coordinator” and it’s really just an admin role but the man gets hired as the financial analyst.

Terri: I think they’re useful for women just to kind of give us as much help as we can get. Everything is so saturated with patriarchy and powerful men. You know, like even if a man doesn’t have the degrees that I have, it’s more likely that he would get the job. So I think mentoring for women helps us to get as much of a leg up as we can. I feel like we need all the help we can get, so why not? I don’t have a mentor. I don’t know about any particular models or any particular, you know, this is what you’re supposed to say to find one either. I could think of them myself. The problem is I can’t identify with anyone outside of the students that I’m already collaborating with that I would want to be my mentor, or that would be willing and open to be my mentor.

Trina: The mentoring concept is no different than motherhood to me. And I say that because a child needs a parent, a child needs a father. And I don’t see any difference. It’s just like sociology talks about how socialization comes about in the home and you can see how much of a breakdown there is in homes that lack a parent. Whether the mom is raising them by herself or whether the dad is raising them. Both people are set there to establish a record of experiences for you; to show you “this is what you do in this situation,” because I’ve been there already. It’s no different in mentoring. The mentor has been where you’re trying to go. So a lot of the pitfalls that you may have experienced on your own can be avoided with proper mentoring. And that’s what happens with the old boy network. I use that as a contrast. It’s no different. The only thing is the old boy network is limited to just them but that’s why the cycle continues because they see him, they pull him in and they mentor that young man to basically fill the shoes when they decide that they want to leave and go do something else. It’s no different.

Not all women are treated equally. Intersectionality is indeed real. McIntosh (1990) described white privilege as “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks” (p.1). White privilege disadvantages Black women on the basis of intersecting discriminations. Mentoring, as described
by the study participants, is needed to saturate the balance of patriarchy in society, the workforce, and in the classroom. A mentor is synonymous to motherhood that teaches you about life’s journeys through pitfalls and success. This coincides with the study of Brown, Davis, and McClendon (2010) mode of mentoring graduate students of color through “academic midwifery” (p. 113). “A good academic midwife is a mentor who is respectful of oppositional ideas, committed to the intellectual and professional development of the student, and adaptive to different and nontraditional techniques and approaches (p. 114).” Using the concept of midwifery, mentors serve as surrogates whose main purpose is to birth the next generation of intellectuals, foster creative thinking, and offer support and encouragement.

Meaning Unit #6: (Effects of being a first-generation doctoral student) – What impact has being a first-generation doctoral student had on you?

Amber: It affected me a lot because we aren’t there. First-gen Black women we aren’t there in many numbers at all. That’s hard. Very hard. So it impacted my whole experience because when you go into a new environment what’s the first thing that you do? You count the number of Black people in the room and now because we are so few in numbers I count the number of people of color in general. So then the next level is I look around for the number of people who come from the same class background as I do. And they aren’t there. They just aren’t there. So it makes it difficult for people to understand what you’re going through. Obviously you understand the world to a certain point because you got through the master’s program and you got accepted into a Ph.D. program, there’s a whole lot of other stuff; like working the system and bumping elbows with people. I would also still give family members money from my small stipend and juggled multiple jobs on campus and that’s hard. Even after I finished teaching and got an assistantship I still had multiple jobs so that’s difficult…it makes being a student really difficult. You can’t do anything…to write everything needs to be clear and you can’t have anything else going on and write. So that was challenging. The second biggest thing was being a first-generation student and not having anybody to (except for a few of my classmates who were also first-gen from a low SES background as well) to not have anybody to talk to about what that feels like and also your family not understanding this world that you’re in. Because even my friends of color, a lot of them were from middle class or upper middle class families whose parents were nurses doctors, lawyers, they came from a middle class background….they weren’t first-generation so I didn’t feel like I could relate in that sense and be able to talk about the process and understanding the world of the Ph.D. so I think that was probably the biggest challenge and it still is a challenge now being a tenured track professor. I don’t think I will never not feel that I’m a Black person that comes from a single parent home will never go away. That feeling of
self-consciousness will never go away. And I don’t know why…it’s imbedded in me. It will never go away ever. That feeling that you’re not doing the right thing, you’re not navigating the system the right way, that somebody knows some bit of information that you don’t know…that feeling will never go away. I think for me, that was the hardest part of the process.

Brandy: The first go round I didn’t have anybody to talk to with things that I was feeling. For example when this White boy came to me and said that my point was different from his so I must not have read the reading closely enough or I would had got it, I didn’t have anybody to talk to that with. I didn’t have anybody to talk to about the fact that I would have my hand raise and the teacher wouldn’t call on me. I didn’t have anybody to go and talk to and be like “oh yeah that happens but where you get them at is writing your papers, you get them when you go and present at conferences; you get them when you finish” I didn’t have anybody to tell me that so I filled it alone the first time.

Keisha: Sometimes I get frustrated when I’m trying to explain to people what it is that I’m doing because they have no idea because they haven’t been through it before. And you feel like your family doesn’t understand when we have to say, “Okay, I need to study so, can you stop calling me every day?” But it’s not really much you can do about that. They want to be connected but at the same time it’s like, okay, "We really don’t need to talk every day. I really do need to study.

Lisa: Well I think that because I didn’t have the people telling me this is what you need to do and this is what we did. Or I didn’t have the parents there to help you out financially and give you advice or have people to talk to that’s really tough.

Natasha: The problem for me is that I don’t have anybody in my family or my group of friends to talk to. Nobody understands the program first off. Nobody understands how long it’s going to take. Like when I talk to my friends they would all say how long is this going to take like a year? And I keep telling them no. Even my best friend, I told her about seventeen hundred times, I’m going to be here for 5 years. And it finally just registered maybe a couple of weeks ago and she said “are you serious? 5 years? This is crazy” and I was like I told you this, I’ve been saying the same thing, it’s not like I’ve changed it, it’s been the same. So nobody understands what this is. It’s very annoying to have to keep explaining this to my family. They are very confused as to how I’m getting funding, how I’m getting money, and how I’m going to live. Everybody asks if I live on campus which I think is a very bizarre question I’m like no I have an apartment just like I would if I would have relocated for any other job. So I guess it’s annoying answering the same questions over and over and over again because nobody understands what this is. So that being first generation creates another level of constantly having to explain myself to everyone. Even though they’re supportive it gets frustrating because I feel like nobody is listening to me when I explained it the first time.

Trina: When you’re in a situation that you lack knowledge it’s not blissful. Because I think some people are delusional about the whole notion of meritocracy and going to school. You’re just going to go to school and everything’s going to be fine. That’s not the
case. When you talk about mentoring; mentoring is associated with social capital. When people come from certain backgrounds there are things that they’re privileged to that they may hear at home as somebody that’s the first generation would not know how to say or do or behave. There’s just certain things that are established in a kid that comes from an established educated background than a kid that doesn’t. And those are things that you can’t be taught. You stumble over yourself and learn as you go. So it is a barrier because there are certain conversations that I think sometimes are more challenging and I do have to do extra homework and go back like certain terms or certain stories may be told that nobody told me that story when I was at my house. For example, in class one of my professors asked why did we call the former president Teddy? Where did that story come from? And I was talking about the bear culture. I didn’t know that it was because of some hunting expedition or something. I didn’t know that. It’s kind of like that, but they knew. The privileged knew, but I didn’t know. So it’s the little things like that that you feel like an imposter all the time. Because it’s like you know this can have academic, like the ability to know [learn] but it’s different when you already know. You have access to stuff that I don’t and I’m trying to gain. So it’s always a struggle. Cause I’m like, you already know this.

