

2020

## Double Jeopardy: African American Women and the Counselor Education and Supervision Dissertation

Beverly Lee Townsend  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Counselor Education & Supervision

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Beverly Townsend

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Walden University  
2020

Abstract

Double Jeopardy: African American Women and the Counselor Education and  
Supervision Dissertation

by

Beverly Townsend

MS, Walden University, 2013

BA, University of Hawaii, 2007

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

November 2020

## Abstract

Half of all doctoral students do not graduate, with attrition occurring because of the dissertation process. Outcomes for women and minorities are even worse. This study is an interpretive phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of African American women working on their dissertation for a counselor education and supervision (CES) doctoral program. This study was guided by Flynn et al.'s emergent theory of the initiation, management, and completion of the dissertation, which highlights 6 themes important to successful completion of the dissertation in CES programs. Though the theory was originally applied to a largely White and Midwestern sample, this study addressed the lived experience of African American women in CES doctoral programs to see if the themes aligned with the experiences of these women. The most significant divergence of the experiences with the 7 interviewed African American women was the centrality of race to their experience. The other primary themes that emerged were the importance of individual traits, personal relationships, and environmental challenges to their experience. Based on the results, efforts should be made to improve the cultural competence of faculty, strengthen cohort networks, and increase support for African American women in CES doctoral programs. Unless efforts are made to understand the experiences of African American women and address higher doctoral attrition, institutions of higher education and society risk failing these women who make up nearly a third of all CES students. Findings may promote positive social change by program administrators to improve the doctoral experience of African American women.

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## Dedication

This work is dedicated to the seven women who shared their experiences with me and to under-represented minorities within the academic system at every level in my hope that this scholarship will contribute to building a more equal system where the outcome is not affected by the color of a student's skin.

## Acknowledgments

I am forever grateful for the guidance and mentorship of Dr. Katarzyna People and Dr. Arden Gale. Their insight and expertise, along with the advice of Dr. Laura Haddock, have made this work of scholarship better for their input. I am fortunate that Walden University employs such intelligent and capable women to guide scholars through this important gateway.

I would like to thank my participants for their willingness to share their experiences with me to help us to better understand the challenges of African American women in CES doctoral programs.

I would also like to thank my husband, Christopher, and children, Rebecca and Christopher II, for their support throughout this journey.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In 2017, 79,738 students completed their doctoral programs by writing a dissertation and earning a doctorate degree (National Science Foundation, 2018). That same year, 149,621 new doctoral students joined the 1.3 million current doctoral students in pursuit of a PhD. However, statistics show that fewer than half of them will complete their programs and earn a doctoral degree (Council of Graduate Schools, 2017; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). For women and minorities, this rate is even less. Women are 16% less likely to complete their doctoral programs than men, and minorities are 28% less likely to finish a doctoral program than Whites (Ampaw & Jergen, 2012). Though women make up 50% of total university students in the West, only 25%-45% of those women go on to pursue a PhD (Carter et al., 2012). Further, African Americans earn only 6.5% of doctorates regardless of specialty, and Hispanics only earn 7% of doctorates nationwide, with math and computer science doctorate earners even lower at 3.2% and 4.5% respectively (Patel, 2017). In fact, the National Science Foundation (2018) found that in 2017 there were a dozen fields that did not award a single doctorate to an African American student.

Although there was no attrition data identified that was specific to counselor education and supervision (CES) programs, the field most likely faces the same attrition challenges (Burkholder, 2012). The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) stopped reporting ethnic and gender demographics in their 2017 report, but previous reports from 2012-2018 showed that doctoral enrollment for counseling and counseling-related programs were consistently over 75% female and

around 20% African American. Additionally, Walden University noted in its 2017 graduate student demographics that 76.7% of its graduate students were women, and 38.7% of graduate students identified as Black. Despite these statistics, Walden University (2018) recently reported that only 12% of its CES doctoral students were able to complete a doctorate in the allotted time. This represents a decline of 3% below the results reported by Walden University for this program in 2017 (Walden University, 2017)

In this chapter, I will cover some background research on the problem as identified by other studies that have approached the problem of doctoral attrition through a variety of lenses and methods. The theoretical foundation for this study is also discussed briefly, with a much more expansive review to follow in Chapter 2. The nature of the study is also discussed in detail to understand the evolution of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and its appropriateness to pursue the problem, purpose, and research questions for this study. Further, the problem statement, purpose, significance, and research questions are discussed, as are limitations, delimitations, assumptions and definitions critical to these factors.

### **Background**

A variety of theoretical approaches have been used to explore the phenomenon of doctoral experiences as it relates to completion, attrition, and the significant factors that influence the experience. For example, Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) used human capital theory to study the cost-benefit calculation that students make with regard to decisions on doctoral persistence across 10 years and 2,068 doctoral students. Additionally, Baker and

Moore (2015) as well as Henfield et al. (2013) used critical race theory to examine the experience of African Americans, Hispanics, and other racial/ethnic minorities in doctoral programs, especially as it relates to retention. Further, Shavers and Moore (2014) used Black feminist thought and studied the lived experience of African American doctoral students and the role of that experience in shaping persistence and well-being in doctoral programs. The most common theoretical lens found in the literature was self-efficacy as described in Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory (Burkard et al., 2014; Dortch, 2016; Gomez, 2013; Kelley & Salisbury, 2016; Lamar & Helm, 2017; Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011; Locke & Boyle, 2016; Olive, 2014; Ponton, 2014; Rockinson et al., 2016; Rovai, 2014). However, I was unable to identify any studies on the experiences of African American Women in CES doctoral programs through the lens of Flynn et al.'s (2012) emergent theory.

### **Problem Statement**

The one-third of U.S. CES doctoral students who are both female and identify as a minority (CACREP, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016) represent a population at higher risk for non-completion when compared to males and Whites (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). Since 2012, women have represented around 70% of students in CACREP-accredited doctoral programs, and minorities have represented around 40% of the CACREP-accredited doctoral student population, with minority females representing nearly a third of all doctoral students and African Americans a fifth of all students in CACREP programs. The percentages of minorities and females in CACREP-accredited CES programs were stable through 2017, though the overall population of students in these programs

increased by nearly 25%, indicating that number of minorities and females in CES programs is rising.

Despite the increase in enrollment, attrition in doctoral programs leaves students and schools worse off financially and, in some cases, personally (Carter et al., 2012). Students who complete doctoral coursework but not their dissertation are typically labeled as “All But Dissertation” (ABD; Flynn et al., 2012). Though all doctoral students in programs that require a dissertation are in an ABD status late in their programs, attrition can make this state permanent. This label and status can leave students feeling incomplete and unwilling or unable to complete their degree (McAloon, 2004). With 25% of doctoral program attrition occurring during the dissertation process across all doctoral programs in the United States, the dissertation represents the greatest single stumbling block to degree completion (Burkard et al., 2014). African American students experience higher isolation and marginalization throughout their education programs (McCoy, 2018). Though women earned more doctoral degrees than men in 2017, minority women attrition continues to be higher than that of White women or males (Abukar et al., 2018). African American women in doctoral programs are also the most vulnerable to the inequality that exists at American universities, regardless of program (Pope & Edwards, 2016). Therefore, this study is important to understand the experiences of these women as they complete this important final hurdle.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program. The dissertation is

a major life experience that “requires an extraordinary amount of personal responsibility, commitment, time, cognitive effort, and motivation” (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016, p. 87). With such an investment in time and resources from the individual and the academic institution, not completing a dissertation represents a significant waste (Carter et al., 2012). In this study I evaluated whether Flynn et al.’s (2012) emergent theory of the initiation, management, and completion of the dissertation aligned with the experiences of African American women. Flynn et al. proposed that mostly positive competing influences and mostly negative barriers to completion played an important role in successful completion of the dissertation, but a major limitation is that their study was largely focused on Whites from Midwestern schools who completed dissertations. Through an IPA of the experiences of women in the CES dissertation process who identify as African American, I sought to understand how these women experienced Flynn et al.’s barriers and influences as they work toward completing their CES dissertations. The identification of common barriers and influences would allow targeted efforts by supervisors and dissertation committee members to create a more positive experience that may improve outcomes, decrease withdrawals, and strengthen the scholar identity of those currently working on dissertations through the application of programs, resources, and understanding (Flynn et al., 2012). Focusing on women who identify as African American currently working on CES dissertations also fills a gap in the current research by exploring the relevance of Flynn et al.’s theory to this population.

### **Research Questions**

There are two research questions that guided this phenomenological study:



Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of African American women in CES programs who are currently working on their dissertation?

Research Question 2: How do African American females experience Flynn et al.'s (2012) competing influences and barriers to completion, if any, while working on their dissertation in a CES doctoral program?

Though the first question allowed for the full potential of experiences, the second focused on the theoretical foundation of the study as it relates to the two domains identified by Flynn et al. (2012) as relevant to doctoral completion across all three of the factors they identified. A brief review of Flynn et al.'s work appears in this chapter with a more thorough review in Chapter 2.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

This study involved IPA based on hermeneutic phenomenology with Flynn et al.'s (2012) emergent theory as a theoretical lens to explore the lived experiences of African American women CES doctoral students. Flynn et al. proposed a theory of how counselor education doctoral scholars experience the dissertation process, focused on internal, professional, and relational factors across six domains. In their analysis, Flynn et al. found that the two domains present in all three factors are barriers to completion, which impede the process, and competing influences, which are mostly positive. Though their study illuminated some of these barriers and influences facing counselor and education doctoral students in the dissertation process, it did not address how these two factors are experienced by African American females in the CES dissertation process. An understanding of if and how African American females writing CES dissertations

experience these barriers and influences can allow counselor educators and counselor supervisors to better capitalize on positive influences and address barriers to completion in this population that is still actively engaged in the dissertation process. By expanding the research to a full IPA of the experiences of several African American women currently in the dissertation phase of their CES doctoral programs through the lens of Flynn et al.'s emergent theory, this dissertation may contribute to expanding the understanding of the experience and help to mitigate challenges and reinforce successful influences.

### **Nature of the Study**

Phenomenological research allows researchers to understand the essence of the experience of participants with a given phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Hermeneutic phenomenology is focused on a contextual lived experience rather than a more general experience (William & Lara, 2018). Additionally, hermeneutic phenomenology must begin from a personal interest of the researcher (Van Manen, 1990). This approach was relevant given that I am a woman in the dissertation phase of a doctoral program, though I am not African American. This insider perspective allowed me to recognize and understand my own experiences and enrich the analysis of this phenomenon in context (William & Lara, 2018).

Further, because the experiences of the women who participated in the study are “embodied, situated, and perspectival” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29), the ideographic nature of IPA is well suited for this exploration. An IPA approach allowed me to better understand the lived experiences of these women who are most at risk of attrition in their

doctoral programs by examining how they made sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). I used this phenomenological approach to analyze the lived experience of African American women experiencing the doctoral dissertation, combining multiple perspectives from several interviewees to reach an essence of the phenomenon, including social and personal aspects, that may not be discernable from a single perspective (Smith & Osborn, 2015). I interviewed more than one participant about the experience so that the analysis might overcome individual hermeneutics and illuminate the essence of the common experience (Smith et al., 2009).

The IPA approach is rooted in the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre. Husserl (1927) argued for an exploration of the experience of a phenomenon rather than the phenomenon itself and the importance of bracketing or separating personal experiences away from the exploration. Heidegger (1962) expanded on the work of Husserl, arguing that all experience is subjective; therefore, the interpretation of the experience is at the core of phenomenology. Heidegger further noted that the perception of experiences is influenced by a “fore-structure,” which establishes a hermeneutical frame of reference for the interpretation of that experience. This intersubjectivity is inescapable and colors everything a researcher attempts to experience. Though a researcher cannot fully escape their fore-structure and intersubjectivity, by conducting bracketing prior to research, the researcher articulates their relationship to the research and acknowledges the fore-structure to be more aware of the impact of their intersubjectivity in the course of the study.

Additionally, Merleau-Ponty (1965) argued for the primacy of the lived experience of a self-contained individual, noting that an individual can never really understand anything except for the perception of that thing filtered through the individual. This subjectivity highlights the importance of IPA in interviewing and collecting data on an individual's or individuals' perceptions about the researched phenomenon. Because it is impossible for a person to truly share the subjective experience of others, an IPA allows for the collection and interpretation of these individual experience to describe the essence of the phenomenon to a larger population (Smith et al., 2009).

Further, Sarte (1948) wrote that "existence comes before essence" (26). For Sarte, there could be no individual understanding of the true essence of a thing without understanding how the presence or absence of other observers influences the thing under observation (Smith et al., 2009). The existence of the individual will always lead to attempts to make meaning of one's experience shaped by the context of the experience. IPA is used to explore the embodied experience, which will necessarily vary among different individuals while allowing a researcher, through careful analysis and interpretation, to arrive at the essence of an experience through the distillation of individual experiences into common themes (Smith et al.,2009).

Husserl's work emphasized the importance of bracketing in this study, and Heidegger's conception of intersubjectivity and fore-structure were important in understanding the hermeneutic influences in the study, especially because I am a woman in the dissertation stage of a CES program. Though impossible to eliminate, these

experiences were acknowledged and enrich the analysis while minimizing contamination or bias. Further, Merleau-Ponty's (1965) indicated the importance of the individual subjective experience and the role of their physical presence within the phenomenon. For this study, I interviewed participants through video conferencing to ensure that observations of physical mannerisms during the participants' narration of experiences could be recorded and analyzed. Finally, Sartre's work can be applied to the influence of people other than the dissertation student in their experiences. Understanding how these "others" are experienced by the subject and contribute to the dissertation experience for women who identify as African Americans will help shape recommendations about how to ensure these interactions are beneficial.

### **Definitions**

*African American women:* Race and gender cannot always be defined through an essentialist or born-that-way paradigm (Brubaker, 2015). As such, any individuals who self-identify as female and African American were considered for participation in this study.

*Attrition:* Defined as dropping out of a program without completing a degree (Ali & Kohun, 2006).

*CES doctoral student in the dissertation phase:* A student who has completed their coursework and any residencies required by their program who is enrolled in a dissertation program.

*Lived experience:* For this study, lived experience was defined as self-reported events that participants felt were important to them during the dissertation phase of their CES doctoral dissertation (Smith et al., 2009).

*Residency:* A tool used by many online programs to bring students together with instructors. Usually these periods are physical but can be virtual. Students receive a variety of classes on research and have the opportunity to share ideas and see the initial work of other students (Walden University, 2020).