The common theme of alienation resonated throughout the experiences of first-generation Black female doctoral students interviewed for this study. Being a first-generation Black female doctoral student led most participants into a class that their family/friends were unable to relate to. Because of a lack of understanding, respondents felt as if they had no one to talk to. I found that being a first-generation Black female doctoral student was overwhelmingly challenging. It was difficult to talk with family/friends because they did not understand the politics of the academy. When they would offer their opinions, it was hard to express to them that the issue was not just black and white. It has also been a huge financial strain. I often wondered if the time, money, and effort that I’ve put into this program were even worth the headache.

**Themes**

Moustakas (1994) noted, “Using the relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes, construct for each co-research an Individual Textural Description of the experience. Include verbatim examples from the transcribed interviews” (p. 121). Proceeding, “Construct for each co-researcher and Individual Structural Description of the experience based on the
Individual Textural Description and Imaginative Variation” (p. 121). Summarizing each meaning unit into one common category, six themes emerged of the lived experiences of first-generation Black female doctoral students as presented in Table 4.1. Themes were: Parents Just Do Not Understand, Can You See Me Now?, Am I My Sister’s Keeper?, Show Me the Way!, Like Mother, Like Daughter, and It is Just Me, Myself, and I.

Table 4.1. Thematic Description of Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning of Unity</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>First-generation family</td>
<td>Parents Just Do Not Understand</td>
<td>Support system lacks collegiate understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>perceptions</td>
<td>Understand</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outsider-Within</td>
<td>Can You See Me Now?</td>
<td>Campus perception as it relates to race and gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interactions between Black females</td>
<td>Am I My Sister’s Keeper?</td>
<td>Underrepresentation and temperament when interacting with others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mentor characteristics</td>
<td>Show Me the Way!</td>
<td>Definition of mentoring and deciphering aspects of mentoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Importance of mentoring</td>
<td>Like Mother, Like Daughter</td>
<td>Determination of the nature of structure of the mentoring relationships among first-generation Black female doctoral students</td>
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(Table 4.1 continued)

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<tr>
<th>Meaning of Unity</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Effects of being a first-generation doctoral student</td>
<td>It is Just Me, Myself, and I</td>
<td>Isolated in academic discourse</td>
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Parents Just Do Not Understand

First-generation Black female doctoral students, who participated in this study, had a very supportive family unit. However, support was limited to mental and emotional support as most could not offer financial support or experiential advice as illustrated by Lisa’s candidate response, “I was broke…they are broke too” (study participant, 2012). Through this analysis, it was found that financial instability, combined with a lack of guidance, led first-generation Black female doctoral students to the isolating task of “figuring things out on their own.” Additionally, the presence of first-generation Black female doctoral students in the academy was met with feelings of being isolated, lost, and frustrated. First-generation Black female doctoral students often found their intersecting identities (Black, female, social class) prohibited their ability to successfully navigate the academy, which led to episodes of personal advocacy as recounted by Amber, (study participant, 2012):

I definitely had to prove myself a lot and vocally say I need to have support. I need to have these experiences. I had to really advocate for myself more than other folks. Other folks also had networks like they knew a professor or their parents were friends with this person so you realize going in as a person coming from a working class, low SES, first-generation background, even though you’ve conquered the masters you don’t realize all the networks and personal connects that you don’t have.

Lisa’s (study participant, 2012) experience paralleled with Amber’s in that she specified, “You don’t have that history, you don’t have the people who have gone before you who have those doctorates and they’re telling you well this is how you work the system.” These
experiences highlighted the complexities that a lack of guidance, mentorship, and systems of support can have on first-generation Black female doctoral students which can be detrimental to their success in the academy. Specifically, first-generation doctoral students come from a family unit that’s misinformed compounded by the intricacies of graduate school. Lunceford (2011), confirmed that “first-generation graduate students may not know where to get the information that will help them succeed” (p.19); which led to a generational discourse given that the family’s perception of a Ph.D. did not resemble the reality of obtaining a Ph.D.

Engagement was another added barrier to the complexities that first-generation Black female doctoral students are confronted with by family. Specially, communication was cited as the greatest barrier when interacting with family as expressed depicted by Trina (study participant, 2012):

They don’t really engage me as far as really asking a lot of questions because I don’t think they know what to ask me. It’s always just, “you’ll be fine”, it’s okay; but never can be more specific help as far what I’m going through. Yeah, the questions aren’t very probing either. They’re just very basic…general, “So, well what year are you?” “How do you like it?” “What are you taking?” And when you try to talk to them, it stops right there because they don’t really know what to say. I have no support system whatsoever and then to get in a department where there aren’t any women of color, or people of color and then on top of that to have come from a historically Black institution; the dynamics were just very different.

The experiences of Trina addressed a hidden nuance in the Black community that I never knew existed until I experienced it first-hand. Like the participants of this study, I too felt overwhelmed, stressed, and pressured. I was overwhelmed with being forced to navigate the academy on my own. I felt stressed, because I had no idea how I was going to pay for school, food, and a place to live. Although I was one of the lucky few that came with my own funding, it was capped at a certain amount and since I was an out of state student, this created an additional stressor as I did not have an assistantship when I first arrived to the university. Lastly, I felt
pressured by my family/friends. When I tried to express my frustrations, I was hit with immediate responses such as “quitting is not an option”, “just hang in there”, or “it will get better”. Without guidance, or having someone to talk with openly about my experiences, the stressors ate away at me until I reached my breaking point— I left the university, all but dissertation (ABD); however, I did not quit.

My decision to leave the university was a personal tribulation as I could not verbally express my reasoning’s with family out of fear of disappointed. I felt overwhelming pressure like that of Natasha (survey participant, 2012) in which she described the family obligation and expectations of being a first-generation doctoral student as, “this overwhelming pressure that I have to finish this program because I am the first and I don’t want to let everyone down.” Although I left the physical campus environment, I stayed committed to finishing my degree through “persistence” (LeSavoy, 2010) and determination to not only finish what I’ve started; but most importantly, to serve as a source of knowledge for those who will come after me.

To clarify the essence of living in multiple worlds, Gardner and Holley’s (2011) study of 20 first-generation doctoral students posited that doctoral students classified themselves as living in two worlds — one of their upbringing and that of higher education. This dissonance of experience was problematic. For example, their language often separated them from their families and communities. One participant stated “You can’t really act educated when you go home, you know, because they think you are uppity” (p. 85). Findings from this study combined with that of Gardner and Holley (2011), solidified the complexities of living in multiple worlds. Verbally articulating the struggles while describing the process can be an exasperated task due to a lack of understanding by those who have not experienced graduate education as well as the
intricacies that first-generation Black female doctoral students do not fully understand the process themselves.

**Can You See Me Now?**

In this study, first-generation Black female doctoral students found the campus environment to be cold and unwelcoming. Bazile (2006) described her perception of the academy, as “deeply infiltrated by racism, sexism, capitalism, and hypocrisy” against Black women (p. 197) which is metaphorically synonymous to living in an urban dwelling as described by (Gordon, 1999). The hood is a very dangerous place. You can be ambushed, assaulted, and robbed. Lisa (study participant, 2012) described her means of survival as an outsider within:

You’re not an insider. You began as an outsider and more than likely you’ve ended as an outsider. So you have to be a hustler. I think if you’re Black and you come from like lower class or a hood situation, you know how to hustle. So you have to hustle in grad school. And you watch. You do a lot of watching of what’s acceptable and what’s not acceptable and you have to draw those lines in the sand for yourself you know I don’t give a sh** what goes on I am not going to cross this line. I’m going to eat. I’m going to get fed. More than likely it’s going to be you feeding you and that’s hard.

Instead of being sexually victimized, Black women are now intellectually objectified as outlined by the experiences of the Black women in this study. Specifically, they felt that their race and gender had a negative impact in the perception of how others viewed and treated them. Rather covertly or overtly, several participants had experienced some form of racism. For instance, Brandy (study participant, 2012) was publically ridiculed in front of her class when she sought permission to enroll in a course. Keisha (study participant, 2012) suffered verbal assault when she asked her professor a question regarding the structure of the class format which benefitted the entire class and not her solely. Lastly, Lisa (study participant, 2012) was verbally reprimanded when she asked for a reading list that would again, benefit the entire class and not
solely just herself. All of these experiences are classic examples of the ways in which Black women are devalued and ridiculed on a daily basis inside of the academy.

Findings from this study also stressed the struggle of womanism versus feminism in the academy. According to hooks (1984), racism was a barrier to solidarity between women given the difficulty of communicating with others of diverse cultural backgrounds. Specifically, based on the experiences of Black women, White women were viewed as a group who “most directly exercised power over them, often in a manner far more brutal and dehumanizing” (hooks, 1984, p. 50). This condemnation is highlighted by Terri’s experience between two White women at her job:

There’s a little lady in payroll and if something is wrong with the time sheets or whatever or anything that I turn in, one thing that she did, and I hate this, is if she had a question or she had like a problem or something that she had to tell me about, she won’t just e-mail me. She e-mails me and all of the people above me…

This opening excerpt captured the significance Terri attached to the intersections of race and gender. In examples where race and gender intertwined, interactions with White men and women who assumed the mantle of the patriarchal class structure of PWI’s, confirmed the current status of Black women in the academy further validating the notion that Black females are modern-day Sapphires (angry, threatening, intimidating, and unintelligent). Sapphire is an archetypal stereotype placed upon Black women during slavery based on a fictional character who constantly “denigrated” those around her which prevent Black women from initiating mentoring relationships because “Black women are perceived as loud, argumentative, aggressive, bitchy, stubborn, and quick-tempered” (Smith, 2003, p. 124). These stereotypes are so ingrained into the consciousness of today’s society as accounted by Terri who goes on to describe how her Black presence was viewed as a threatening behavior to her fellow White colleagues, despite the fact they were all female:
Then my supervisor who talked to me said, said “Well you know, you do have a very strong personality. So in other words you said “I’m paying attention to what the person is saying and processing what they’re saying, but then when I ask a question about it, that’s intimidating?” I think to me that was coming from a, “You’re a Black female, you’re typically thought of as kind of strong willed.”

Terri concluded with a description of how the interactions between herself and White women, left her feeling insulted as a Black woman:

I think it’s very insulting to have to have a conversation with a supervisor who’s a White woman because of an interaction that I’ve had with another White woman. And you’re telling me basically, you know, you’re scaring the White people. That’s what it comes across as. Really, that’s what I think of. Like, okay, so I’m paying attention to what you’re saying and I’m asking questions about what you’re saying probably because what you’re saying doesn’t make any sense, but that’s intimidating. So basically me asking questions and processing is scaring the White people.

In terms of intersectionality, this is a classic example where race emasculated gender proving that White privilege (McIntosh, 1990) is still prevalent in today’s higher education environment. Based on the findings from this study, society now has an understanding of how the caricature of the angry Black woman (Sapphire) stereotype continues to lead to a negative perception that restricts the mobility of Black women which restrict the opportunity to dispel untrue stereotypes of Black women in academia.

Am I My Sister’s Keeper?

In this study the presence of Black women at PWI’s was sparse. Specifically, the presence and interactions of Black female administrators and faculty were non-existent given there miniscule presence in the academy. Of the interactions with fellow Black female doctoral students, participants of this study described the interactions as spiteful and catty. For instance, Brandy (study participant, 2012) described the diluted and tortious relationships between Black female peers. She described the hidden agenda of what it really means to be a successful Black woman in society and the vindictive nature of having the invisible privilege of choice as to who
succeeds and who does not. Troubling, was her reflection of Black women outside of the academy stating, “I think that my relationship with the other Black females on campus are indicative of my relationship with Black females my whole life” (Brandy, student participant, 2012). This solidified the notion that Black women have a long history of internalized self-hate so engrained that we must first confront the underlying resentment within our community before we can foster a true sisterhood.

In the book, Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center, hooks (1984) affirmed the only way to foster a sisterhood is to confront racism:

Women of color must confront out absorption of White supremacist beliefs, “internalized racism,” which may lead us to feel self-hate, to vent anger and rage at injustice at one another rather than at oppressive forces, to hurt and abuse one another, or to lead one ethnic group to make no effort to communicate with another. Often women of color from varied ethnic groups have learned to resent and hate one another, or to be competitive with one another. (p.57)

The interactions of Black women in the academy, as described by the participants of this study, was a classic example of Black complicity subjugated by Eurocentric cultural norms apparent in US higher education. It was revealed, through the experiences of the participants of this study, that Black female doctoral students are less than supportive of one another. Being Black in a White space was equivalent to being an outsider–within (Collins, 2000). This analogy also holds true to being an outsider-within when you have not been accepted into the secret society of Black sisterhood. Terri shared her experiences in which she distanced herself in order to combat the negativity of the competitive environment:

Experiences with other Black female graduate students it’s very – I’ve got to get mine; I’m not trying to help you. You know, I’m doing catty stuff; I’m talking about you behind your back. I don’t really like you. It’s very cliquish. I don’t like her. Let’s not include her in the circle. Oh, she don’t want to come be in our circle. It’s sad, it makes me sad. I try not to participate. It makes me not want to collaborate and interact and work with them because of all the foolish negativity, such as, “I don’t like her because of this, or I don’t like her because of that,” or as my mama would say, “Throwing slams.” You know,
sneaking in little snide remarks about this person or that person when they’re not around, but when they are around. I don’t do that… I wish it could be a stronger Black female cohort.