### **Assumptions**

The most basic assumption in this study was that participants knew, could make meaning of, and could express their experience in an explicit manner (Patton, 2002). Because this study was focused on the lived experiences of African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program, I assumed that the participants were being honest with me in their responses and retelling of their experiences. Though I have no way to independently verify the accuracy of their experiences, by promising anonymity and conducting the interviews in private, I helped the participants feel comfortable enough to be honest. I was assumed that participants' experiences were relevant to the problem of attrition. Given that IPA focuses on analyzing multiple experiences as they relate to a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009), I believe that these experiences were relevant to the phenomenon. Additionally, I assumed that following an IPA approach would allow for the most candid responses about their experiences. Finally, I assumed that all participants were comfortable reading, writing,

and speaking in English, because the interviews and disclosure materials were provided in English to avoid the need for an interpreter with its concomitant privacy concerns.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

I limited the scope of my study to the experiences of African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program. Though there are studies that show other minorities, especially those who identify as Hispanic, also experience lower completion rates (Berg, 2016; Hinojosa & Carney, 2016; Lerma et al., 2015; Olive, 2014), for the sake of a more manageable study, I limited my exploration of experiences to a single ethnic identification consistent with the recommendations (see Terrell, 2016). Additionally, I focused specifically on doctoral students in the dissertation phase of their CES program. The decision to limit participants based on field of study is in the interest of relevance to my own field. The decision to limit the focus to the dissertation phase is based on research that shows that 50% of all doctoral attrition occurs in the dissertation phase, making it the single largest point of failure for doctoral students (Burkholder, 2012). Because of the limited scope and other delimitations, the transferability of the study is limited to the implications that individual readers may take from the limited experiences analyzed in the study (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Limitations**

Limitations include the double hermeneutic nature of IPA research in that I as the researcher observed the subjects as well as the limited generalizability of the results of my observations of a small, homogenous sample of CES students. Additionally, I am a White CES doctoral student in the dissertation phase of a doctorate. My ethnicity as a

member of the dominate race could influence the extent to which African American participants were willing to share their experiences with an outsider. My own experiences with the dissertation process could have also influenced interpretation if not understood and bracketed away from the analysis to the extent possible. I conducted an epoché prior to the research to bracket personal experiences and ideas about dissertation experiences to reduce hermeneutic interference with the study and acknowledge the limitations on generalizing the results beyond the studied sample (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Theme assessments were provided to the dissertation chair/methodologist as well as the content committee member for their consideration prior to drawing conclusions from the resultant themes. All theme assessments were also provided to the interviewed participants along with their transcripts to ensure that participants agreed with the themes I attributed to their comments. Additional limitations may also be represented in the limited duration of this study and potential for a limited response rate.

### **Significance**

An IPA of how African American females experience barriers and competing influences—as defined by Flynn et al. (2012)—could highlight how these two domains affect these students in the dissertation process. Common positive influences could be capitalized upon to strengthen their impact, and common barriers could be identified for mitigation. By analyzing the experience of several African American females currently engaged in the CES dissertation process, this study highlights common themes in these two domains that are the most relevant to these African American females in these programs. Based on the results of this study, students, counselor educators, and counselor



supervisors will have a better understanding of these domains, allowing for the development of targeted mitigation strategies to improve completion rates for this population. This represents an opportunity for social change by improving outcomes for a population that represents the nearly one-third of doctoral CES students.

Additionally, CACREP-accredited programs are required to promote diversity (CACREP, 2017). But although student diversity is strong, faculty diversity is still limited, with 74% being White and 61% male (CACREP, 2016). With women and minorities earning fewer doctoral degrees than their White and male counterparts, it will be difficult to improve the faculty demographic inequities. If Flynn et al.'s (2012) theory addresses common domains in the dissertation experience, and the experiences of African American women align with the theory, then the results of this study can be used to understand how the theory and the experiences of African American women can be used to tailor programs and improve doctoral completion rates for this population. Graduates of doctoral programs have increased work opportunities and higher income potential. Additionally, increasing the number of minority doctoral graduates provides a more diverse pool of minority counselors and counselor educators to service the increasingly diverse American society.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I provided the foundational premise for the study of the experiences of African American women in the dissertation phase of a doctoral program through the lens of Flynn et al.'s (2012) emergent theory. Doctoral attrition is a significant problem that disproportionately affects African American women. An IPA of

their experiences can add valuable information to the field. The results of this study not only will address some of the limitations present in Flynn et al.'s theory, it can help universities understand the unique nature of the experience for African American women, especially in the dissertation phase of their programs. In the next chapter, I will explore the existing literature in the field using Flynn et al.'s domains to organize the research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

Sixty percent of students across all doctoral programs do not complete a dissertation and withdraw from their programs (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). Completion rates at online universities are lower than onsite programs and vary between 35.7% and 49.3% (Johnson, 2015). Further, the one-third of doctoral students who are both female and identify as a minority (CACREP, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016) represent a population at higher risk for non-completion of doctoral programs when compared to males and Whites (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). With the CACREP (2016) requirement to increase diversity, it is important for scholars to understand the experiences of African American students in CES programs.

The higher attrition rates of minority doctoral students are contributing to the lack of diversity in university faculties in CACREP-accredited programs (Berg, 2016). Meanwhile, the diversity of the United States is increasing (Colby & Ortman, 2015). Though women make up 50% of total university students in the West, only 25%-45% of those women go on to pursue a PhD (Carter et al., 2012). Additionally, African Americans earn only 6.5% of doctorates regardless of specialty, and Hispanics only earn 7% of doctorates nationwide, with math and computer science doctorate earners even lower at 3.2% and 4.5% respectively (Patel, 2017). Though the CACREP stopped reporting ethnic and gender demographics in their 2017 report, previous reports from 2012-2016 show doctoral enrollment for counseling and counseling-related consistently are over 75% female and around 20% African American. With Walden's (2018) recent

admission of a 12% graduation rate in their CES doctoral program, the problem is clear. Females and minorities are represented in higher percentages in this type of program compared to their demographics in the general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), and if African American females are at greater risk for failing to complete a dissertation, a deeper look at how the doctoral dissertation process is experienced by this population is necessary.

In this literature review, I will explore current research related to the central problem of this study, which is that students who are female and identify as a minority represent a risk for not completing their doctoral degree. I will, in this review, build the foundation from which to evaluate Flynn et al.'s (2012) emergent theory of the initiation, management, and completion of the dissertation, wherein they proposed that mostly positive competing influences and mostly negative barriers to completion played an important role in successful completion of the dissertation. I will examine the experiences of African American women in the dissertation phase of CES doctoral programs—a population that was significantly underrepresented in Flynn et al.'s research.

In this chapter, I will explain the literature search strategy, theoretical foundation, and review relevant literature. I will begin from literature related to the research problem and move toward the research questions that were used to guide the study by exploring the literature in the context of the six domains identified as important to Flynn et al.'s (2012) emergent theory. I show through an examination of the literature that additional research is needed to better understand the experiences of African American women enrolled in CES dissertation programs.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I reviewed articles and dissertations on a range of issues related to doctoral experiences, especially as they relate to minorities and women. The plan for the literature review was to focus initially on research related to the doctoral dissertation, regardless of field. I then turned to a review of CES-doctoral-program research. Though I noted studies that involved minorities during both these phases, a specific research phase was conducted to identify studies specific to minorities in doctoral programs, particularly those in CES doctoral programs.

I used a combination of Google Scholar searches and the Walden University Library website to identify initial articles of interest that met the search tags. The research databases used for the search were EBSCOhost, Education Research Complete, ProQuest Central, along with conference papers, dissertations, books, and websites that provide demographic data and statistics related to doctoral completion. Additional articles were found at Taylor & Francis online, Pew Research Center, CACREP, SAGE, and PsycINFO. To focus on recent research, I reviewed studies about doctoral attrition and CES programs published since 2012. Topics of key interest were doctoral attrition, African Americans in doctoral programs, and CES doctoral studies (particularly those that focused on the dissertation phase). Keywords were used to find relevant articles. The keywords that produced the most relevant results were *African American Women Doctoral Completion*; *Minority Doctoral Persistence*, *Doctoral Student Attrition*, *Doctoral Student Persistence*, *Doctoral Completion*, *Counselor Education Doctorate*,

*Counselor Education and Supervision Doctorate, Minority Dissertation Experience, Minority Doctoral Experience, and Counselor Education and Supervision Experience.*

The exploration of literature identified 22 articles in the original search. During the review of those 22 articles another 14 were added because they were recent (<5 years old) publications on related scholarship that was cited by the original articles. I initially wrote a summary of all 36 initial articles and then explored all of the article summaries as a cohesive document to understand methodologies, methods, strengths and weaknesses, variables and concepts, phenomena, and future study ideas to synthesize the existing research and serve as the foundation for this study. Due to limited research into CES African American student attrition, I also explored articles related to other minority groups and other doctoral programs. In the end, I found over 60 literature references that contributed to the construction of this study.

### **Theoretical Lens**

The theoretical lens for this hermeneutic phenomenology study is the emergent theory of the initiation, management, and completion of the dissertation process as proposed by Flynn et al. (2012). Their goal was to explore the experience of the dissertation process for counseling professionals. Flynn et al. used a consensual qualitative research approach in the development of their theory because it allowed them to ensure consistent data on a homogenous sample through an iterative process using multiple researchers, explore representativeness in the results, and arrive at a “shared vision” of a theory (p. 244). The study focused on counselor education programs and involved 42 graduates of PhD and EdD programs. The participants represented 22

women and 20 men. The participants reported ethnic identification as follows: 88.09% White, 4.76% African American, 2.38% Asian American, 2.38% Latino, and 2.38% Jewish.

Based on their study, Flynn et al. (2012) identified six domains grouped into three factor categories. The domains were the impact of the environment, competing influences, personality traits, chair influence, committee, and barriers to completion. The three factor categories were internal, professional, and relational. The impact of the environment included factors such as work, home, and school, including elements like family support, childcare, practical needs, and career support. This domain was a mostly neutral domain in the theory. Competing influences included prestige, opportunity, deadlines, finances, and accomplishment, which were a positive domain. Relevant personality traits were positive and included persistence, control, destiny, and motivation. Chair influence was mixed; motivation, teaching, and involvement were positive, but ailments, death, and lack of involvement were negative. Committee was a neutral factor with the most relevant aspects being choice, pre-planning, and proficiency. Barriers to completion were a negative influence and included life distractions, injury, disappointing findings, and faculty relationships.

All the domains were represented in the relational factor category. Professional factors included all except personality traits. Internal factors included all except chair influence, committee function, and the impact of environment. The only two domains represented in all three categories were competing influences and barriers to completion. Flynn et al. (2012) suggested that their theory could be used to guide resources,

programs, and philosophy toward doctoral students in the dissertation process. Flynn et al. indicated that their theory could help with the design of strategies that strengthen identity, reduce ABD, and increase success. However, the ethnic homogeneity of the study participants presents challenges in understanding how this theory might apply to minority doctoral CES students. Though the participant gender was well balanced, it merits exploration as to whether differences exist in the domains as experienced by women. Both distinctions are important, especially because the CES doctorate is a field that is 33% women who identify as minorities (CACREP, 2017).

I was unable to identify any studies on Flynn et al.'s (2012) emergent theory to see if their identified domains, especially the two domains present across all three realms, align with the experiences of African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program. The theory offers a framework that suggests that competing influences and barriers to completion are important contributing factors to the experience of dissertation students and the completion of CES doctoral programs. But before a theory can be applied to guide resources, programs, or philosophy toward dissertation students, universities must know that the suggested framework represents those students. Exploring this theory in the context of African American women who are in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program represents new research and will contribute to the knowledge in the CES field.

### **Domains**

Flynn et al.'s (2012) six domains included personality traits, barriers to completion, competing influences, chair influence, committee function, and impact of the



environment. These domains were separated out into internal, professional, and relational factors. Although the focus for this study was the domains of competing influences and barriers to completion, which are represented across all three factors, it is worth examining the recent literature through the lens of the other factors to establish how the current knowledge in the field aligns with Flynn et al.'s emergent theory.

**Personality traits.** Flynn et al. (2012) found that participants identified several personality traits as positive factors in their ability to complete CES doctoral programs. Among the personality traits Flynn et al. identified were “ambition, persistence, internal locus of control, internal sense of destiny, and motivation” (p. 247). These factors were noted by the participants as helpful to individuals who completed their dissertation, but there was no discussion of negative personality traits that may have had a bearing on the students.

Researchers like Baker and Moore (2015) have also noted the importance of individual characteristics and attributes to include some negative characteristics and attributes like self-doubt and stress. Baker and Moore analyzed 19 students who identified as minorities through a critical race theory lens, noting that “reports of [minority] counselor education doctoral students’ experiences can challenge accepted notions of cultural competence and inclusivity within the counseling profession” (p. 70). More than half of their students reported inner drive, positive outlook, demeanor, and motivation as positive characteristics and attributes. One student identified the importance of being a good student to overcome potential stereotypes about race.

**Identity.** Many of the minorities studied in the literature had a strong sense of identity, and in some cases multiple identities, that were important to them. For example, African American women experience a “double-bind based on their racial and gendered categorization” (Dortch, 2016, p. 350). Two seemingly contradictory themes of the minority doctoral experience that emerged were a desire to “prove them wrong” coupled with trying to be a “part-of-a-bigger-whole” (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p. 23). Some minorities have even reported ignoring their ethnicity (Lerma et al., 2015). But when minority students had a strong professional identity, they have reported improved relations with faculty and experienced better doctoral persistence (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016).

Identity can also complicate the role of counselor educator for minority women. For instance, Haskins et al. (2016) conducted a transcendental phenomenological study of eight African American women who were counselor educators and mothers. The themes found were that the participants were susceptible to marginalization based on race. Their status as African American counselor educators who were also mothers created professional strain and neglect due to motherhood responsibilities. The participants all reported an internalized feeling of success based on their accomplishments in the face of additional challenges. They found that their motherhood played a role in their scholarship and their approach to pedagogy.

**Self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy came up in the research many times. Self-efficacy most often refers to the students’ perceptions of their own competence (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy, in the context of recent literature, manifests in difficulty developing a

dissertation plan (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012), student writing ability (Locke & Boyle, 2016), and psychological roadblocks (Straforini, 2015). Some students face challenges with even identifying and justifying a topic and plan for their dissertation projects (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). Many students do not know where to begin the process; they feel that their writing ability is insufficient, and they do not have strategies for creating time in their schedules for writing (Locke & Boyle, 2016). Additionally, the significant transition to the dissertation can end up a psychological roadblock akin to the transition from childhood to adulthood and separation from the familiar environment of home; the student exists in a dual role of student (child) and independent researcher/creator of knowledge (adult; Straforini, 2015). Procrastination is also a significant theme in dissertation experience research, especially the dichotomy between a youthful sense of timelessness and immortality coupled with a fear of the future (Straforini, 2015). However, confidence is a common factor in a positive experience (Burkand et al., 2014).

Low self-efficacy is a barrier that leads to CES doctoral attrition (Willis & Carmichael, 2011), though students' perceptions of self-efficacy are subjective and may not truly correlate with actual efficacy. In a recent study, most CES faculty were only modestly satisfied with the dissertation products of their students, which suggests a mismatch between perceived efficacy and actual efficacy (Borders et al., 2015).

Dollarhide et al. (2013) added to this discussion by identifying the importance for CES students to accept the responsibility as a source of professional knowledge. Because the dissertation represents most doctoral students' first effort to create professional knowledge, it is a critical stage in the process (Locke & Boyle, 2016). In multiple studies,

integration of multiple identities was critical to the students' perceptions of self-efficacy and played a role in doctoral persistence (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Farmer et al., 2017; Hinojosa & Carney, 2016; Van der Linden et al., 2018). Of note, publication of original research as a student improved self-efficacy and may contribute to greater confidence in creating dissertation research (Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011). Additionally, self-efficacy is not a fixed statistic, as Farmer et al. (2017) found that students with work experience in counseling were far more confident in their abilities as researchers and doctoral students. Self-efficacy is important enough to the process that it was the central tenet of much of the research related to doctoral CES programs (Burkard et al., 2014; Dortch, 2016; Gomez, 2013; Kelley & Salisbury, 2016; Lamar & Helm, 2017; Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011; Locke & Boyle, 2016; Olive, 2014; Ponton, 2014; Rockinson et al., 2016; Rovai, 2014).

***Motivation.*** Motivation is also a critical factor; students who are intrinsically motivated by their dissertation topic—because of its value to them personally—are quicker to complete a dissertation (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). Individual meaning and significance of the dissertation play a significant role in avoiding writing blocks that might prevent completion (McAloon, 2004). External motivation factors like the economy and labor market also play a role in motivating students to choose a field and complete their program (Fitzsimons, 2017). These internal and external motivations were both reported as factors for successful CES dissertation students (Flynn et al., 2016).

Motivations among CES doctoral students is represented in many forms. Hinkle et al. (2014) focused their research specifically on motivation and found that it was an important factor in the pursuit and completion of a CES doctoral program identifying four primary motivations: to be a professor, to prove oneself in a respected profession, to become a clinical leader, and to succeed amid obstacles. Lerma et al. (2015) found that intrinsic motivation was one of six themes that were significant factors to success in CES doctoral program according to 23 graduates.

**Barriers to completion.** Flynn et al. (2012) defined barriers as environmental factors that impeded students in their efforts to complete their CES doctoral program. Factors that contributed to this domain included non-dissertation life requirements, distractions, injuries, weak findings, and relationships between different faculty members on the dissertation committee and between the student and the faculty members. Specifically, participants in the Flynn et al. study noted failure to validate self-created instruments and family deaths as barriers in their programs.

***Under-represented minority challenges.*** For minority students the dearth of minority faculty contributes to the difficulty of finding representative mentoring for underrepresented minority (URM) students and represented an obstacle for these students (Berg, 2016). Berg also explored common challenges for URMs in online doctoral including isolation, self-doubt, financial pressure, family, and work responsibilities. Finally, Berg noted challenges with the online delivery method especially with regards to bonding between faculty and students. Bhat et al. (2012) also focused on URMs and noted challenges like discrimination, stress, self-doubt, and personal issues. Lerma et al.

(2015) found that Hispanic doctoral students expressed a sense of vulnerability in the academic environment.

According to Zeligman et al. (2015), women of color have a unique experience as students at the doctoral level. Zeligman et al. (2015) claimed that the lack of representation in student and faculty bodies of women of color limits both peer support and role models. The combination of racism and sexism contributes to the experience of a woman of color in post-graduate education. Zeligman et al. noted that three areas in particular affect women of color: diversity, mentorship, and racism/sexism, and these additional layers for women of color in doctoral programs contribute additional challenges.

The claim that African American women have a unique doctoral experience is borne out by Dortch (2016) who interviewed two African American women and reported that some of their challenges included uninvolved faculty, feelings of isolation, and difficult dynamics within the dissertation committee. Other detractors included racial dynamics, unclear expectations, dissertation committee dynamics, faculty advisor relations, and no sense of direction. Haskins et al. (2016) studied African Americans in university environments and also found that they have a very different experience even from other racial groups, with higher discrimination and bias compared to Whites leading to higher rates of depression and stress.

Henfield et al. (2013) studied African Americans and noted feelings of isolation; peer disconnection; and faculty misunderstandings and disrespect. Again, lack of diversity among the faculty was noted by multiple participants, contributing to the feeling

of several students that their faculty did not respect differences. Lack of diversity was also noted as a challenge by Hispanic students (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016). Hinojosa and Carney also noted the challenge of navigating cultural realms wherein participants highlighted the differences between their culture of origin and the academic culture.

***Personal obstacles.*** There are many personal obstacles that can pose barriers to completion, regardless of race identification. Willis and Carmichael (2011) interviewed six Caucasian former doctoral students (4 females and 2 males) who had withdrawn from their programs. Noting the negative costs of attrition on the individual and the university, the researchers point to wasted resources and the emotional toll. They noted that some attritors have struggled with depression and suicide attempts. The researchers identified some of the barriers that lead to student attrition like procrastination, low self-efficacy, poor advisor relationships, low integration, and personal incongruence.

Locke and Boyle (2016) conducted a grounded theory study of students in a so-called dissertation boot camp, an intensive course on writing the dissertation. They found that time, writing and advisement were the primary challenges experienced by dissertation students. Their study focused on education leadership doctoral students. Most students in these programs work full time outside of school and classes. The students' busy schedules and inability to complete the dissertation can lead to a permanent ABD status. Prior to the dissertation boot camp, students reported four primary themes: uncertainty about how to begin, barriers, advisor challenges, and time. Lack of adequate advising was noted by study participants as a negative factor and influenced the students'

beliefs about their self-efficacy (self-efficacy has been previously noted as significant to successful completion of the dissertation).

Access to the culture is a hurdle for women and carries with it gender stress with expectations of split efforts and time between academic and family responsibilities (Carter et al., 2012). Additionally, a history of abuse was a personal obstacle that could reappear and create psychological challenges due to the increased stress of the doctoral program. Lamar and Helm (2017) found that insecurity especially about identity was a challenge for CES doctoral students.

Personal issues were a significant reason that students quit dissertation programs (Burkholder, 2012). First-generation and nontraditional students have particular difficulty with dissertation-writing process (Straforini, 2015). The dissertation is a “rite of passage” that, upon completion, allows the student into a profession. Because of this significant transition the dissertation can end up a psychological roadblock akin to the transition from childhood to adulthood and separation from the familiar environment of home. The ABD student exists in a dual role of student (child) and independent researcher/creator of knowledge (adult). Procrastination is a significant theme in dissertation experience research especially the dichotomy between a youthful sense of timelessness and immortality coupled with a fear of the future. Additionally, neuropsychologically-limited executive function and poor self-regulation complicate the process in young adults (Straforini, 2015). Straforini also noted the importance of external factors like health, money, and academic ability in contributing to success. First-generation students can experience guilt about leaving others behind as they progress and a fear of not fitting in at



either place after completion. Online education environments also have their own challenges like poor community, mentorship, and self-efficacy that have all been linked to attrition (Rovai, 2014).

**Competing influences.** Although I initially expected competing influences to be negative, Flynn et al. (2012) found that competing influences were a mostly positive factor. Participants noted various competing influences like a sense of accomplishment, self- and chair-deadlines, higher teaching opportunities, prestige, and financial limitations. The domain of competing influences was found across all three factors: relational, professional, and internal.

**Labor market conditions.** Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) looked at a variety of factors such as labor market conditions and financial aid as they relate to doctoral completion across the three phases of a doctorate: transition, development, and research. They found that financial aid was important but more specifically research apprenticeships led to higher completion rates than other forms of financial aid. Labor market conditions became more important late into doctoral programs. As students neared completion, a favorable labor market was correlated with higher completion rates. The gap in the literature Ampaw and Jaeger seek to address is the institutional focus of most studies. This internal looking misses factors that may be external to the university and have an impact on programs. Specifically, the opportunity cost of doctoral studies; whereby students forsake current earning potential in hopes of higher earning potential upon completion of a doctorate. Higher unemployment rates and higher expected income also

correlated favorably with completion in every stage. Berg (2016) also noted the personal, social, and economic value of the degree program is important to URMs.

*Personal experience.* Not all who students who leave their programs never return. Burkholder (2012) noted that departure and return are a personal event, and that personal factors informed the decision to depart. One of the competing influences is the students' ability to accept new roles as they progress in their education. Dollarhide et al. (2013) described the transformation of professional identity for counselor education students in three stages: external validation, experience, and finally self-validation through integration of identities as a counselor, PhD student, and counselor educator, evolving legitimacy, and acceptance of responsibility as an expert. The researchers suggested an ongoing dialog with students as they undergo this journey of transformation to validate their experiences during the process. Conversations between educators and students; support groups; and peer relationships were all recommended as useful in transforming professional identity.

As much of the literature previously covered demonstrates, identity plays a significant role in the personal experience of doctoral students. Lamar and Helm (2017) identified seven themes in the responses of the participants: confidence, ownership, voice, identity, journey, learning, and supporting. Experiences showed more confidence in students who were later in their programs. Voice ranged from the desire to improve client welfare through research to insecurity about identity and acceptance of their ideas. Counselors are expected to shift between multiple identities: "counselor, supervisor, teacher, and researcher" in addition to the personal identity of the researcher. Participants

felt the interview process helped them get more in tune with their researcher identity, suggesting that such dialog is important for their development. It would benefit educators and supervisors to have these conversations early and often. Researcher skill and researcher identity develop at different rates. Students describe a wide range of emotional experiences to research from positive to negative.

***Social support.*** Social support was important to completion of the dissertation (Kelley et al., 2016). These predictors existed even when controlling for gender and field of study. Social support was especially significant to doctoral completion among Hispanic students. Lerma et al. (2015) interviewed 23 Hispanics (4 men and 19 women) who had completed doctoral degrees and identified 6 common themes: family role models, educational support, parental expectations, ethnic identity, acculturation/cultural expectations, and intrinsic motivation. Family role model themes involved relatives with multiple jobs and college degrees. Most participants reported significant support from family, friends, peers and even work and school supervisors for their educational efforts. Many reported that their parents had always expected them to go to college. The role of ethnic identity was mixed with some reporting ignoring their ethnicity. Intrinsic motivation was a significant factor for success as reported by the participants. The authors recommend that universities recreate a collectivist orientation in the spirit of the Hispanic idea of *familia* within the academic environment.

***Chair influence.*** Chair influence was a mixed factor with some participants in Flynn et al. (2012) reporting positive impacts and others reporting negative impacts. When chairs were motivated, engaged as teachers, and involved in the process, students

reported positive impacts. Participants reporting negative chair influence experience discussed issues like lack of involvement, chair illness, and even death of the dissertation chair. Of interest is that participants either reported chair influence as positive or negative with rare neutral categorizations. It seems chairs are either positive or negative with little middle ground.

Burkard et al. (2014) also found that the primary factor distinguishing a positive dissertation experience from a negative one was the relationship with the dissertation chair, especially because students are balancing the interdependence with and independence from their dissertation committee members. Students and committee members often view the dissertation differently. For faculty the dissertation is an opportunity to teach more about research and deepen the students' knowledge; students often just want the dissertation finished so they can complete their doctorate. A t-test on results from an instrument that measured the relationship with the dissertation chair was correlated with the final characterization of the dissertation experience as positive or negative.

Dissertation chairs play many roles like mentor, advisor, and teacher. They hold incredible power over the dissertation student and their ability to achieve their education goals. Bhat et al. (2012) studied African American females and the primary implication of their research is the importance of the relationship between the advisor and advisee. They noted that CES faculty should facilitate mentorship opportunities while remaining cognizant of the inherent power dynamics. Gender matching is not a panacea as matching

students and faculty advisors by gender does not necessarily equate with less stress for women students (Carter et al., 2012).

**Committee function.** Like chair influence, committee function received mixed results from the survey participants. Participants reported some disappointment in responsiveness from the dissertation committee but noted the importance of choosing the right committee. Committee proficiency, especially as it related to the type of study the student was pursuing, was important to participants. The results were mixed with some students feeling that the committee was essential while others reported it as an unnecessary formality. Burkholder (2012) studied individuals that left doctoral programs but eventually returned, and one of the four primary themes that emerged from their study was that faculty-student interactions are important. Students wished faculty was more supportive and available, respectful of their decisions, encouraging of balance, devoid of preferential treatment.

Relationships, especially those with the dissertation committee, play a significant role in the dissertation process. Berg (2016) focused on the importance of diversity in university faculty in providing relationships between the staff and URM students by providing mentors who can appreciate the challenges of URM students. Berg also noted key enablers provided by a good committee-student relationship like affirmation, mentor match, communication, expectation management, and encouragement. Online delivery can further strain the relationship (Berg, 2016). Burkard et al. (2014) also found that the primary factor distinguishing a positive dissertation experience from a negative one was the relationship with the dissertation chair and committee, especially for students who are

balancing the interdependence with and independence from their dissertation committee members. Family and friend relationships and support systems also influence the quality of the experience. The relationship to society is also relevant as Carter et al. (2012) found that tensions existed in the cultural expectations of women such as “passivity, family nurturance, and (at least symbolic) subordination to male authority” (p. 339). Dortch (2016) found that relationships with other African American students were important and contributed to the success of African American doctoral students in addition to “supportive relationships with peers, faculty, and administrators” (p. 353).

Relationships also greatly affect the experience and chances for success in CES doctoral studies. Bhat et al. (2012) found that the relationship between dissertation advisors and students and subsequent mentorship was the primary factor in the experiences of CES students, especially among females and URMs. Faculty-student interactions were also critical to the success of CES doctoral students who had left their programs and returned to complete a PhD (Burkholder, 2012). Relationships are also key to the development of a CES professional identity as students need external validation throughout their experience as they develop a strong professional identity (Dollarhide et al., 2013). For URMs, strong faculty relations and mentorship were essential for reducing feelings of marginalization. Poor relationships with faculty increase feelings of isolation (Henfield et al., 2013) and can lead to student attrition (Willis & Carmichael, 2011).

**Impact of environment.** The environment, both academic and personal, was a significant factor to many of the students in the Flynn et al. (2012) study. Attrition is higher in online or limited residency doctoral programs, which supports the importance

of the environment to the completion of a doctoral program (Terrell, 2014). Additionally, Flynn et al. noted that students reported impacts from home, work, and school on their productivity. Aspects of the environment like childcare availability, family support, peer/career support, and practical concerns like research and/or writing space all factored into student assessments of their environment.

As with the broader literature, much of the minority literature addresses the issue of support in the form of academic and peer relationships, especially those with other persons of color. Improving the cultural competency of faculty and within departments can improve overall program climate (Baker & Moore, 2015). Representative mentoring for minority doctoral students is difficult; diversity in university faculty is important but so is the ability of mentors to appreciate challenges faced by URM students (Berg, 2016). Peer writing group as well as supportive relations with family, faculty, and communities are significant contributors to feelings of self-efficacy and subsequent success in doctoral programs (Dortch, 2016). Lack of faculty diversity can challenge the development of minority academic identity because of the lack of role models (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016). Significant support from family, friends, peers and even work and school supervisors is important to minority doctoral completers (Lerma et al., 2015). In many cases academic culture informs the decision on whether to continue the doctoral program (Burkholder, 2012).

Culture is represented in a variety of ways in the literature and was an important factor, especially for URM students in CES doctoral programs. The cultural competency of faculty plays a significant role in the academic climate and in attracting URM students

(Baker & Moore, 2015). Lack of diversity and diversity-trained faculty contribute to low persistence in Mexican women (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016). The lack of representation in student and faculty bodies of women of color limits both peer support and role models; both racism and sexism combine to negatively affect the experiences of URM women (Zeligman et al., 2015). A common theme in the literature is that recognition and support from diversity can help with recruiting and retention/completion.

### **Research Questions**

Given the alignment of many of the research themes with Flynn et al.'s (2016) Emergent Theory, the theory is a valuable tool to analyze the experience of doctoral students in CES programs. The most significant limitation from Flynn et al. is the lack of diversity in the original study sample. To overcome this limitation, one must examine the theory in the context of the lived experience of others. This study will explore two basic research questions: What are the lived experiences of women currently in the dissertation phase of a CES program who identify as African American? What are the competing influences and barriers to completion (Flynn et al., 2012), if any, experienced by women currently in the dissertation phase of a CES program who identify as African American? Using IPA, this study will examine the experiences of African American women in the dissertation stage of CES doctoral programs to see if their experiences align with the theory.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

This literature review focused on doctoral studies in the United States with a significant focus on CES programs and dissertations, as well as research focused on the



minority experience in doctoral studies and the dissertation process. The published scholarly articles I found largely focused on qualitative means (~75%) with quantitative (~15%) and mixed methods (~10%) getting far less attention. A variety of theories have been used to explore the issue such as Self-Efficacy as a facet of Social Cognition Theory, Black-Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Borderlands Theory. Much of the research speaks to the challenges of minority women, specifically Hispanics and Blacks, in the doctoral process.

General dissertation literature focuses largely on the themes of self-efficacy, relationships, and motivation (both intrinsic and extrinsic). CES specific studies prominently feature themes of self-efficacy, relationships, motivation and the role of culture and identity. Literature that explores minority doctoral involvement including but not limited to CES focused on the themes of integration, support, and persistence. These themes fit well within the model identified by Flynn et al. (2012). Specifically, these themes represent potential barriers to completion and competing influences as described by Flynn et al. Because Flynn et al. suggested that their theory be used to guide resourcing decisions, it is essential to conduct further exploration of the theory, especially as it relates to minorities and females (who are overrepresented in CES doctoral programs).