The findings from the study conducted by LeSavoy (2010) revealed that the public/private divides are necessary and beneficial in helping to avoid undermining relationships that may hinder degree completion. Subsequently the competitive environment, as described by the participants of this study, created a system of toxicity that Black female students, like Terri, chose to segregate away from. This was proven to be beneficial as the prospects of degree completion was deemed to be more important than socialization.

**Show Me the Way!**

Ironically, none of the study participants were actively engaged in a mentoring relationship on the doctoral level, citing a deficiency of Black women on at PWI’s. When asked what qualities they desired in a mentor, honesty, loyalty, and trustworthiness were common characteristics sought among all participants. The structure within mentoring relationships was a defining characteristic for several of the participants in this study. For instance, mentors were expected to be transparent as expressed by Keisha (study participant, 2012) in which she declared that mentors must be “somebody who’s going to give you access to the hidden curriculum, you know, tell you the stuff that other people won’t tell you.” In terms of this study, mentors serve as an invisible roadmap, through guidance, that first-generation Black female doctoral students desperately need to successfully maneuver within the walls of the academy but are often denied of such opportunities.

Along with being transparent, mentors must also be willing to offer sound advice through positive reinforcements and critiques as outlined by Trina (study participant, 2012):

A mentor is someone that is, when I say honest, honest in the sense that they’re going to constructively tell you what you’re deficiencies are and then upon identifying what your
deficiencies are suggesting to you what it is that you need do to, to strengthen those deficiencies. Because it’s not enough to tell you how great you are. You also have to be able to give me the contrast of what my areas of weakness are so that I can actually come to a balance on both sides of the scale.

Being mentored is important because it equips you with the proper techniques to be able to mentor someone else. In addition to transparency, mentors must have prior experiences with being mentored themselves as personal experiences provide the best examples as to what qualities makeup a good mentor and which qualities hinder success. This also creates a generation of Black scholars in which Trina (study participant, 2012) explained her adoration for a devoted mentor:

They see you, they acknowledge your scholarship first and foremost…They invest in you. They take the time to get to know you as a person and they take the time to get to know you as a scholar and they invite you into their space. And by inviting you into their space they’re acknowledging that there is something that they want to take the time to get to know…it shows me that this is not something that they take very lightly. That when they bring you in, the commitment is going to be there for a lifetime.

Lost in translation, is the essence that doctoral students automatically know the necessary skills to write and perform independent research. Having a devoted, trustworthy mentor is crucial to building a foundation of independency. Doctoral students, specifically first-generation Black female doctoral students, are in desperate need of guidance. They seek someone that’s invested in building lasting relationships, will get to know them on an individual/personable level, and will instill graduate level writing techniques while offering advice at each step of the way. First-generation Black female doctoral students are often viewed as misinformed as they tend to ask questions more frequently which can cause them to feel disengaged if they feel they are seeking answers but are not receiving sufficient and timely feedback. This can lead to feeling of rejection with further alienates the status of first-generation Black female doctoral students in the academy.
Like Mother, Like Daughter

Participants in this study perceived mentoring by Black women as an important aspect for career growth. However, the masculine class structure of the academy stagnates the progression of Black women which is further compounded by the lack of cohesiveness and solidarity (hooks, 1984) between Black women. History taught us that there was an undeniable bond between Black women as they fought for equality. Today, the academy has become so cutthroat that Black women are willing to step over each other instead of helping one another as expressed by Brandy (study participant, 2012) description of exclusivity:

It’s so hard because a lot of women do have that mentality that there’s only room for one and I’m that one and you can’t get here…sometimes I found with women, they’ll tell you stuff to keep you away, to keep you in that position.

To further compound the complexities of race and gender as it relates mentorship are the experiences between Black women. It was revealed that all Black women, characterized by the participants of this study, were willing to offer assistance. However, it was up to the individual person to decipher what impact, if any, the amount of assistance had on their overall success. For example, Keisha (study participant, 2012) expressed that a good Black woman may be willing to support you but may lack of clout and position of power. Brandy (study participant, 2012) compared the quality of mentoring experiences between two Black women. On one occasion, Brandy (study participant, 2012) described an experience in which she felt she did not get everything that she needed and that the mentor was purposely withholding key information:

I’ve come in contact with a few Black women, who were in high powered positions, that I got nothing from them. They didn’t tell me anything about being a good person, about being a leader, about being nothing. They showed me how to wear a nice suit, how to always have your hair done, and how to be in front of people. But I never got anything about how they got there, why they got there, do they even enjoy being there.
This experience exemplified the hidden system of opposition amongst Black women who appear to offer support on the outside but in actuality, only offer superficial advice for fears that they may one day be replaced. In contrast, Brandy recounts on a mentoring relationship that she classified as reflexive:

She gave me a lot of stuff about being a good person, a good leader, a good coworker, being a good colleague, and what books to read. She was the one that told me you should always be reading three books: the personal development, the professional development, and then something for fun. To me that went beyond like how to be good executive director and this is the kind of sit you should wear.

Even though the interactions between Black women were met with enmity, participants of this study still sought to be mentored by someone who mirrored their image (Patton & Harper, 2003) as unequivocally expressed by Keisha (study participant, 2012):

I think you can find good mentors within any race, any gender, but there is a bond between sisters that nobody else can understand, and there are experiences that we have that other people don’t experience, and provided that they can offer all the same qualities as somebody else, it is definitely an asset to have a sister for a mentor.

Trina (study participant, 2012), related mentoring to that of motherhood stating that in each relationship you need guidance. Therefore, mentoring by someone who looks like you adds the dimension of relatedness, understandability, and trustworthiness.

In addition, many participants noted that positions of power were typically held by White men which revealed how the intersections of race and gender was irradiated as an “old boy network” (Trina, study participant, 2012) which denies Black female access to mentors. Terri (study participant, 2012) goes on to discuss the gender disparities in the workforce stating that, “everything is so saturated with patriarchy and powerful men…even if a man doesn’t have the degrees that I have, it’s more likely that he would get the job.” Natasha (study participant, 2012) revealed similar perceptions stating that, “it’s still very apparent that the more assertive women still get stereotyped as having an attitude problem and not great to work with… the same stuff
can come out of the man’s mouth and he doesn’t get labeled at all.” This harsh reality sanctioned the need for mentoring amongst women and further justified the need for mentoring between Black women. The results of these findings illustrated the significance of mentoring, the significance that Black women are unique individuals and require specialized guidance, as well as the necessity that mentoring has on career and personal development opportunities.

**It is Just Me, Myself, and I**

The most common phrases expressed throughout this study were the inability of having someone to talk to and a lack of understanding which left the participants of this study to feel alienated as if they were living in exile. Ballard (1973) wrote:

> This theme of alienation among Blacks who had the singular chance to attend White institutions persisted in the pre-World War I and pre-World War II periods. Many seemed to feel themselves in four-year exile in a strange and alien White world which cut them off from their roots. (p. 5)

First-generation doctoral students in this study often felt as if they were intellectually delayed as a result of their social class structure. Trina (study participant, 2012) recounted in a story in which she felt she had to play catch up because certain gained knowledge was elusive to her particular background.