There is no evidence that any researcher has attempted to explore Flynn et al.'s (2012) Emergent Theory of the Initiation, Management, and Completion of the Dissertation Process for Counselor Education Students. By exploring the experiences of African American women, a population that represents a full third of CES doctoral

students (CACREP, 2017), in the dissertation phase of a CES doctorate program in the context of Flynn et al.'s theory, this study represents new research in the field and will contribute to the knowledge of CES programs. The challenge then becomes defining the best method by which to study the experiences of African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program. The next chapter will explore the methodology by which this researcher pursued this study.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program. African American women are completing doctoral degrees at lower rates than their White or male counterparts (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). Thus, I wanted to understand the experience of these women especially as they relate to the emergent theory developed by Flynn et al. (2012). This will add to the literature in the field and provide opportunities for scholars, teachers, and administrators to better understand the experience of these women.

This chapter will cover the chosen research paradigm and methodology for conducting and analyzing the results of the study. I will explain my role as the researcher, and I will address issues of trustworthiness and ethical conduct of the study. My intent is to demonstrate a complete plan by I completed this study.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

To understand the lived experiences of an individual, a qualitative approach was the most appropriate. An IPA framework is uniquely qualified to deepen the understanding of a phenomenon and to create new knowledge (Creswell, 2013). This approach was best suited to answer the central research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of women currently in the dissertation phase of a CES program who identify as African American enrolled in a dissertation program?

Research Question 2: How do African American females experience Flynn et al.'s (2012) competing influences and barriers to completion, if any, while working on their dissertation in a CES doctoral program?

Researchers use IPA to understand the essence of a phenomenon as experienced by a small group of subjects within some common frame (Smith et al., 2009). It is a hermeneutic phenomenology in that it is contextual and involves the researcher intimately (Van Manen, 1990). IPA is particularly useful in complex studies (Smith & Osborn, 2015). In the case of this study, I explored the lived experience of female students in CES doctoral programs who identify as African American. Race, gender, and academic level are all intermixed in these individuals, which contributes to the complexity of the study. IPA was thus well suited to understand the lived experience of these women (Smith et al., 2009). One risk with the approach is the subjectivity in interpretation, but it provides rich analysis as long as measures are taken to account for bias in the researcher (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

I considered and rejected narrative inquiry, case studies, and grounded theory approaches for this study. Narrative inquiry is usually limited in scope to a single individual (Creswell, 2013), which would not provide for a holistic view of the phenomenon. Case studies, which are focused on deep exploration of single cases over an extended period of time, would have been too limited and would not have allowed for a broader analysis of the responses of all of the participants through a common analytical framework (Patton, 2015). Finally, I did not attempt to develop a new theory; therefore, a grounded theory approach was not suitable.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My primary roles in this study were that of interviewer and interpreter—a double hermeneutic as noted previously. The researcher in IPA plays an active role and essentially serves as an instrument in the study (Smith et al., 2009). As interviewer, I ensured that the conversation had a natural flow to encourage free discussion (Smith & Osborn, 2008). As a woman in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program, I was also careful about understanding the role of my own experience through bracketing (Smith et al., 2009). Bracketing my own beliefs and attitudes in writing before conducting these interviews reduced the potential ethical concern of bias (Darawsheh, 2014).

### **Methodology**

An IPA methodology allowed me to capture and interpret multiple subjective experiences from African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program through a secondary lens like Flynn et al. (2012). IPA is idiographic in that it is used to examine the experience through the unique lens of the person having the experience and how they make sense of their experience (Smith et al., 2009). In this section, I will discuss how I conducted this research in order to facilitate follow-up attempts to replicate my results. I will cover the logic for selecting participants, instrumentation, recruitment, and data collection and analysis.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The population for this study is women currently in the dissertation stage of CES programs who identify as African American. The CACREP (2016) has reported that 76%

of CES students are women, and 20% are African American, which suggested that the participants would not be too difficult to find. Due to the restrictive nature of the study population, I purposively sampled participants who met the primary criteria in that they (a) identified as African American females and (b) were in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program. Purposeful sampling is often used in IPA because it allows the researcher to select the individuals who best reflect the experience under study (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). If I were unable to reach saturation levels in participants—three to eight individuals as suggested by Smith et al.(2009)—I was willing to expand the pool by also considering women who identify as Hispanic, as they face similar challenges or using snowball sampling to find additional students who meet the parameters. Additionally, to avoid being overwhelmed (Smith & Osborn, 2008), I initially sought three to four individuals who met the study criteria.

### **Instrumentation**

Semistructured interviews are the most effective means of data collection for IPA because they allow for a more natural narrative flow that enables the participant to cover any aspect of their experience that they deem relevant (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Though the overall experience is valuable, semistructured interviews allowed me to ensure that aspects of the experience related to Flynn et al.'s (2012) barriers and influences were addressed in the interviews. The interview protocol that I used for my study can be found in the appendix. After the approval of an institutional review board, data collection began. A voice recorder was used to record the interviews for later transcription. A benefit of IPA is the limited number of interviews required to reach saturation and

meaningful results (Smith et al., 2009). Follow-up interviews were coordinated if necessary to fill any gaps in data like misunderstandings and missing or unclear information. To ensure content validity and not detract from the interview, I avoided detailed note-taking during the interviews. Interview notes were transported in a lockable folder, and I have a locked file cabinet at home that allows me to protect all materials related to this study.

### **Data Collection**

Before any contact with potential participants, I obtained institutional review board approval (#01-03-20-0164537). I made initial outreach through Walden's participant pool as well as a Facebook group of Walden University students to which I belong and the mailing list of a professional organization like the Chi Sigma Iota honor society/Omega Zeta chapter for counselors or the American Counseling Association to identify women who identify as African American currently in the dissertation stage of an CES program who were willing to be interviewed about their experiences. I communicated with participants prior to the interviews build rapport, cover initial consent, learn about the participants, and inform them of any ethical considerations.

Interviews occurred over video or audio conferencing, with only me and the participant present. Further, participants were able to choose an alias or I selected one that they approved to protect their privacy and encourage forthrightness. Researchers have recommend three to eight interview subjects as an appropriate sample for doctoral level research (Smith & Osborn, 2015), but I conducted interviews until I determined that

data saturation had occurred. Interviews were also conducted based on recommendations to be at least an hour (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

I recorded the interviews and took impression notes to capture aspects of the interview that make an impression on me but may not be well represented in video or audio recording. From these recordings, I personally transcribed each session. Second interviews were possible if there were other questions when I began to analyze the transcripts for themes. In case any participants expressed discomfort or stress as a result of the interview, I provided participants with information about counseling services available to them. I also left my contact information with participants in case there was additional information they would like to discuss with me. Participants were free to leave the study at any time. Interview notes taken during physical interviews were personally carried in a lockable folder and stored in a locked file cabinet in my office. Interview notes from teleconferences were directly stored in the locked file cabinet. I have the only key to this file cabinet in my possession.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis is the management, coding, storage, and analysis of data (Evers, 2018). Analysis followed the recommended structure for IPA (see Smith et al., 2009) represented in the following paragraphs. The key was to perform the analysis ideographically to situate the data in the participant context and perspective (Smith et al., 2009).

I read the entire transcript to get a sense of the overall experience as related by the interviewee as recommended by Peoples (2020). I eliminated words that didn't relate to



the interviewee's experience (e.g., um, you know, I see, etc.). For example, P1's statement "has been like very supportive um but the other one Dr. XXXX I feel like is supportive but not as supportive as he probably could be to be honest with you." Became "P1 said that her chair is supportive but other committee members could be more supportive." To protect privacy names of any professors or institutions were either dropped where unimportant or replaced with an identifying label like "SOUTHERN STATE UNIVERSITY" in cases where the location seemed important to the participant.

I formed preliminary meaning units based on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual understanding of the transcript (Smith et al., 2009). For my study I began highlighting elements of the transcripts that resonated with me or seemed particularly important to the participants. For example, P3 spoke about discrimination that she hadn't expected to encounter at institutions of higher education saying, "the further you go up you hope to not find it at higher levels."

I then identified patterns related to "convergence and divergence, commonality and nuance (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). For example, P2 also spoke about her professor's tendency to gravitate toward White students. P6 mentioned that "systemic oppression is real."

I began to analyze the potential meaning by triangulating the researcher, the data, and the subjects' context of the experience. Most of the women mentioned aspects of being African American and how it shaped their experience. For example, P2 mentioned her chair having trouble relating to "brown people"; P3 said "brown colored"; P4 and P6

each referred themselves as a “black woman”; and P7 talked about universities seemingly classifying African Americans as “good or bad black people.”

I determined final meaning units through clustering and theme development. I initially considered race an aspect of individual traits but as the data piled up it became clear that race was important enough to the experience that it deserved its own meaning unit separate from other individual traits. Five of the participants mentioned race directly and not in the context of discussing their individual traits. P2 spoke of “bias” that she called “natural.” P3 noted that African American professors would not challenge the system because “they are worried about their jobs.” P4 said she was dealing with “colorism.” From the collection of all of the statements related to race and how they shaped the experience of the participant, I determined that Race would be a final meaning unit.

I organized the themes into a structure that makes clear the relationships between them, ensuring that the data can be followed from initial statements through final themes for subsequent plausibility validation. For example, participants related challenges related to school, work, and family. P5 found challenges with support at school claiming, “I can’t just go to anyone.” P5 said she was going to “pull back some of my hours at my job” to have more time for family and her dissertation. P5 also mentioned the challenges of family and being torn about letting grandparents watch the child but admitted “I have my own issues about trusting my baby to other people.” As I approached saturation on the transcripts, I realized that most of the challenges fell into these three categories. Rather

than have separate themes for each, I decided to collect these into a single theme of “Challenges.”

I developed an initial narrative that described through discovered themes the essence of the experience. As I highlighted statements and began to organize themes, I copied and pasted related statements into a separate Word document. From these collections of related statements, organized by theme, I developed a narrative of my understanding of the experiences of these women. For example the statement “They notice when instructors give them less attention or their ideas less weight” was taken from P1’s note that her committee wanted her to hire someone else to “analyze her data,” P2’s statement that her chair “gravitates” toward White students, P3’s recognition of “bias,” P5’s feeling that her chair “was trying to control” her, P7 replaced two women of color on her committee saying she “was looking to feel supported.”

I reflected on the process with a focus on my perceptions and conceptions because the idiographic nature of the process will have inevitable shifted my fore-structure during the analysis (Smith et al., 2009). I followed a hermeneutic reflection process outlined by Peoples (2020) to explore the shifting of my own perceptions and “replace [my] current conceptions with more fitting ones” (Chapter 4, Section 6). For example, I recognized that though I was a woman in a CES doctoral program, my own experiences were very different from those of these women because I never had to contend with issues of race. Also, as a future counselor educator and supervisor, I recognized and noted the importance to “understand that the experiences of these women and the common themes would likely be represented in my own students.”

Using my own experiences during the study, I crafted a complete idiographic narrative that captures and illuminates key themes that highlight the experience in context. I first discussed a general narrative of the phenomenon specific to my participants, then extrapolated to a more general summary of the phenomenon using phrases like “most mentioned how their race had impacted their lived experience.”

Before the collection and analysis of any data, I conducted bracketing to identify and understand my individual fore-structure that may create bias (Heidegger, 1962). This is especially important as I am also a female CES doctoral student attempting to complete a dissertation. Initially, I read the entire transcript of the individual interview in order to get a sense of the entire description. I took my time with the reading and not simply try to quickly summarize the experience as related by the interviewee. While reading I recorded my initial impressions. After reading the entire transcript, I broke down preliminary “meaning units” to highlight emerging themes (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). Then, I then identified any gaps in the data (missing information or unclear statements) given from the original transcript and formulate follow-up interview questions for each participant if necessary. I obtained permission from each participant to re-interview them for further description if any gaps were identified. The individual interviews were then transcribed, read over, and integrated into the original analysis of meaning units.

I used a combination of open and *a priori* coding to begin analysis. To begin with I took detailed initial notes from the completed updated transcripts. Notes were either descriptive, linguistic, or conceptual (Smith et al., 2009). Clustering of related statements

between the interviews allowed for the emergence and capture of common themes within the disparate experiences of the participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

This process was repeated for the number of interviews conducted. I then assembled the transcripts with my notes into a single wholistic document. I analyzed the entire document as a cohesive product. From this analysis, I identified final meaning units, which were informed by a deepened sense of the entire description. Smith et al. (2009) note the possibility of multiple levels of interpretation, warning that novices often are too shallow in their descriptions. Using the final meaning units, I explored how the themes connect to one another to illuminate the experience to abstract to a superordinate theme (Smith et al., 2009).

The final step was to craft a narrative that analyzed and interpreted the common themes and final meaning units identified through deep engagement with the interviews and transcripts to illuminate the essence of the experience of the participants. The final narrative illuminates the barriers and influences experienced by the participants, and was able to articulate how these barriers and influences contribute to the experience. This narrative forms the basis of Chapter 4 in the dissertation.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is a measure of research worth and the strength of the findings (Levitt et al., 2017). This section will explore how credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were established. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) these four measures are the best way to demonstrate trustworthiness.

## **Credibility**

Credibility is about internal validity, which is to say that the findings of the study follow logically from the data and the process (Patton, 2015). To help with credibility, I maintain contact with study participants to allow for member checking and follow-up interviews. Prolonged contact throughout the study process will ensure that subjects feel comfortable that my results accurately represent their own understanding of their experience. I conducted enough interviews to reach data saturation, which Smith and Osborn (2015) say should occur between 3-8 interviews. After six interviews I believed I was approaching saturation, and the seventh interview aligned with previous data, so I decided it was a good place to stop and begin analysis. Finally, the bracketing exercise will provide reflexivity, which focuses on potential influence on the research by the researcher (Hammarberg et al., 2016).

## **Transferability**

Transferability focuses on external validity or generalizability of the results (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) recommends thick descriptions alongside the data itself to describe other facets of the collection such as location, participant mannerisms, and any other factor that may prove to have bearing later on. If the interviews are carried out in more than one context these differences could be meaningful. The use of semi-structured interviews ensured that all participants received the same initial questions in the same order. Additionally, Rudestam and Newton (2015) noted that the themes that result from coding should logically follow from the raw data and allow additional researchers to reach similar conclusions. The idiographic nature of IPA contributes to

transferability due to the capturing of multiple experiences surrounding a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Dependability**

Dependability in qualitative research serves the same function as reliability in that it ensures the accuracy and consistency of the study's conduct and the stability of the data (Patton, 2015). Creswell (2013) recommended good notes, high quality recordings, and detailed transcription to ensure dependability of the data. Additionally, I kept a journal throughout the process to help provide an audit trail for subsequent researchers. An audit trail validates the reduction, analysis, and synthesis of data as the study progresses (Rudenstam & Newton, 2015).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability in qualitative research relates to the objectivity of the researcher and the potential impact on the results (Patton, 2015). The measures to ensure reflexivity will help to identify any personal biases that could have influenced the process (Hammarberg et al., 2016). As a female CES doctoral student working on a dissertation, I needed to ensure that any themes I interpreted were reasonably interpreted by a researcher without this potential bias. To the extent possible I used direct quotes from my interviews to demonstrate themes instead of relying on my own interpretation as recommended by Darawsheh (2014).

### **Ethical Procedures**

The American Psychological Association (2016) Code of Conduct provided the ethical basis for this study. A Walden University Institutional Review Board was

convened and required a signed agreement between participants and the researcher. All participants will be treated with beneficence as defined by (Schrems, 2014). Informed consent was obtained from all participants that covered the purpose, recording methods, right to withdraw, and lack of any payment for all participants. All notes, recordings, and data are secured in a locked file cabinet to which I have the only key. I will keep all data for at least five years and allow access only to myself and the dissertation committee upon request.

### **Summary**

This chapter covered the design and rationale for the research as well as my role as researcher. I covered a plan for data analysis and addressed trustworthiness and ethical concerns. I explained why the IPA approach is appropriate for this study to qualitatively explore the experiences of African American women in the dissertation of a CES doctoral program using IPA and Flynn et al.'s (2012) Emergent Theory. Chapter 4 will discuss the results of the study.



## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The central problem for this study was that African American women are completing doctoral programs at lower rates than Whites and males. Using IPA, I explored the experiences of seven African American women who are CES doctoral dissertation students to answer the central question of this study about the lived experience of these women. In this chapter, I will present the emergent themes from the interviews. I will discuss the participants, data collection/analysis, and themes. Finally, I will compare the responses of these women to the theoretical lens of the emergent theory proposed by Flynn et al. (2012).

### **Participants**

The participants were all African American women working on their dissertations for CES doctoral program. The seven women varied in age from their 20s to their 50s. They were at various stages of the dissertation from prospectus, proposal, institutional review board, and final defense. The participants were from a variety of university types. There was an even mix of online and brick-and-mortar students with one student remotely attending a brick-and-mortar periodically after her original university closed in her state during her dissertation. The women all volunteered for the study after reading the ad. They were excited that someone was exploring the topic, and they were curious about why I had chosen this as a topic.

### **Data Collection**

Six of the interviews were conducted by video teleconference and one was done by phone. The recording of one of the video teleconferences failed, but an audio backup was made during the call and was used for transcription. The women engaged in the call from a location of their choosing. The settings varied from offices, schools, and homes. In my case, all interviews were conducted from my home office. I connected to the video teleconference service through a VPN to protect the privacy of any information exchanged during the call. Additionally, because all conversations were through Skype, the calls were encrypted by a 256-bit encryption protocol. This ensured that only I and the participant were privy to the information discussed. All participants responded to the informed consent form with an e-mail that said, "I consent to participation in this study." I provided a copy of the interview protocol and questions to each participant prior to their interview so that they had time to think about their potential responses.

### **Data Analysis**

The structure of the interview questions (Appendix) followed the domains identified by Flynn et al. (2012). The central research question for this study was "What are the lived experiences of African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program?" A secondary question considered how the experiences of these women aligned with the domains determined by Flynn et al. (2012). My analysis followed a hermeneutic IPA framework as detailed by Smith et al. (2009), and emergent theory served as the theoretical lens through which I structured the questions and initially grouped themes within the responses.

My analysis of the participant responses was conducted one at a time to understand the experience of each individual before looking for larger themes within the group. My first step was to re-watch or re-listen to each of the interviews a couple of times. I then created a transcript of the interview by playing and pausing the recordings while typing until I had a complete textual record of the conversation. I read each transcript multiple times, including readings where I also listened to the recorded interview while reading to ensure accuracy.

I began to use the highlighting feature of Microsoft Word to highlight phrases and choices of language that seemed important to the participant either through repetition or emphasis. Additionally, I took notes in the margins of each transcript using the comment feature about how particular elements struck me or if a particular theme emerged from the interview. I repeated this process for each of the seven interviews. I took all the interviews and used the marginalia and highlighting to find emergent themes and began to copy and paste comments from each interview into a separate document arranged by themes.

I grouped themes where some could be read as a subtheme of another (e.g., self-efficacy and determination as individual traits, or institutional and individual racism as race). This chapter was written from this final thematic grouping. After looking at the final themes, I wrote a general narrative of the phenomenon and a more specific description of the phenomenon. Finally, I connected the experiences, themes, and narratives to the theoretical framework.

Four primary themes emerged from my conversation with these women about their lived experience with the dissertation process as an African American woman in a CES doctoral program. The most significant theme that diverged from those defined by Flynn et al. (2012) was the impact of race on the experiences of these women. The other significant themes were the importance of individual traits to their experiences, personal and academic relationships, and the various challenges faced by the women at home, school, and work. The following table outlines the primary and subthemes found in this study.

Table 1

*Primary Themes and Subthemes by Participant*

Theme/Subtheme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7
Feeling Different from Others	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Capability as a Scholar	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Determination to Succeed	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Importance of Religion	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Relationships as an Enabler	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Team of Experts	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Others on the Path	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A Family Affair	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
The Complexity of Race		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Challenges to Overcome	✓		✓		✓		✓
Academic Support	✓				✓		
Responsibilities of Work	✓		✓		✓		✓
Life Goes On	✓						✓

**Results****Theme 1: Feeling Different from Others**

Individual traits were significant to the experience for every one of the participants, especially with regard to self-efficacy. Multiple times in the interviews the

participants called attention to the fact that their experiences were different from others or that their particular constellation of personality traits was unique. This uniqueness was most often expressed as a confidence in self or a higher than normal level of determination. Additionally, five of the participants made direct or indirect reference to religion or the role of a higher power in their experience.

**Capability as a scholar.** Self-efficacy may have been the most consistent theme in this study. Every single woman made comments related to her ability to understand the dissertation process, do the work, and complete the dissertation. They all expressed some feelings of short-coming or lack of preparedness for the dissertation itself. Choosing an acceptable research topic, constructing a literature review, and dealing with feedback were common themes in the responses.

P1 noted being told to scale down the size and scope of her study. She originally wanted to do a sweeping study that used a mixed methods approach to gather data on her topic. Her committee also felt that there was enough bias because of her experience with her topic that a third-party auditor would be necessary. Her most significant challenge was the literature review. She wished she better understood:

how to better read and compose the literature review ... I hate that. How to read and weave the documents, how to read the articles and find them 'cause up until my doctorate and the professor was like just look at those references because they relate to your study and I was like that is so easy but knowing how to read the articles like after reading them over and over things started clicking and just

having someone tell you how to read effectively and how to like compose the literature review

P2 and P3 experienced challenges with writing. P2 said the worst part was, “writing because I hate it. Probably I’ve always felt like my writing could improve. Learning, honing my APA style and then they change it and you’re like why bother.” P3 was facing significant criticism of her writing for the first time in her academic career. In her experience she was “being chastised for every period or comma and I didn’t really recognize the extent of it because I’ve never expressed it.” She didn’t like being told to write the chapters of her proposal out of order because for her a sequential process made more sense. When her writing fell short of her chair’s expectations, she said,

[My chair] told me she didn’t understand what I was writing. I wasn’t writing well. [She] told me to turn in a 12-page outline of chapter 2, told me to go to writing lab but they did not confirm what she said she was seeing. I paid editors who could not confirm what she was seeing. I went backwards, went back to chapter one laid it out all 51 pages of it and she still said she couldn’t follow it.

The friction with her chair has now led to her fighting to continue her degree. She complained that:

I never ran into anyone that told me I couldn’t write I spent three quarters re-editing paying for editors who said there nothing wrong and the last two quarters her marking me as non-satisfactory putting me in an academic situation where I’m having to go through an appeal to stay in the program.

P4 experienced uncertainty about how to begin her dissertation, saying, “I felt really unprepared not knowing a lot from the school like what do I need to do how do I start the process.” The gap between completing her studies and starting the dissertation left her uncertain about how to proceed. In her experience her greatest weakness was:

just being knowledgeable about the process and the expectations going into it. You start the class and you start the prospectus and just jump into it not knowing what to expect. I wanted more outline and what to expect instead of learning as I go; also, getting committee members which wasn't a process like I said there was a gap and no one was tracking that part. I didn't feel like I had a lot of support even getting a committee to start.

P5 noted, “I have enjoyed it but there have been some growing pains like I just didn't know what I was doing.” However, in her case she was very confident in her ability to do the work. She said, “I can read articles and I can break stuff down I can write up content that is like efficient.” For her the challenge was in understanding the process.

P6 was confident in her research abilities because of her school being a research university noting, “I've been connected with research from the beginning and I think that was critical because I wasn't like blinded with research when I hit the dissertation.” However, she felt unprepared for the level of criticism she received when she began to submit material for her dissertation. She said,

it seems like a more intense process a lot more critical feedback that I feel like I wasn't prepared for I mean I've gotten a lot of feedback before the doctoral

project I mean but a lot of critical feedback that I thought I would be prepared for but wasn't as prepared for in my brain.

P7 ran into challenges when she was left to set her own deadlines for the dissertation process. She said,

I just didn't know what was expected. I thought I had an idea of what this was going to look like and not having deadlines really kind of threw me off. I guess I kinda really work well with deadline and now I have a deadline. So, having that autonomy of just doing it on your own has been really challenging for me.

She continued,

This is a huge undertaking just because I've written papers before; this isn't a simple task. The outline have to be different they have to be more specific especially chapter two my God ... the outlining was a struggle for me cause I didn't know how to do it and coming up with a solid outline I had to revamp everything. There were times when I thought I knew what to do and my dissertation chair would be like "[P7] you have to do it like this" and different from how I normally do it.

All the participants noted at least some level of challenge in the process of crafting and writing the dissertation, with the most common complaints being uncertainty over the literature review and handling criticism of their writing.

**Determination to succeed.** Five of the women noted that their determination or discipline was a key element of their experience. There was a strong sense that these women were taking responsibility for the process and the outcome and were determined



to succeed even in the face of significant challenges. P1's school closed as she was finishing her proposal, but she refused to let that stop her. She found a school in another state that would take her and even her dissertation chair as an adjunct so she could finish her dissertation:

My drive like when I sit and think about my drive is insane ... I went back to visit old coworkers and she said to me, 'you've accomplished so much in the last two years.' And I was like dang I hadn't really been able to sit back and think about it 'cause I just been going like non-stop. Like, I gotta get through school I gotta do this I gotta do that. So, when I have time to think about it, I have accomplished a lot.

P2 also talked about the importance of her personal drive as a key factor in the dissertation process. For her the dissertation was the prize and no obstacles were going to keep her from achieving that goal. She referred to herself as a "question asker" who made sure "everything was laid out." P2 said,

For me, it's maintaining that self-discipline. People lose momentum get tired at the end of the race, but I'm built a little different ... I am a person who thinks outside of the box; so, where people see this, I see ten different strategies to go through. My dissertation is more than just a piece of paper. It's been my life. It's been my career. It's what got me into this.

P3 is currently under academic suspension and is fighting to remain in her doctoral program after two consecutive semesters where she and her chair have disagreed

about her topic and her self-efficacy. Her response to the suspension is to use it for motivation. She pointed out when she turned from despair to determination:

When I saw the actual potential to remove me from the program, my fight came back, and I decided that the only person who had a right to diminish my future and decide if I could be doctor was me. I had to realize that I had to defend my self-power to the fear that this person had a right to hold my life back. So I made a decision that I had to get it back so when I feel like that aspect of dissertation writing has clouded the other years. It took the joy away from the journey for some time.

P4 noted the threat of burnout due to the stress from the dissertation but said, I'm really determined to get it done. You can be burned out when you get to dissertation because you've done a lot of work and this is like the last hump and just want to get it done. That goes along with motivation because I just want to get it done.

For P5, her self-discipline was key to her progress in the dissertation process. She said, "I have self-discipline that has been engrained in me for such a long time [...] that discipline has always been there, and I know like I have always known I'm going to get this thing done." P5 summed up the most common theme in this area, "let me tell you this at the end of the day I'm going to finish this dissertation."

**Importance of religion.** Five of the participants made direct or indirect references to religion or God. P1 made references to thank God for getting into her program and praying that she would get the dissertation done. P2 said, "my faith is

another thing it is my stronger thing I'm not going to get into it with you I'm not going to argue with you or let you get inside my spirit." P5 was the most effusive about the role of her faith in her dissertation experience, noting:

With my second reader she's like my mentor too as far as my Christian belief. Like, were both Christian outside of like our committee I can go to her and be like talk stuff about like the word of god and our relationship with Jesus Christ and that has helped to ground me and just keep touch with who I am and keep that part of who I am intact more than just the personal rewards of getting the dissertation done. That definitely has been a good change its been important in my dissertation that I am a Christian

P6 and P7 used the word "blessed" to refer to their experience with the dissertation especially when talking about having the opportunity to pursue a doctoral degree. P7 used the words "blessed" and "lucky" interchangeably calling attention at one point to not knowing which was the more appropriate word to use.

The emergence of these individual traits is consistent with what Flynn et al. (2012) called personality traits. I chose to use the term individual traits because I would be hard-pressed to justify self-efficacy as a personality trait. Though Flynn et al. found that personality traits were mostly positive, in this case with the most common trait being perceptions of insufficient self-efficacy, I would say that the individual traits in this group were mixed in their effect on the experiences of these women with the dissertation.

## **Theme 2: Relationships as an Enabler**

Relationships are a key enabler for a student working on a dissertation, providing affirmation, encouragement, and expectation management (Berg, 2016). In fact, relationships have been shown as the key distinguisher between positive and negative dissertation experiences (Bhat et al., 2012; Burkard et al., 2014). In URM's, positive relationships reduce feelings of marginalization and isolation (Henfield et al., 2013). The relationships that were the most important to the women in this study were those with the dissertation chair/committee, cohort group, and their families.

**Team of experts.** All of the women talked about their experience with the dissertation chair and committee. Though most of the experiences were positive, P3 and P5 have had significant challenges with their dissertation chair. In a couple cases the chair was an important buffer when committee members and students disagreed over requirements or process.

When P1's school closed while she was in ABD status it could have been catastrophic for her chances of success. She worked tirelessly to find a school that would accept her previous work and allow her to complete her doctoral degree. She not only found a school in another state that would take not just her but also her dissertation chair (as an adjunct professor) so she could complete her dissertation. With a committee of strangers from a different state and a different school, the stability and relationship with the chair has been critical to a positive experience. When one of her committee members told P1 that she was too close to her subject and would need to hire a \$5000 research

committee to analyze her data, her chair intervened and resolved the disagreement. P1 said of her professor:

He's very supportive. He is crazy busy working at different schools and traveling a lot and I don't like to bother people after a certain hour or even on the weekends like business hours, but he is very available and says 'Call me any time. I'm available.' If he cannot pick up the phone like he always shoots me a text message like I'm in a meeting. I'll call you back he communicates a lot with me. So, it's been a very positive influence

P2 said, "I love my chair. My chair is awesome." However, P2 also admits her chair was born, raised, and educated in a southern state and that he "gravitates" more towards the white students with whom he is more comfortable than the African or Arab Americans in the class, though she excuses it with his age and upbringing. She said "he's 66 or 67 and with us being brown people is where he struggles. He's only worked in schools and went to school to get his PhD and then came here to [SOUTHERN STATE UNIVERSITY] and nothing else." Despite the challenges, P2 feels that she has a great relationship with her chair. She noted, "I've heard a lot that when there are people on the chair that don't get along it is hard on the student."

The experience of P3 seems to bear out that warning. I spoke to her a couple days after her chair had resigned. P3 reported, "a lot of hiccups that I've run into like the cultural competence of my chair." In her experience, it would have been better if she had been able to interview chairs and committee members "to see if there is a fit." P3 believes

that a thought process similar to the ACA Code of Ethics needs to come into play with dissertation chairs and committees. She said:

I would suggest all educators and supervisors need to do self-assessment. They need to define if a topic is beyond their competence the same way the code of ethics requires us not to operate outside our level of competence and not just assume that just because you have a doctorate that you are supposed to be an expert. It's hurtful. People have their own natural influences, and because of that you need to understand your trigger, your bias. Are you prepared to really assist this person with their topics?