When people come from certain backgrounds there are things that they’re privileged to that they may hear at home as somebody that’s the first generation would not know how to say or do or behave. There’s just certain things that are established in a kid that comes from an established educated background than a kid that doesn’t. And those are things that you can’t be taught. You stumble over yourself and learn as you go. So it is a barrier because there are certain conversations that I think sometimes are more challenging and I do have to do extra homework and go back like certain terms or certain stories may be told that nobody told me that story when I was at my house. For example, in class one of my professors asked why did we call the former president Teddy? Where did that story come from? And I was talking about the bear culture. I didn’t know that it was because of some hunting expedition or something. I didn’t know that. It’s kind of like that, but they knew. The privileged knew, but I didn’t know.
Being a first-generation doctoral student presents invisible barriers as expressed by Lisa (study participant, 2012), “I didn’t have people telling me this is what you need to do and this is what we did.” Not knowing the correct path or receiving adequate guidance caused confusion and frustration for the participants of this study. Amber (study participant, 2012) expressed how disparate our experiences and existence are in the academy which perils the reality that most outsiders do not fully understand the complexities of being a first-generation Black female doctoral student:

Being a first-generation student and not having anybody to (except for a few of my classmates who were also first-gen from a low SES background as well) to not have anybody to talk to about what that feels like and also your family not understanding this world that you’re in. Because even my friends of color, a lot of them were from middle class or upper middle class families whose parents were nurses doctors, lawyers, they came from a middle class background….they weren’t first-generation so I didn’t feel like I could relate in that sense and be able to talk about the process and understanding the world of the Ph.D. so I think that was probably the biggest challenge and it still is a challenge now being a tenured track professor. I don’t think I will never not feel that I’m a Black person that comes from a single parent home will never go away. That feeling of self-consciousness will never go away. And I don’t know why…it’s imbedded in me. It will never go away ever. That feeling that you’re not doing the right thing, you’re not navigating the system the right way, that somebody knows some bit of information that you don’t know…that feeling will never go away. I think for me, that was the hardest part of the process.

A never ending sense of uncertainty created a system of self-doubt that followed Amber throughout her degree completion and professoriate career. This reality highlights the perils that when denied mentoring, first-generation doctoral students are plagued with the terminal illness of self-doubt throughout their everyday lives and careers.

Furthermore, a common annoyance expressed by the participants of this study was the fact that a lack of understanding caused constant repetition of information when communicating with family and friends. For instance, Natasha (study participant, 2012) expressed how she was annoyed at the fact that she felt ignored:
Nobody understands the program...nobody understands how long it’s going to take. When I walk to my friends they would all say how long is this going to take like a year? I keep telling them no. Even my best friend, I told her about seventeen hundred times…I’ve been saying the same thing, it’s not like I’ve changed it it’s been the same. It’s very annoying to have to keep explaining this to my family...it’s annoying answering the same questions over and over and over again because nobody understands what this is...even though they’re supportive, it gets frustrating because I feel like nobody is listening to me when I explained it the first time.

Repetition led to the participants of this study feeling as if they did not have anyone to talk to (Amber, Brandy, Lisa, and Natasha, study participants, 2012). To further compound the feeling of alienation was the fact that first-generation Black female doctoral students were often left to their own devices. There was an erroneous assumption that because first-generation doctoral students have completed a Master’s degree, they automatically know how to successfully navigate the course of a doctoral program. First-generation Black female doctoral students need additional assistance in order to navigate successfully. We do not need to be spoon fed, but rather be encouraged to speak freely, think critically without judgment, and accepted as individuals in a space that was not created for us. Our struggles are real and often times overlooked.

**Descriptions**

The final step in Moustaka’s data analysis is to “Construct for each research participant a Textural-Structural Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes” (p.121). The six themes presented in this study were: Parents Just Do Not Understand, Can You See Me Now?, Am I My Sister’s Keeper?, Show Me the Way!, Like Mother, Like Daughter, and It is Just Me, Myself, and I. Because of the uniqueness of experiences, a Thematic Textural-Structural Composite (Table 4.2) was constructed to highlight the barriers and experiences of living in two worlds-one of their upbringing and that of the academy.
Table 4.2 Barriers of being a first-generation Black female doctoral student

| Barriers of first-generation Black females doctoral students living in two worlds |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| **Home**                        | **Academia**                    |
| Environment: Supportive         | Environment: Non-supportive     |
| Pressure of being first         | Pressure of catching up         |
| Communication discourse (explaining the process) | Communication discourse (interacting with White males) |
| On public display               | Oppressionally Invisible        |
| Process is invisible            | Process is invisible            |
| Questions of understanding      | Questions of clarity            |

Although all participants of this study believed that mentoring was an important concept, none reported being able to find a suitable mentor during the doctoral degree process. Furthermore, participants stated they did not know the proper protocol to finding and selecting a mentor which proved problematic as feeling of isolation, self-doubt, and uncertainty were prevalent throughout all interviews. Table 4.1 depicts the perils that first-generation Black female doctoral students face while living in multiple worlds. As it relates to interactions at home, first-generation Black female doctoral students often came from a supportive environment. However, support was often limited as there’s a lack of understanding of what it means to be a doctoral student and a lack of means to offer financial assistance. This supportive environment is negated once first-generation Black female doctoral students enter into the academy. There, they lack financial stability, guidance, and solidarity which is further compounded by the negative interactions between fellow Black students, faculty, and
administrators. As discussed in the findings, Black female graduate schools are less than supportive of one another. They are eager to move up the career ladder but are not willing to assist others along the way. This is problematic as first-generation Black female doctoral students still have a dismal presence at PWI’s and first-generation Black female doctoral students are even meager.

Because first-generation Black female doctoral students are the first in their family to take on the immense task of completing a doctoral degree program, it is compounded by the realities that once they enter into the academy they are academically inferior to their counterparts. Additionally, there was a communication disconnect as first-generation Black female doctoral students were often plagued with the challenge of constantly explaining the process of doctoral program which is compounded in the academy by constantly being put on public display as expressed in the stories of Brandy and Lisa (study participants, 2012). Unfortunately, a lot of the characteristics in Table 4.1 overlap creating hidden barriers that their counterparts are unable to relate to. As a result, recommendations are made to help assist first-generation Black female doctoral students persist to degree completion and is outlined in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND FINDINGS

Discussion

You’re walking a rough road…but who’s going to tell our story if we don’t? (Lisa, study participant, 2012)

Doctoral students begin the learning process of how to navigate the world of academia through academic experience. The path from beginning a doctoral program to degree completion has been confusing for most first-generation Black female doctoral students who participated in this study, as it was for me, the researcher/author. Therefore, mentorships are vital to the retention and success of first-generation Black female doctoral students in the academy. It is evident that newly entering first-generation Black female doctoral students need a wealth of support to combat overwhelming feelings of inadequacies. Therefore, exposure to greater research opportunities, information, and mentoring has the potential to increase the number of first-generation Black female doctoral students. Lunceford (2011) shared his implication for the need of guidance for first-generation graduate students:

Graduate school is a difficult experience that is often compounded when the student comes from a family uninformed concerning the intricacies of graduate education. First-generation graduate students may not know where to get the information that will help them succeed and processes that faculty take for granted can seem an impenetrable maze to students. As we help FGS make the transition to college, faculty must recognize that for many of them an undergraduate degree is only the beginning of their experience in academia. With appropriate guidance, it is likely that many of them may become not only our students, but our future colleagues as well. (p. 19)

The experiences of the first-generation Black female doctoral students of this study, were indicative of their intersecting identities (Black, female, and students) compounded by invisible barriers associated with being first-generation. Barriers plagued by this specific group included limited financial support, unrealistic expectations shrouded by family pressures, lack of guidance, and a sense of uncertainty.
Findings suggested that the first-generation Black female doctoral students of this study did not receive adequate support and tended to ask questions more frequently than their White counterparts. This perception gave the false notion that first-generation Black female doctoral students were uneducated, needed to be coddled, or were simply in over their heads. In reality, the first-generation Black female doctoral students of this study, were left to figure out the intricacies of how college worked which led to a constant need of affirmation through questioning.