P5 also had a challenged relationship with her chair. She said, "it just came across like she was trying to control (me). It was like she wasn't listening to me." P5 resented the suggestions from her chair on how to define African American women. She said, "She was like pushing and I was like you can't just keep pushing for everybody. You're not even bi-racial. You're White, a White woman and you need to pause. I was just like that that irritated me." She felt that the chair was interfering. "I just kept getting these vibes from her that she's not going to just let me pick the participants for the study. She brought in her personal biases in a professional setting and that's unfair to you that's unfair to the program." The relationship has soured the experience for P5.

What you've done to me since I've been working on this topic I'm just going to have to step out and say hey I don't think we work well together you know I'm looking for your professional consultation with my dissertation but you may have some other things going on that may be affecting you from doing your job as a

dissertation chair and I'm ok with that and it happens so it's definitely been life changing as far as like researching everything but my methodologist is fine second reader is fine but I'm just watching my chair right now and it just kinda sucks

P6 and P7 have great relationships with their dissertation chair. P6 has had a relationship with her chair because her master's program and felt that longevity and familiarity were key to her success.

I've been working with my chair she was my master advisor she's seen me become a counselor and going into counselor education been working together throughout the whole process. She is awesome. She knows me better than anyone else because we've worked together so much. She makes sure that I actually do what I say I'm going to do. So, even when I don't want to, she finds me when I'm trying to duck off.

Despite the great relationship, the shift to a higher program led to a concomitant shift in academic standards especially with regards to writing. P6 said "they have been a little more critical and it's kinda shocking."

P7 said, "I have an amazing dissertation chair so it's not like I don't have support." She noted that she knew others who did not have supportive chairs and committees, but that she felt very supported by her chair:

She will talk to my committee members when things need to get done so that has been positive. When I think about those times when I was frustrated and crying

she empathized and allowed me to keep pushing forward with words I needed to hear. Maybe I didn't care about them but needed to hear them

P7 was very deliberate in choosing her dissertation chair and committee. She generated some surprise in her academic community when she replaced two women of color on her committee with two White women saying, "I was looking to feel supported looking forward to knowing that what I was doing was correct and that I was heading in the right direction."

**Others on the path.** All seven of the women said that their cohort played a positive role in their experience. These cohorts varied from physical meetings to online chat groups and message boards. The sense of shared experience was important. Some of the cohort groups were consistent from lower degree programs through into the doctorate and dissertation. P1 spoke of the importance of that support.

I think that support is really needed. Like residencies get students together to work on each other's topics and like knowing who to go to like she's really good at lit reviews or she's really good at APA. Good with methodology etc. so different people you can have on your team to help out. It would have been good to have that network to empower and encourage each other they help you refine your topic or whatever you're going through and they're like ok cause we worked together.

P2 said she was "pretty close. I'm pretty close-knit with my classmates. We do projects together, and we go to conferences together." P3 noted how important developing a cohort network was, especially for students in online environments, saying



“you really need to establish a network of people you can vent to who understand. In your day to day if people haven’t endured doctorate, they don’t have a clue.” P3’s cohort group had remained largely constant since her master’s program.

P4 also called attention to the importance of cohort support in an online class and the loss of that community when she began her dissertation. She said:

Having other people in the process so cohort members in the same place I am as well as people ahead of me asking them how it is. My committee chair has been helpful getting me start giving me information like this is how this is going to go and this what to expect. The discussion boards and all the support from peers throughout the journey and then your just like on your own.

P5 was from a brick-and-mortar school but remarked on the shift in the dissertation to really working alone with little contact with other students. She noted the importance of:

even just like talking to others from my program. Like, they kinda know what I’m doing but they have been very supportive but that all they can give but I take it me having that support and being able to research and find things I can figure out what’s trash and what’s not what’s real and not. I don’t really have to go to the school I mean I can still go to the school but having a cohort the girls in my class like me so just the whole different topic but just like those people around me but your like completely isolated. I mean I can send a message and they’ll reply but not being on campus I feel like this is more of an independent process and that

really hit me at first I feel so isolated. And my chair was like good you should feel that way and I would say it really is isolating but that has been and I do a lot of my stuff at like home as far as my just not being in a classroom setting and being on my own here.

P6 said, “I have a really strong support system in and out of school ... they are rock stars.” P7 found opportunities within her cohort group for all of them to help one another with the process. She said, “I go on writing retreats with friends and share with them hey I’m stuck here or can you review this or read this so I’m lucky for those influences.”

It is significant that although there was no prompt in the interview protocol specific to cohorts, every participant mentioned the importance of that cohort network as a support structure in their dissertation. Praise and appreciation for the cohort group were consistent regardless of whether the participant was succeeding or struggling in her program.

**A family affair.** Mentions of family fell into two categories: support and challenge. Most mentions of family were extremely positive. P1 said, “my husband is so supportive; my daughter is like my number one cheerleader.” In P2’s experience, the support of her husband was “empowering.” P4 was the most effusive about her family and their support for her, especially from her mother who had experience with the process.

My husband is really supportive and encouraging me to just get through it and do what I have to do and supporting me in the process whether it’s

complaining about researching. When I want to stop he's like you got to keep going, and my mother she did an EdD so she didn't have to write a dissertation or anything had to do a capstone. So, she has been through the process she tells me it is endurance and perseverance. A lot [of people] get through classwork but don't get through capstone or dissertation.

P5 said that talking to her husband about the experience has been "really helpful."

For P6, "a very tight supportive circle" was central to her experience. Even when family members were not familiar with the dissertation, their support was important to the participant. P7 noted the importance of "people that ask what have you gotten done today. My partner is amazing he is not well versed in what it looks like to go through a dissertation or the PhD process but there are people that do understand."

### **Theme 3: The Complexity of Race**

Although none of the women called attention to their gender as significant in their experience, most of the participants mentioned the role race had in their experience. Only P1 and P4 did not mention race or bias in their interviews. Being African American in a doctoral program adds a layer of complexity and can lead to feelings of "marginalization, isolation, and alienation" (Dortch, 2016, 350). As previously mentioned, P2 experienced her chair gravitating towards whites and struggling with relating to "brown people" as she referred to the African and Arab American students in her program. She attributed the bias to the location of her school in a southern state, saying, "I think that they may not be intentional bias, but they are natural; it's [SOUTHERN STATE]."

P3 had the most to say about race. She said that it figured significantly into her experience and her challenges with her chair and other professors in her program. She said:

It's disheartening as an African American I had one professor a white professor who said, 'we are just alike.' I said explain how. She said, 'we're women and highly educated and we grew up impoverished.' And I was like I didn't know I was impoverished. My mother even though I was raised in a single parent my mother was high-end middle class, and she began to talk about the shame she felt from using food stamps and I was like oh my mother didn't qualify for public assistance. I said I'm a little disturbed that you are assuming that I'm like um because I'm black I was impoverished I said my problem with this conversation you're trying to tell me what my lived experience is but even in your impoverished state you can never correlate our two lives because my blackness put me in a different path than your whiteness even though you were in poverty

P3 also had a male supervisor who was White and homosexual who tried to equate their experiences because of their "outsider" status. She noted the dearth of African American professors at her university saying that they would not challenge the system because "they are worried about their jobs." P3 noted that she had heard from other African American women that they were having similar challenges getting their research topics approved.

I would love to say it only happened to me, but I can say that even people in different schools are experiencing the same issue. It's almost as if there is some unwritten plan to impede the progress of African American women who are seeking to complete doctoral programs, especially if they are working through challenging topics. People that are African American who are in the CES on theoretical perspective or therapeutic intervention are not experiencing the same things because it is not challenging the field or pointing the finger

P3 said that, in her experience, the discrimination and microaggressions toward those she referred to as "brown colored" people were "pushing people away from counseling." She lamented:

You can't understand the judgement on me because of my color and the judgment on my peers because of color that stops their successes. You expect to experience some discrimination in a program like this because you are going into an institution that you don't own, but the thing that takes you aback is the further you go up you hope to not find it at higher levels like you found it at lower especially in the counseling field you hope to find that people have decreased their discrimination and bias or at least become more aware but it doesn't happen that way. I wish it did, but it doesn't.

P3 attributed the lower graduation rates of African American students to burnout. She believes, “they are putting their best foot forward but it’s not good enough to meet the demands of the program.” She continued:

but the trauma of racism is huge, and it never dies it never dies you want to forget but it’s not that easy. I wish we had moved into a phase where we have eliminated racism and discrimination but we can’t but it reminds me of what I have to push for my grandkids and that’s the major thing being able to push past where people want to hold you back and they may not realize they are holding you back but their actions. That they may not see that power because it is automatic power from being an authority and educator one of the anxiousness that I have that my ability to move forward was in the hands of someone that could cut it off or move it forward. Like that nuclear weapon button someone else could control and I have no say. I wouldn’t want anyone to experience what I’ve felt in the last phase of my program unfortunately some people take their lives some people have nervous breakdowns. I just wouldn’t want another person to experience the heaviness that experience of being the slave and being broken.

P5 experienced similar challenges with non-African American faculty interfering with her chosen delimitations in her study. The chair was trying to broaden P5’s definitions of female and African American to include transgender and biracial participants. She said her chair was “trying to silence my voice.” The issue eventually

boiled into conflict with the chair. P5 said, “she was just like pushing and I was like you can just keep pushing for everybody you’re not even biracial you’re white you’re a white woman you need to pause I was just like that that irritated me.” She continued:

I’ve had my issues within the program just being a black woman and also dealing with colorism for whatever reason. I didn’t even realize how crazy it. I’m not a light-skinned or fair-skinned woman. I’m a brown-skinned woman. That just confirms everything that I’ve been reading about African American women who still identify as black women but were African American. How we’ve been silenced for so long about the things that we need to keep ourselves fully valued you silence me and you tell me I’m being exclusive and discriminatory. It’s just like it was mind-blowing

P6 noted the importance of understanding how her race was a factor, saying “knowing that I’m a black woman it’s a real thing and it’s a real factor that I have to take into consideration because there are some things that I just won’t get picked for because I am a black woman.” She talked about the challenges of negotiating the university system:

Systemic oppression is real, and there are these different people that had opportunities. However, I also realize like it’s almost like I had to work twice as hard just to get it, and its unfortunate but I realize it has been my reality. Like I said, those things are still real even in this time we talk about within counseling. It’s one thing to read about it and another to experience it to prepare someone for that we start seeing those barriers and challenges and I got to figure out how to get through them. Who I am, my

experience my experience as a black woman has been different than my white counterparts going to a PWI [predominantly White institution]. Those resources are around me but my experience has been different because I wasn't taught from the beginning how to utilize them so I had to learn the back ropes. So I went and called it is oppressive in one way, but I realize that people of color have to learn to work the system so it can work for them um and so those types of things just come with the territory.

P7 talked about challenges she experienced referring to imposter syndrome wherein she sometimes experienced thoughts that she didn't belong in this world, that she had not earned her place. She believes universities see African Americans differently, noting "So I've been told that the program sees individuals black individuals as either a good black person or a bad or problem black person. So like all the black students got put in these boxes and you could tell. So those are things we had to navigate in a regular basis." She continued:

With this experience there have been a lot of things that have made me reflect a little more like being a young black woman in this dissertation process had made me see what I can accomplish, what I have the opportunity to accomplish ... but really having to think about what it's like being a black woman in the PWIs [predominantly White institutions] and that's where I've predominately been. Just having to learn how to navigate those spaces having been in that herd is part of my own personality but I do feel like race comes into that ... in the beginning it



was tough because you don't always have those mentors to tell you how to think about all the different identities. Like a point of reflection for me who am I why am I doing this. Like it's an honor for me to be doing this, not just for my family and my ancestors, it's an honor that people in CES want to read my stuff because I know I have something significant to say in this field. So yes, there is something to be able to say as a young black woman I was able to accomplish this and in the CES space to be able to be recognized as Doctor P7.

She talked about the importance of standing up for herself and making her voice heard when she experienced demeaning or discriminating treatment, saying "these are people that we need to let hear our voice about these things like incidents of microaggression and the permanence of that racism there are stuff and even I guess the biggest thing like being looked at differently."

None of the questions in my interview protocol were specific to the race of the participant. Although it may have been obvious from the title and the advertisement that my study was exploring the experiences of African American women writing dissertation, I never prompted any of these women to talk about race. It arose naturally in the conversation as they talked about their experiences. That it arose so consistently shows how significant race was to these women in how they experienced their dissertation and their relationships in the university systems.

#### **Theme 4: Challenges to Overcome**

Barriers to completion was one of the factors that Flynn et al. (2012) identified as consistent across every realm in their study. In this study, nearly every participant rejected the label of barriers to completion preferring to refer to instead to challenges that they encountered. The general idea seemed to be that a barrier was insurmountable whereas a challenge was something that could be or had been overcome. Though semantic in nature, the unwillingness of these women to accept the label of barriers may provide an avenue for better understanding how these perceived challenges affect the experience. These challenges mostly fell into three categories: school, work, and life.

**Academic support.** P1 faced an incredible challenge when her school closed before she could complete her dissertation. She reached out to the parent school, the state, and even the ACA. She felt like she was “not being supported” and that “there was no way I’m going to be able to get this done.” She found a school in another state that would accept her and let her finish her dissertation but now finds herself at a distance from the resources of that school. She said:

I can’t go to the school to the writing lab I can’t go and submit papers and go to the library I thought about going to my old school to see if I could use their writing center [...] I didn’t use it in my master’s thesis but it would have helped me with the feedback and reassurance I need sometimes to sit and talk to someone.

For P5 the challenge in her school has been finding someone willing to take on quantitative research in the CES program at her school. She said:

I just feel like I've been trying to just do and have the support that has been a challenge because I can't just go to anyone. I have to have someone in the CES program and the people who are left are like they have their own biases about certain stuff. I wish there were other faculty members who did quantitative work and I would be able to get the support that I need for my study

These challenges may have been particular to P5's school, because a study of 38 CACREP-accredited doctoral programs found that 54% of all dissertations submitted for CES doctorates were quantitative (Borders et al., 2015). For P7 her challenges with the school were racial in nature. She said:

I think we see it (systemic racism) the representation in our faculty when I chose my faculty to be part of my committee there was only one black person and she didn't even identify as black she identified as biracial. So, there weren't lots of black people to choose from or to reach out to find someone. So, these other women even though they were women of color they couldn't really understand my experience and that's why I focus more on race than culture its more specific.

As previously noted, the women who participated in this study came from various education delivery platforms. Three were from online CES doctoral programs, Three were at brick-and-mortar schools, and the final one was attending a brick-and-mortar in another state that required her to travel to the campus for events like defenses and meetings. Despite differences in delivery mechanism and location, the schools

themselves presented similar challenges for the students in terms of faculty, resources, and support.

**Responsibilities of work.** Although work experience has been shown to contribute to self-efficacy and success in CES programs (Farmer et al., 2017), work is also a potential source of conflict and can intrude upon the time necessary to complete a dissertation. P1 said that it “was kind of like stressful, the supervisor I had at the time, not being able to practice like self-care it was exhausting and mentally draining.” In P1’s experience, this was especially challenging in jobs that can reach out to you after business hours, saying “like if they work 8-5 they still get called at night and on the weekend. Supposed to be their family time and they’re still calling them and bothering them.”

P3 noted the challenge of “the normal day to day ritual of working full time doing a dissertation having a family and balancing those things learning how to shut everything down when you are writing.” For P5 the challenge was significant enough that she had decided to reduce her hours at work to free up more time to work on the dissertation. P7 was able to experience the dissertation with and without work. Initially she was a fellowship student but decided to start working to have some extra money. She said:

After being a fellow, I was like, I need to work. I spent a couple years being a fellow and like living off that income if you want to call it income and decided into candidacy, I wanted to go back to what I was doing. I wanted to go back to make money. I was like I can work and come home and work on my dissertation just wanted to like pay off debt and have that

money in my pocket and I saw people doing it and so like just going into the job I was making money and that was important for me. Important for me to have a consistent salary and that was a barrier because I knew about my finances and that job put me in a position where I wasn't able to work on my dissertation. Not just on time but emotions I mean like that was the worst job I've ever worked in my life. And so kinda dealing with that was a barrier for sure.

It makes sense that anything with a forced time commitment like work would limit the amount of free time that students have to spend working on or thinking about the dissertation. A couple of the women noted that keeping a notebook on hand to capture ideas about the dissertation helped them to not feel completely disconnected from the process while away at unrelated work. Balancing work and school is something these women have to contend with.

**Life goes on.** Of course, life does not stand still for these women as they work on their dissertations. P1 planned a wedding in the midst of her dissertation. P1 also had emotional challenges because of the difficulties she experienced. She said, "Of course, I'm experiencing bouts of depression not knowing what's going to happen with the school. It was overwhelming and frustrating." P5 got pregnant and decided that to avoid additional stress she would take time away from her dissertation. Because it was the summer, the break had a limited effect on her progress, though the presence of a child has its own challenges:

Because I want to like stay at home when she needs me. Sometimes, I'm like in the middle of writing and it's like I just can't think right now. So sometimes I have to like push back some time that kind of happens I work part time so I can have my own little money which has played a role in me getting some things done. The good thing is I still take notes when something comes up in my mind but that probably like my biggest barrier

P7 struggled with her personal relationships and noted how important it was for her to compartmentalize, "being like ok I can deal with that but realizing that it seeps into other things because I'm not devoting as much time into reading or writing because part of me is still consumed with what else I'm dealing with over here.

### **General Narrative of the Phenomenon**

Challenging. Educational. Disheartening. Interesting. Life-changing. Intense. Exhausting. These are the words these African American women used to describe their lived experience while working on dissertations in CES doctoral programs. The dissertation is only one part of the doctoral process, but it is the part that these women found to be the most challenging.

In many cases, dissertation not only challenged them academically, it frequently challenged their own ideas about themselves and their identity as scholars. Identity is central to their experience, and engagements with dissertation committees that were critical were often internalized as criticisms of the individual scholar rather than the work. Every participant in this study mentioned self-efficacy challenges. Although some were aware of these shortfalls prior to the dissertation, most seem to have become aware

of their need for scholarly improvement during the dissertation. Most said that they could have been better prepared by the university system for the transition to independent research in the dissertation. Most of the women noted that their discipline and determination was a critical piece of their identity that would eventually lead to their success in the dissertation. Most mentioned religion as important to their identity in this experience.

All participants found relationships important to their experience. They all mentioned the importance of the relationship with their dissertation chair and committee. All of the women experienced their cohort as playing a positive role in their experience. They relied on their friends and colleagues to help them through this trying time. Most experienced relations with family as positive, though some mentioned family as a challenge as family responsibilities required time away from studies. Race was significant part of nearly all of these women's identities as it related to the experience. None of the women said that their gender was a major contributing factor to their experience, but most mentioned how their race had impacted their lived experience.

Many of the students reported difficulty in finding support for their topic or methodology within their university systems. The requirement to work was a challenge for most of the participants. Only one reported having a fellowship, but even that was insufficient for daily expenses and she sought a job instead of the fellowship. Life and living present their own challenges, and a few of the women talked about challenges in their personal life and relationships that affected their experience.

### **General Summary of the Phenomenon**

African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program are keenly aware of the influence their race has on their experience. They notice when instructors give them less attention or their ideas less weight and attribute the slight to their race. They experience predominately-White academia as outsiders. They are acutely aware of differences in how prepared they are to leverage university resources like libraries, which they attribute to less effective formative education. They are confident in their abilities as a scholar but expresses significant discomfort with the unfamiliar structure of the dissertation. Their earlier research or schoolwork did not adequately prepare them for the challenge of the dissertation. Their discomfort leads to experiencing feelings of insecurity when facing less-well understood elements like the literature review. They may for the first time in their academic career be experiencing significant critical feedback that challenges their sense of self as a future teacher, supervisor, and scholar. Though most if not all doctoral students face initial research hurdles, these women are more sensitive to the negative criticism and have a hard time not taking it personally. Whereas they were often provided the base material for research work in their studies they are for the first time responsible for finding relevant research on their own. These women mostly find their dissertation chairs and committees to be positive support systems, though there are sometimes personality conflicts and insensitivities to race that create additional challenges. When dissertation chairs challenge the acceptability of their chosen research topic, these women are personally insulted that their idea does not meet with approval. Personal support structures like peers and family are extremely important



to creating a positive experience for these women. They experience an intense bond with other minorities in doctoral programs who face many of the same challenges. They believe that they have a personal responsibility to help others who will follow in their footsteps and want to ease the challenges for that future generation. The lived experiences of African American women in the CES dissertation are unique and significant to how they interpret the dissertation experience and in turn themselves in the context of that experience.

### **Connecting to the Theoretical Framework**

Heidegger (1962) used the concept of *Dasein* (German for “there is,” colloquially used to mean presence) to refer to the essence of a being situated in its context. This essence of the individual does not exist independent of the environment in which it exists and cannot be set aside. Heidegger challenged Descartes assertion that thought is equal to being, because the essence of being precedes the potential for thought. The thinker “is,” but there is an underlying essential being that predates and enables the thinker. My ideas about myself and my experiences are filtered through the lens of me and informed by my past, present, and ideas of the future. My *Dasein* is the lens through which any attempt to understand the *Dasein* of my participants must pass. Throughout this experience, I have sought to explore how my essential being affects my attempts to understand the essence of these women and their experiences with this CES dissertation. Though Heidegger did not believe it was possible to totally set aside this fore-structure, he felt it necessary to try to do so to the extent possible in the name of approaching scientific integrity in research involving the interpretation of experience.

I began this process as a partial insider to the phenomenon I wanted to study. I am a woman in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program. Although I am not African American, some of my expectations were shaped by my insider experience of the other aspects of the phenomenon. The effect on my *Dasein* began as soon as I started to survey the existing research on the dissertation and the experiences of women and minorities. I realized how deep and prevalent the challenges were for some students, especially minority women. Though I understood my own challenges, I realized how fortunate I have been to always feel supported and included by university faculty.

Before I started interviews, I began by writing down my own experience so that I could get an idea of how my own experience might shape my expectations. By capturing my own experience, I hoped to recognize when my own *Dasein* might exert influence on my interpretations of the experiences of my participants. During the interviews, I focused on allowing the participants to fully express their experience. I relied on my experience as a counselor to remain non-judgmental and allow their experience to emerge in their own words with limited probing from my end.

As I listened to the stories of these women, I found my *Dasein* affected as I realized through the hermeneutic circle, that I would one day be a professor and likely a dissertation committee member and chair. It will be important to me to understand that the experiences of these women, and the common themes would likely be represented in my own students. I resolved to remember this experience and the challenges these women faced when dealing with my own students. As I began to process the interviews afterwards and develop themes, I was again reminded of some of the commonalities of

the experiences of these women and how I might build support into the plan for my students. By offering my students suggestions on how to face and overcome challenges that it seems likely they would encounter based on these interactions, I could potentially help alleviate some of the uncertainty and stress.

Finally, in writing up the narratives and summaries of the stories of my participants, I came full circle back to my own experiences. I see in front of me on the page my early impressions, my development as a researcher in expanding my knowledge on the subject, my recognition of a problem, my development of a study, my interactions with these women, my analysis of their experience, and finally my interpretation of their lived experience and it's lasting effect on my own perceptions going forward.

My participants each have their own unique *Dasein*, their own interpretation of themselves in their own contexts. The commonalities suggest an interpretation of a group *Dasein* that transcends the particular individual in favor of a group identity within a shared context. Though each participant is a unique individual, I could begin to see that there is enough commonality in the experience that I could argue for a *Dasein* of an African American woman working on a CES dissertation.

As the women spoke with me, they frequently spoke of their strength and determination to overcome diversity. I witnessed their own hermeneutic circles as they spoke frequently of how they would help other African American women in this process. In these moments in their minds they were already on the other side of this challenge and looking back on how they would help others along the path. They spoke of the help they would offer that they themselves wished to have received. Additionally, the act of talking

about their experiences was emotional for some of the women. More than one said they were surprised to have this level of emotion while talking about these experiences and noted that they needed to spend some time with those emotions and process the experience. It is an important reminder of the ideographic nature of experience as personally situated and perpetually cyclic. The *Dasein* of these participants was influenced by their interaction with me and my study. It speaks to the responsibility of researchers of lived experience that the very act of interacting with the participant creates an experience itself that will become a part of the overall experience of the participant with the studied phenomenon.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness, I followed the advice of Smith et al. (2009) based on the work of Lucy Yardley. Yardley wrote that the quality of qualitative research depended on four factors: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigor; transparency and coherence; as well as impact and importance. Sensitivity to context was built into this study by its ideographic nature; the whole point was to understand the experiences of these women from their own words. Additionally, I conducted a thorough review of literature related to the experiences of African American women in doctoral programs to include CES programs to better understand the context of the experience. Commitment and rigor were demonstrated in the way I conducted interviews and selected my participants. I did not take notes during these interviews, relying on recording methods that I reviewed later so that the participants could see that I was completely engaged with them and interested in their experience. I selected participants who were African

American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program deliberately to ensure homogeneity and relevance to the research question. Transparency and coherence were ensured through a thorough explanation of the methodology and by following a recommended protocol for the analysis and theme determination through IPA methods. Finally, impact and importance are asserted by the commonality of themes that arose through the analysis and their potential to improve experiences for other students from similar demographics.

### **Summary**

The dissertation is a significant transition in the life as a student and researcher and has been called a rite of passage likened to the transition from childhood to adulthood (Straforini, 2015). The experiences of these women were remarkably consistent with most of the literature in the field. The biggest gap in the alignment of their experiences with the Flynn et al.'s (2012) Emergent Theory was the centrality of race to their experience of the dissertation process. All of Flynn et al.'s domains were found in the experiences of these women: impact of the environment, competing influences, personality traits, chair influence, committee function, and barriers to completion. Differences in semantics (barrier vs. challenge) might be attributable to the mostly White participants used in the Flynn et al. study. In the next chapter I will discuss these findings and offer interpretations in line with existing research as well as a set of recommendations on how the experiences of these women can be harnessed and applied to improve the experiences of other African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this IPA study was to understand the lived experience of African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program. I explored the experience of seven African American women through individual interviews. Flynn et al. (2012) had previously explored factors related to completion of a CES dissertation finding that barriers to completion and competing influences had the most bearing on the successful completion of their participants. However, fewer than 5% of Flynn et al.'s participants were African American, so I additionally explored whether the factors identified in their study aligned with the experiences of the women with whom I spoke.

In this chapter I will interpret the results of this study in the context of the literature explored in Chapter 2 to see where commonalities exist and where this study has filled some gaps in expanding an understanding of the experiences of African American women with the CES dissertation. I will also discuss recommendations based on the results. Finally, I will discuss the implications for social change of my research.

### **Interpretation**

The primary research question for this study was “What is the lived experience of African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program?” The question was brought on by an initial look at demographics for CES doctoral students related to enrollment and graduation. I noticed the significant difference between enrollment and graduation and wondered what the problem was. As I looked further into the problem, I began to see that African American women were facing an exceptional

challenge. After studying existing literature on doctoral attrition, I spoke with seven African American women to get an understanding of their lived experiences.

Four primary themes emerged from my interviews with seven African American women CES doctoral students: feeling different from others, relationships as an enabler, the complexity of race, and challenges to overcome. Though the participants largely rejected the idea that there were barriers to completion, they did identify a variety of school, home, and work challenges that affected their experience. Likewise, the label “competing influences” did not resonate with these women. But other factors identified by Flynn et. al (2012) such as personality traits, chair influence, committee function, and impact of the environment were represented in the experiences of these women.

### **Feeling Different from Others**

Individual traits were a significant factor in the experiences of these women with the most significant trait being their perceptions of their self-efficacy. All the women identified various areas where they did not feel prepared for the dissertation. Because low self-efficacy has been correlated with attrition in CES programs (Willis & Carmichael, 2011) and dissertation completion (Gomez, 2013), especially in online environments (Rockinson et al., 2016), this is an important aspect of these women’s experience. In one study, the stage that led to most minority attrition was the development of a plan for the study (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). Low self-efficacy results in difficulty developing a dissertation plan or even identifying and justifying a topic (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). Many students do not know where to begin and experienced feedback that they interpreted as their writing not being good enough (Locke & Boyle, 2016). Psychological

factors like the threshold transition of beginning a dissertation can lead to fear, insecurity, and procrastination (Straforini, 2015). But skill and identity as a researcher develop at different rates (Lamar & Helm, 2017). It is also important to recognize that lack of adequate advising has been correlated with poor perceptions of self-efficacy in students (Locke & Boyle, 2016). Conversely, strong mentorship improves outcomes for minority students (Patel, 2017). This finding on the centrality of self-efficacy is consistent with many studies in the last several years (Burkard et al., 2014; Dortch, 2016; Gomez, 2013; Kelley & Salisbury, 2016; Lamar & Helm, 2017; Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011; Locke & Boyle, 2016; Olive, 2014; Ponton, 2014; Rockinson et al., 2016; Rovai, 2014).

In addition to self-efficacy, an individual trait that was well-represented in the experiences of these women was the role of religion, faith, and religious language. References to God, faith, Christ, blessings, prayer, and spirit were made by most of the women when talking about their experiences. Similar references to God and prayer by African American counselor educators were noted by previous researchers like Haskins et al. (2014). Despite frequent use of language with religious association, only two of the women directly talked about the role of their faith, scripture, and relationship with God as an aspect of their experience with the CES dissertation.

The individual trait that seemed to counteract feelings of low self-efficacy in these women most was their determination and discipline. Despite insecurity about self-efficacy these women are confident in their own abilities. Self-reported confidence in students has been correlated with a positive experience and successful completion of dissertations (Burkard et al., 2014). At present all of these women, though they are at



various phases of their dissertation, seem like they are on a personal trajectory toward completion. Succeeding despite obstacles and proving oneself were both identified as motivators that were important to the pursuit and completion of a CES doctoral program (Hinkle et al., 2014). I got the sense that were I to follow up with these women several years from now that every one of them would have overcome the self-efficacy challenges and completed their dissertations. To themselves, these women were doctors except for the dissertation, and nothing was going to stop them from taking that final step. They continue moving toward their goal aware that their face and skin color mark them as different from most of the students around them.

### **Relationships as an Enabler**

It is clear from the interviews of these women that the relationship with and influence of the dissertation chair and committee play a significant role in the how they have experienced the CES dissertation process. Although Flynn et al. (2012) separated chair influence and committee function in their analysis, in this study the two were completely intertwined and interactive within the experience of these women. In previous studies, the relationship with the dissertation chair was positively correlated with the final characterization of the dissertation experience (Burkard et al., 2014). The relationship with the dissertation advisor has been of primary importance to the experiences of African American women (Bhat et al., 2012). Poor relations with faculty increase feelings of isolation and marginalization leading to higher attrition, especially for URM students (Henfield et al., 2013; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). Therefore, the relationships with the chair and committee as well as the relationship between the chair and committee

members are important, especially when there are disagreements about a student's dissertation process or product.