Although most first-generation Black female doctoral students in this study sought support within their cohorts, faculty, staff, and administrators should take an active role in empowering the next generation of scholars. It will not only benefit the next generation, but the reciprocal nature allows for continuous learning on both sides of the spectrum. Mentoring is not a hierarchical concept and should be viewed as a form of uplift and support to strengthen identifiable weaknesses. Additionally, in the same way that teaching should be differenced, mentoring is not a one-size-fits-all model and should be personalized to fit the needs of each unique individual.

The participants of this study shared several characteristics and definitions of a mentor. The overall need to have a mentor was clearly articulated by the participants as a whole. They recognized the importance of mentoring, particularly for first-generation Black female doctoral students. It is important to note, mentoring is different from advising in the academic sense. For the purposes of this study, the following definition, gleaned from the experiences of the study participants is offered: Mentoring is a one-on-one, personalized, reflexive relationship where the mentor invests time and themselves into your overall success. Mentors provide knowledge, advice, challenge thought, and serve as a system of support. While mentors invite you into their
space, it is imperative that the mentee be willing, open, and ready to enter into a mentoring relationship. A successful mentoring relationship is one of shared assumptions and expectations.

Moreover, when seeking out mentors, the participants of this study identified the following characteristics of a mentor: a mentor must be respectful, willing and able to provide guidance, down to earth, humble, consist, honest, powerful, engaging, have integrity, genuine, caring, and considerate. Although more Black women were present in the academy today than in previous decades, findings revealed the racial climate of the university is still dominated by a White male patriarchal class structure that denies the importance and validation of Black women and their presence and experiences in the academy.

**Implications**

When considering the statistics presented in Chapter 1 and briefly reviewed here, issues surrounding the success of Black female graduate students warrant careful attention. In 2010, there were a total of 1,824,900 White students enrolled at degree-granting institutions compared to just 362,300 Black students, a differential of 1,462,600. Of the total number of students, 1,080,000 were White females and 256,000 were Black females, a differential of 824,000 female students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, p. 331). These statistics point to the realization that although Black female enrollment continue to strive positive, they are still severely underrepresented in institutions of higher education. Unless concentrated efforts are made to address the disparity in enrollment, little will change. Given the findings of this study, providing strategic mentoring structure would be one way to address enrollment disparities.

**Recommendations**

Based on the information gathered through an extensive review of literature on mentoring, Black women, and first-generation students, as well as the lived experiences of the
study participants, six areas of improvements (themes) were identified to improve the experiences of first-generation Black female doctoral students. The six areas are presented here.

**Recommendation I: Parents Just Do Not Understand**

First-generation Black female doctoral students of this study were disadvantaged when entering the walls of the academy—given their family unit and class structure. Although family offered an overwhelming array of emotional support, financial support and guidance are needed to aid first-generation Black female doctoral students throughout their academic journey. Information regarding financial opportunities (e.g., scholarships, grants, fellowships, and assistantships) should be easily accessible. Seminars should be developed to assist students in writing proposals and grant applications and should address issues of adjusting to the expectations of a Ph.D. program. Additionally, seminars on effective communication inside and outside of the academy should be developed. Lastly, faculty should assist students in creating reasonable timelines that include conference proposals/presentations and academic calendar requirements.

**Recommendation II: Can You See Me Now?**

Colleges and universities need to be held higher accountability standards when issues of race and gender are brought to the forefront. Although the study participants did not see their experiences as overtly discriminatory, the blatant disrespect placed upon them based on their intersecting identity was reprehensible in the twenty-first century. Therefore, it is indicative that programs be held to the standard of accountability by creating a diverse and inclusive environment. Specifically, faculty should be required to implement yearly performance plans that identify a plan of action to eliminate racialized barriers. To ensure university wide accountability, each department should be required to implement training initiatives that focus on
diversity and inclusion. This will ensure that students have a safe place to share their experiences without fear of reprisal.

**Recommendation III: Am I My Sister’s Keeper?**

Colleges and universities should reevaluate their recruiting strategies when attempting to increase the representation of Black women. Incentives, such as financial support for programs that cater to increasing the percentage of Black women on campus, should be implemented. Additionally, building a system of support (through collaborations that make institution specific resources available to a greater audience such as programs that highlight keynote speakers, job announcements, and a master listing of current students with their research interest) with surrounding colleges and universities will create a greater sense of community and foster collaborative networking opportunities. In order to accomplish these tasks, university administrators should conduct and analyze data on the current status of diversity and inclusion on the departmental and institutional level. Once data analysis is complete, all invested stakeholders should implement a strategic plan that addresses key findings.

**Recommendation IV: Show Me the Way!**

The most direct method for improving mentoring relationships is to provide development opportunities focused on mentoring. Through the creation of workshops, the concept of mentoring becomes the focal point for success in the academy. The mentor/mentee process should be encouraged and actively sought out by both parties. As a result, departments should become actively involved in mentoring programs. It should be expected that faculty, staff, and administrators have a vested interest in mentoring an equal playing field and should be immersed in the literature of the benefits of mentoring and how to successfully nurture mentor relationships.
Based on my experiences, and reviewing the conversations of the participants of this study, the following guideline was developed to assist in the mentor process:

1. Look for people whom you would like to emulate: role models can be a good starting point when searching out a mentor.

2. Once you’ve found a suitable person of interest, learn about her interests: if your personal agenda and research interests do not align, maybe she’s not the best fit to serve as a mentor during the research process. Since mentoring is has multifaceted layers, she can still offer moral support, career development, and collegiate experience, just to name a few.

3. Establish parameters: in order for the mentoring relationship to be successful, one must first establish guidelines, rules of engagement, and set agendas. Know what it is that you are seeking in a mentor rather it be professional development, career development, or simply moral support.

4. Ask questions: Do not be afraid to ask questions but always be prepared with a possible answer to the solution.

**Recommendation V: Like Mother, Like Daughter**

In most career fields, mentoring was seen as a form of career development. For most women, opportunities for career advancement were scarce. Mentoring programs should address topics such as mock interviews, preparing your curriculum vita/resume, and improving presentation skills. Additionally, these career advancement opportunities should be uniquely tailored to doctoral students and should not coincide with University Career Services, as their services typically cater to the undergraduate population. In order to accomplish this goal,
university administrators should implement quarterly workshops that cater to career development.

**Recommendation VI: It is Just Me, Myself, and I**

Colleges and universities should implement strategies to effectively capture data on its student population beyond the baccalaureate degree. Creating a student focused peer can build a community of support with likeminded individuals. In order to accomplish this task, graduate student associations should be reevaluated for efficiency. Specifically, Black graduate student associations should focus more on the specific needs of graduate and doctoral students.

**Conclusion**

Mentoring relationships are dismal on the doctoral level. Most participants stated they were being mentored through previously established mentoring relationships. Participants acknowledged that, given the scarcity of available Black female faculty and administrators, most found solace in informal mentoring relationships through co-workers and colleagues. It is imperative that program directors and administrators review the recommendations of increasing participation rates in mentoring programs, the employment rates of Black faculty and staff, and the enrollment rates of first-generation Black female doctoral students.

The culture of the environment, in which these relationships would develop, is fraught with limitations, stereotypes, and preconceived notions. Black women are underrepresented in all aspects of the academy. First-generation Black female doctoral students, in particular, experienced issues of isolation, self-doubt, and discrimination based on their intersecting identity and presence in the academy. What was shared by the study participants was that the mentoring relationships must be a mutual agreement. These interactions are vital to the success of first-generation Black female doctoral students at PWI’s. Since first-generation Black female doctoral
students lack the basic knowledge of relationship building, have limited resources and financial aid, and are often ostracized, mentors are needed to break down barriers and offer affirmation.

Because most insiders in the academy cannot relate to the barriers that plague first-generation Black female doctoral students, a strategic approach to mentoring must be carefully developed and implemented. A clear set of goals and expectations should be agreed upon by both the mentor and mentee. It is also imperative that any instances of criticism be dealt with in a private, one-on-one manner. In general, mentoring is beneficial for first-generation Black female doctoral student’s academic success given that mentors offer guidance, advice, and career development opportunities.

**Implications for future research**

Considering the limitations of this study (Chapter 3), one area of future research would include expanding the pool of research participants to include disciplines in STEM. There are also opportunities to further this study to focus on the following research participants:

1. First-generation Black males
2. First-generation administrators and faculty
3. Cross-race mentoring relationships
4. Cross-cultural mentoring relationships

Although I analyzed the data using a phenomenological method, I propose varying research strategies, theoretical frameworks, and methods in order to strengthen the data and increase knowledge in the literature. Theories to consider are Black feminism, Black feminist thought, and womanism. Additional methods to consider are oral histories, narratives, and quantitative analysis.
REFERENCES


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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.* New York, NY: Feminist.


APPENDIX A: LETTER OF INTENT

Subject: Please forward: doctoral study on first generation Black female doctoral students and mentorship

Hello,

My name is Takea Vickers, a doctoral candidate at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I am currently working on my dissertation and am looking for participants for my research. I am hoping you can forward this information to women you know who fit the criteria of the study. If they are interested, they can then contact me.

The purpose of my qualitative study is to examine the experiences of Black female first generation doctoral students to determine the effectiveness of mentorship on their collegiate experience.

I am looking for approximately 10 participants who meet the following criteria:

I am seeking women who are Black, first generation graduate students (never having a parent with an advanced degree) or first generation students (never having a parent with a degree beyond a high school diploma), currently majoring in the humanities or social sciences field (I am excluding all STEM fields for this study), current doctoral students or recent graduates at a Predominantly White Institution.

Selected participants in this study will take part in a semi-structured, audio taped interview that should last approximately 30-90 minutes. The interview will consist of questions that will elicit stories about their experiences as a graduate student.

Please have any interested participants email me at tvicke3@lsu.edu so that I may follow up with the consent form, research purpose and interview questions, and to schedule an interview.

Any information gathered throughout the study will be kept in the strictest confidence. Please forward this email to potential participants rather than responding to me with contact information. If you do not know anyone who fits the parameters of this study, please forward this email to someone you think might be of assistance in identifying potential participants.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Takea Vickers, Ph.D. Candidate
Louisiana State University
Department of Educational Theory, Policy, & Practice
Higher Education Administration
324 Peabody Hall · Baton Rouge, LA 70803
tvicke3@lsu.edu
### APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Study Title</strong></th>
<th>The Invisible Road Map: The Role of Mentoring for First-Generation Black Female Doctoral Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Performance Site:</strong></td>
<td>State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Investigators:</strong></td>
<td>The following investigator is available for questions about this study, Monday-Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.: T. Vickers, (405) 834-XXXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose of Study:</strong></td>
<td>I examine mentoring as a form of social support for first generation Black female doctoral students at a predominantly White institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subject Inclusion:</strong></td>
<td>First generation Black female doctoral students from predominantly White institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of subjects:</strong></td>
<td>5 doctoral students and 2 faculty members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study Procedures:</strong></td>
<td>Each individual will be interviewed about her experience with mentoring. Each interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Interviews will be tape recorded for further analysis; but will be destroyed upon the completion of the project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benefits:</strong></td>
<td>This study will address the needs and concerns of current first generation Black female doctoral students in hopes that it will provide a roadmap for future scholars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Risks:</strong></td>
<td>Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of my study records. Files will be kept in a secure locked file to which only the investigator has access. Because of the nature of all work, some participants may describe activities with which they could be identified. In order to minimize this risk, each participant will be assigned a pseudonym.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Right to Refuse:</strong></td>
<td>Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Privacy:</strong></td>
<td>Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Signature:</strong></td>
<td>The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects’ rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Institutional Review Board, and (225) 578-8692. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Signature _______________ Date _______________
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS PROTOCOL

I will begin with some basic background questions and then ask you questions regarding your collegiate experience with your mentor(s). Please remember that there are no wrong or right answers. You will have the option to skip a question or stop this interview at any time. Do you have any questions? We will begin the interview.

Background Questions:

1. Can you state your age, department, and the number of years you were enrolled in your doctoral program?
2. First generation students are typically classified as those who parents do not have a degree beyond a high school diploma. First generation graduate students are classified as those who parents have an associate’s or bachelor’s degree. Lastly, first generation doctoral students are those who parents have earned a master’s degree or equivalent. How do you classify yourself and why?
3. Where you married or single before you started graduate school?
   a. If married, does your spouse provide you with adequate support?
   b. If single, did you begin a relationship during your graduate career?
4. How was the fact that you are pursuing a Ph.D. viewed back home (between friends, family, colleagues)?
   a. (IE, the token child for your family)
   b. How has this put pressure on you, if any?
5. Did you leave your home institution, family, and friends in order to pursue a doctoral degree?
   a. How did that experience affect your well-being?
   b. How did it affect your social life?
6. Can you talk to me about why you chose to pursue a doctoral degree?
7. When you considered pursuing a doctoral degree, who encouraged you? Who discouraged you?
8. Why did you choose to attend a Predominantly White Institution?
   a. Did you attend a PWI during your master or undergraduate degree?
   b. What attracted you to your particular university and program?
   c. What was the racial and gender makeup of your department?
9. Who supports you?
   a. Has your department made you aware of funding that targets minority scholars?
10. Describe your experiences of being Black in a White space.
    a. Difficulties to speak and be heard without being labeled or stereotyped; tokenism; discrimination; racism.
    b. How would you describe the campus environment and/or culture towards you as a Black woman?
11. How well were you treated by the professors in your department?
a. What would have made your experience better in your degree program?

j. How would you describe your relationships with other Black women on campus? In your department? Black faculty administrators?
   a. (i.e., where they helpful in building a community of acceptance or was it a toxic relationship in terms of competition).

Mentorship

k. What is your definition of mentoring?

l. Do you think mentors are useful to women?
   a. Why or why not?

m. Did you have a mentor when you were in undergraduate or during your master’s career?
   a. How was that experience?
   b. Was it good or bad?

n. Where you able to find a mentor during your graduate career?
   a. How many mentors did you have?
   b. Is your mentor a male or female?
   c. How did you find this mentor?
   d. What role did this mentor play?

o. Was your mentor and advisor the same person?
   a. How would you describe your experience with your mentor outside of the classroom?

p. Where you paired with a mentor upon arriving to the university?
   a. If not, did you wish you had been and how would it have affected your overall well-being at the university?
   b. If yes, did you work well with your mentor?

q. Describe what a good mentor is to you.

r. What qualities did you seek in a mentor?
   a. Did race and gender impact your decision?

s. Has your mentor provided you with any mentoring that directly relates to job training?
   a. Does he/she encourage you to participate in conferences that will aid you in your future career?

t. Did you found a mentor via social media?
   a. Explain how that happened.
   b. How did that work for you?

u. In terms of mentoring, did you get the mentoring and support that you needed?
   a. What were your mentoring gaps?
      a. In which areas did you have enough support?
      b. In which areas did you need more support?
   b. What steps did you take to get that assistance?
      a. Did you know how to find a mentor?

Mentoring at Different Levels

v. During your academic career, did you consider leaving the university?

w. What was the greatest challenge that you faced while taking classes?
   a. How did you overcome this obstacle?
x. What was the greatest challenge you faced while participating in conferences?
   a. How did you overcome this obstacle?

y. What was the greatest challenge you faced during your general exam?
   a. How did you overcome this obstacle?

z. What was the greatest challenge you faced while writing your dissertation?
   a. How did you deal with this obstacle?

aa. What was the greatest challenge you faced upon degree completion?
   a. How did you deal with this obstacle?

bb. In general, how did you deal with negativity and/or adversity?

c. If you knew then, what you know now about the entire Ph.D. process, would you still have chosen that career path?

Needs beyond Mentorship

d. Aside from mentoring, what other form(s) of support or assistance did you feel you needed but were not getting?

e. How do you feel that being a first generation graduate student impacted your graduate career?
   a. Do you feel you had to overcome any limitations or obstacles since you were a first generation graduate student? Why or why not?

ff. What was the single biggest factor that helped you, as a Black female graduate student, complete your graduate degree?

g. Did you have someone to guide you into the next phase of your life?
   a. How did they guide you and why was it beneficial?

hh. Do you have any words of advice for future Black women scholars?

ii. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences of being a graduate student?
Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight

Unless qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research projects using living humans as subjects, or samples, or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This form helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.

Applicant: Please fill out the application in its entirety and include the completed application as well as parts A-E, listed below, when submitting to the IRB. Once the application is completed, please submit two copies of the completed application to the IRB Office or to a member of the Human Subjects Screening Committee. Members of this committee can be found at http://www.lsu.edu/screeningmembers.html

- A Complete Application includes all of the following:
  - (A) Two copies of this completed form and two copies of part B thru E.
  - (B) A brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts 1-6)
  - (C) Copies of all instruments to be used.
  - (D) If this proposal is part of a grant proposal, include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment material.
  - (E) Certificate of Completion of Human Subjects Protection Training for all personnel involved in the project, including students who are involved with testing, handling, data, unless already on file with the IRB Training link: http://phrp.nlm.nih.gov/users/login.php.

1) Principal Investigator:
   Name: Takesha Vickers
   Rank: Doctoral Candidate
   Dept: ETPP - School of Ed
   Ph: 305-834-7137
   E-mail: tvickes@lsu.edu

2) Co-investigator(s): Please include department, rank, phone, and e-mail for each.
   Dr. Kristanna Machmets, Associate Professor
   School of Human Resource Education and Workforce Development
   machmets@lsu.edu
   225-578-7844

3) Project Title: The invisible Roadmap: The Role Mentoring for 1st Generation Black Female Doctoral Student and Graduate

4) Proposal (yes or no): NO
   If yes, LSU Proposal Number:
   Also, if YES, either
   - [ ] This application completely matches the scope of work in the grant
   - [X] More IRB Applications will be filed later

5) Subject pool (e.g., psychology students):
   Black Female Doctoral Students and Recent Black Female PhD Grad
   "Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children 18, the mentally impaired, pregnant women, the ages, other). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.

6) PI Signature: Takesha Vickers
   Date: 12/04/11

Exemption Expiration: 12/31/2014

Review: Exempted

Signature

Date: 12/31/11

Screening Committee Action: Exempted

Reviewer: Mathews

Signature

Date: 12/31/11
This consent form will be read to all participants -- by orally agreeing to participate in the survey, the participants will have given consent to participate in this research. Each participant will be emailed a copy of this oral consent form prior to the interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Title:</th>
<th>The Invisible Road Map: The Role of Mentoring for First Generation Black Female Doctoral Students.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performance Site:</td>
<td>State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigators:</td>
<td>The following investigator is available for questions about this study, Monday-Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.; T. Vickers, (405) 834-7137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Study:</td>
<td>I examine mentoring as a form of social support for first generation Black female doctoral students at a predominantly White institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Inclusion:</td>
<td>First generation Black female doctoral students from predominantly White institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of subjects:</td>
<td>7 doctoral students and 3 faculty members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Procedures:</td>
<td>Each individual will be interviewed about her experience with mentoring. Each interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Interviews will be tape recorded for further analysis, but will be destroyed upon the completion of the project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits:</td>
<td>This study will address the needs and concerns of current first generation Black female doctoral students in hopes that it will provide a roadmap for future scholars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risks:</td>
<td>Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of my study records. Files will be kept in a secure locked file to which only the investigator has access. Because of the nature of all work, some participants may describe activities with which they could be identified. In order to minimize this risk, each participant will be assigned a pseudonym.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right to Refuse:</td>
<td>Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy:</td>
<td>Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signature:</td>
<td>The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Institutional Review Board, and (225) 578-8692. I agree to participate in the study described.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
VITA

Takea Antoinette Vickers is a native of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. She attended the University of Oklahoma, where she earned a Bachelor of Art in 2006 and a Master of Education in 2008. Takea began interning for the federal government during the summer of 2010. Currently located in Washington, DC, Takea plans to continue her career with the federal government upon degree completion.