After chair and committee relations, cohort relationships figured prominently in the experiences of these women with the CES dissertation. Support groups and peer relationships are important to the formation of professional identity for CES students (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Dortch, 2016). Even when controlling for gender and field of study, support from peers has been an important predictor of successful completion of the dissertation (Kelley et al., 2016). Previous research has also noted the importance of socialization to satisfaction and completion for African American women in doctoral programs (Rockinson-Szapklw et al., 2014)

Further, family relationships were largely a positive factor in the experiences of these women. Supportive relationships with family members contribute to feelings of self-efficacy and subsequent success in doctoral programs (Dortch, 2016). This support has been found to be even more important for minority doctoral completion (Lerma et al., 2015). Perhaps this contribution to success is because family members are uniquely poised to appreciate challenges that URM students face (Berg, 2016). Flynn et al. (2015) largely address the importance of family support in the realm of an environmental impact, noting that access to the support and potential benefits like childcare and physical space within the family home for research work contribute to CES dissertation completion. It has also been shown that integrating the family with academic, economic, and social variables has a positive correlation with persistence; although none of the latter factors were significant in isolation (Rockinson et al., 2016).

## **The Complexity of Race**

Critical race theory supports the idea that race and racism affect the lives of persons of color and that White privilege exists and perpetuates a hierarchy through institutional discrimination (Baker & Moore, 2015; Henfield et al., 2013). Though my study focused on the experiences of African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program, not one of the women called attention to her gender as a factor except in the context of race (e.g., “black woman,” “woman of color,” “brown-skinned woman,” and “African American women”). Thus, race was a significant factor in the experiences of these women, but their gender was a secondary consideration and only when attached to comments about how race played into their experience. Gender may be considered less of a factor in the African American population as two thirds of all doctoral degree earners among African Americans are women (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Despite the lack of reference to gender in this study, it is important for the field, as women report discrimination at twice the rate of men and two-times fewer publications than CES men (Haskins et al., 2016). Additionally, a meta study of 2,068 doctoral students found that women were 16% less likely than men to finish their programs (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). Women have also experienced greater gender stress and expectations of maintaining normative roles while navigating academic life (Carter et al., 2012).

African Americans in doctoral programs have reported “marginalization, isolation, and alienation” (Dortch, 2016, 350). Minority students have a harder time finding representative mentors, especially in predominantly White institutions (Berg,

2016). Feelings of isolation, disrespect by faculty, and disconnection have negatively affected the experiences of African Americans in graduate programs (Henfield et al., 2013). Poor representation in faculty and student bodies create additional challenges for African American women in postgraduate education (Zeligman et al., 2015). Despite the challenges presented by race, these women all expressed a strong professional identity, which has been shown to improve doctoral persistence in minority students (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016).

Several of the women talked about standing up to racism and the role that their continued education has played in developing in them the confidence to confront racism when they encounter it. Microaggressions were mentioned multiple times but were never fully defined by the women in terms of what they considered to be microaggressions. Several types of microaggressions as an African American on a university campus are calling out false pity, condescension, dismissal of White privilege, and allusions to affirmative action in the presence of minorities (Walters, 2018). Improving cultural competency within faculty can improve overall climate within universities (Baker & Moore, 2015). But not all research has found race as a negative factor, and for CES programs African Americans have earned more doctorates than any other minority (Bhat et al., 2012).

### **Challenges to Overcome**

Flynn et al. (2012) reported numerous barriers to completion as negatively affecting the dissertation experience for CES students. But my participants all rejected the idea of a barrier because it seemed to convey an immutability that they did not accept.

The participants in my study talked about challenges they faced as things to be overcome and not as something stopping their progress. These challenges are related to things that interfere with the opportunity to work on the dissertation more so than the self-efficacy elements already discussed. Although low self-efficacy can present challenges, the focus here is on external challenges. Challenges arose from various domains within the participants' lives but mostly centered around school, work, and life.

School is a center of gravity for the student. Whether a physical campus or an online platform, school is where the student interacts with instructors and other students, where they receive feedback on their own work and development, and where they access resources essential to developing a professional identity. Even in online schools, face-to-face residencies are important to persistence (Johnson, 2015). Some of the challenges faced by these women were related to the faculty at the schools. Poor cultural competence was raised a number of times with everything from subtle racism to insensitivity. Further, researchers like Berg (2016) have called attention to widespread underrepresentation of minorities in university faculty, which is problematic because minority faculty better appreciated the challenges faced by these students.

Work was also a challenge that complicated the dissertation experience of most of my participants. In the literature work has been found to be a double-edged sword. External factors like money are incredibly important to the success of the dissertation (Straforini, 2015). However, work responsibility has been previously identified as a significant and common challenge for URMs (Berg, 2016). Work is important enough to the development of doctoral students that the CACREP (2015) has suggested a period of

counseling work post-master's and pre-doctoral. Although counseling work has been shown to be beneficial to doctoral students it was not shown to improve confidence in research and teaching (Farmer et al., 2017). Work on campus such as research apprenticeships have been correlated with higher completion rates (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). Work environments expose African Americans to higher discrimination and bias and higher rates of depression and stress (Haskins et al., 2016).

Home life is another source of challenge for these women. Because most of their dissertation work is done at home, these challenges can be especially impactful on the process. The dissertation is a major life experience and invariably sacrifices must be made within the personal sphere to carve out the time necessary to complete such a monumental task. Relationships at home play a significant role in how CES students perceive their experience in the doctoral programs (Burkard et al., 2014). One of the challenges of independence in the dissertation often conducted in a home environment is self-regulation (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). Most of my participants agreed with the challenges of managing their time in the dissertation process due to work and home distractions.

The most interesting thing about listening to the rejection of these women of the label barriers as defined by Flynn et al. (2012) and the preference for the word "challenge" was that there seems to be an inevitability in these women's minds of the completion of the dissertation and success in the doctoral program. The women developed techniques like notetaking during periods where they could not be working on the dissertation. In a couple cases they took a break from the dissertation so that they

could focus on career or family. These were temporary interludes followed by a renewal of attention and effort on the dissertation. For these women nothing was going to prevent them from reaching their goals.

### **Limitations**

The size of the participant pool is a limitation. This study illuminates the lived experiences of seven African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program. As such, these themes, though important to these women, cannot be directly generalized to other African American women in other programs. Even the extension to other African American women in CES programs should not be assumed without additional efforts to establish these themes as relevant to the experiences of other African American women in CES programs. This study did not include African American men or other minorities of any gender and cannot be considered to be generalizable to other minority groups.

Time was another limitation as the interviews were scheduled to run about an hour. These were short interactions with these women that could not possibly capture every aspect of their experience. The entirety of my interaction with these women including time spent communicating by was less than a couple weeks. Longer interactions could have elicited more rich responses, though by the seventh interview, I felt I had reached saturation with regards to the common themes that were emerging.

A final limitation is that I only spoke to women who had not yet completed a dissertation. It cannot be determined at this time if all or any of these women will ultimately complete the dissertation. These experiences are a snapshot of someone

currently in the process of the dissertation. By focusing on women who had not yet completed their dissertation there may be elements that contribute to successful completion that were not able to be captured in this study.

### **Recommendations for Action**

With the themes that emerged from my conversations with these women, I settled on some recommendations to improve negative elements of the experience while sustaining the positive elements. Some of the clearest challenges faced by my participants were the cultural competence of faculty and supervisors and their own research self-efficacy. Cohort networking and a desire to give back to the community were key strengths that should be sustained. Finally, I make a recommendation regarding teach-out programs as an important safety net for students.

Many of the women I talked to had challenges with the cultural competency of their chair, supervisor, or other committee members. Efforts should be made to offer training cultural competence of faculty members especially with regards to interacting and communicating with minority students. Training on what can be considered microaggressions in interactions minorities for faculty and other students could help improve the climate in which minority students operate. Universities could publish details of their training programs and goals related faculty training to improve transparency and demonstrate their efforts at inclusivity. More research is necessary to understand the role of race in the topic selection of African American women. This research could study interactions with dissertation chairs and African American to see how those interactions are shaping topic selection and methodology development. Students who are motivated



by a personal connection to their topic finish their dissertations faster than other students (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). Finally, several the women with whom I talked faced challenges in identifying faculty who were versed in their desired methodology or subject. Universities could provide an avenue for introducing students to various faculty and their specialties and research methodologies through a regular newsletter or online social platform. Lack of adequate advising also creates challenges with student confidence and self-efficacy (Locke & Boyle, 2016).

Universities could explore the establishment of programs focused on research self-efficacy and the dissertation process, especially the literature review. Every one of the women with whom I talked expressed some level of frustration with their ability to research and write the dissertation. Self-efficacy has been correlated positively with dissertation completion (Gomez, 2013). One way that has been shown to improve self-efficacy is to have students publish scholarly research earlier in their program (Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011). Universities may consider a writing club moderated by faculty with the purpose of preparing student writing for publication. Another option is workshops focused on specific aspects of the dissertation. Facilitators could be faculty or students are further along in the dissertation process to discuss research, writing, or creation of a literature review.

Universities can provide avenues to establish and maintain cohort networks between students with particular emphasis on students shifting into the dissertation phase where they are increasingly isolated from their peers. Avenues can include online forums, physical meetings, or trips to conferences or other academic engagement opportunities.

Another study of African American women also found that peer and community support, especially in the form of writing groups, were important to success in doctoral programs (Dortch, 2016). All of the women with whom I spoke expressed a desire to help other students who were new to the process. The experience of senior students or recent graduates could be used to moderate or lead these forums and provide advice and support to student. Community has been identified as a critical component for minority success in White dominated institutions (Baker & Moore, 2015). Universities have an opportunity to help facilitate community by dedicating resources to develop and strengthen cohort networks. Walden University recently started a program called “Tapestry: Graduate Students of Color—Sister Circle” to facilitate mentoring and interaction between African American CES students and professionals. Monthly meeting focus on topics like collaboration, self-care, and work-life balance. It is an idea supported by these findings, but more research is necessary to see if such programs improve outcomes for African American CES students.

Finally, Teach-out programs are an essential safety net and should be required of any accredited program. CACREP took the important step of providing exceptions to some of the accreditation standards for schools that were accepting students when Argosy University closed in 2018, leaving students in 5 CACREP Masters Mental Health Counseling programs and 4 doctoral CES programs stranded with limited options. Such reactionary accommodation is admirable but a proactive and established process would be better for students. For one of my participants the lack of this safety net was a significant source of stress and she felt under-supported by the school, state, and the

ACA. Having a teach-out plan should be part of any CACREP accreditation package so that in the event of institutional failure, students are not left scrambling to find their own way.

### **Implications for Social Justice**

Less than 4% of college professors are African American women (Walters, 2018). Without attention to the experiences of African American women in the dissertation phase of doctoral programs like CES, universities are accepting this as the status quo into perpetuity. The lack of minority representation on faculty is tied to a number of factors negatively affecting the experiences and outcomes of URM students in doctoral programs, especially in the dissertation process. Understanding the experience of African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program is critical to improving the experience and increasing the success rate. The women I spoke to all see themselves as leaders with important things to say about the field of CES.

African American women are completing doctoral programs at lower rates than men and Whites. It is essential that educational institutions investigate and address this disparity. This study conforms with much of the literature that the dissertation has been the most difficult phase of the doctoral program for the seven women I talked to. It makes sense that half of all doctoral attrition occurs in the dissertation phase (Burkard et al., 2014). Aside from the dissertation itself the institutional environment has created its own difficulties for the women with whom I spoke. Poor cultural competence in word choice and action negatively impacted the experience of most of my participants. Institutions should capitalize on the strength and impact of cohort networks on this population to

improve outcomes. Further studies should explore the generalizability of the themes found in this study and attempt to measure the level of effect to maximize investment and improve outcomes.

Efforts could be made to identify and investigate schools with high diversity but very low graduation rates to determine where these schools are failing their largely minority student populations. Argosy University had a student population that was nearly 70% minority students yet less than 6% of its students received degrees. A full third of those that did graduate were White men (Argosy, 2020). The admirable efforts at increasing diversity begin to seem predatory when looked at through the lens of the outcomes for most minority students in that less than 4% ever saw a degree from an institution that accepted hundreds of millions in federal financial grants and loans, for which these students are responsible regardless of outcome. Walden University needs to explore its 12% graduation rates for CES students, especially because 69% of Walden CES students identify as African American or Black (Walden, 2018).

Having to work creates significant challenges for the majority of women in this study. Expanding fellowship options to ease the burden while offering these women the opportunity to serve as mentors for other African American women at various stages of the education journey could contribute to reducing one common negative theme while bolstering one of the most positive themes. Increasing fellowship opportunities can also increase student exposure to research and thereby improve self-efficacy (Gilmore et al., 2016). Unfortunately, most fellowship programs are insufficient for full funding and poor labor law coverage currently complicate the fellowship option (Ludwig, 2015). Efforts

should be made to expand and improve fellowships to support students, provide opportunities for development, and create pathways for mentorship.

In June 2020, race relations and disparities in how people of different races are treated by those in power in America was thrust onto the global stage. After yet another killing of an unarmed African American male by police, this one broadcast globally, people all over the world took to the streets to protest the unequal treatment that African Americans, and other people of color throughout the world, deal with on a daily basis. The protests and anger that spilled out onto the streets of America and the world are a powerful reminder that despite progress the institutions that hold and exercise power must do so more equally. The systems in this country were built for a particular race and class and have left many minorities feeling left out (Baker & Moore, 2015; Henfield et al., 2013). Universities are a powerful gatekeeper into the world of academia. Transparency and inclusivity in education, mentorship, hiring, and promotion are needed to address and overcome the systemic racism built into the universities. Lower graduation rates for African American women and other minorities are a clear indication that there is room for improvement at every stage of the education pathway from encouragement of URM to engage in higher studies to processes to enable them to participate and succeed in the world of higher academia.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this study, I have provided analysis of the lived experience of seven African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program. This experience is most often situated in an educational environment where the women

experience academic life as an outsider and in some cases an imposter. Their race is a factor in the experience despite their hopes that race would not be an issue at higher levels of education. Most said that they were unprepared for the challenge of the dissertation and the shift from interpreting knowledge to becoming the creator of knowledge. Self-efficacy challenges were present in most, especially with regards to the literature review. Despite all challenges, some of them significant enough to see the student on academic probation, these women all see themselves as eventually succeeding. They have strong social and family support for this monumental task. Although chair relations were mixed, most negative experiences were ameliorated through positive committee function. These women recognize the challenges they have faced and want to reach out to others, particular to junior students just starting out to help light the way on this difficult journey. They value their experience and place great importance on their own roles—present or future—as counselor, teacher, and researcher.

The experiences of the women with whom I spoke conform with much of the research on the subject of doctoral completion. Despite some semantic disagreement, Flynn et al.'s (2012) Emergent Theory is a good fit conceptually for the experiences of these seven African American women in the dissertation phase of a CES doctoral program. The most significant divergence from Flynn et al. for my participants was the impact of race on their experience. This study found that the most common themes were individual traits, relationships, race, and challenges. These themes help illuminate the essence of what it is like for the women with whom I spoke to participate in the dissertation process. Understanding these themes can help educators and supervisors

engaging with these women understand what it is like for the student as they work through the final challenge between these women and the well-earned title of Doctor.

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## Appendix: Interview Protocol

### Script

Hello, my name is Beverly Townsend. I am currently a doctoral student at Walden University enrolled in the Counselor Education and Supervision doctoral program. My dissertation focuses on the lived experience of African American women who are enrolled in a dissertation program for their PhD in Counselor Education and Supervision. Thank you for participating in my study, but I want to ensure that you know you can stop the interview at any time and terminate your involvement in the study any time you wish. This interview is planned to run about an hour, and I would like to follow up with you once I have had a chance to analyze and process our conversation here for further clarification. My goal is to have a largely unscripted conversation about your experience, but I do have some prepared questions to help guide our conversation. Do you have any questions of me before we begin? Please remember you can stop at any time. Are you ready to begin?

### Interview Questions

- Describe for me your experience working on your dissertation.
- If there was a single word that could capture your experience with the dissertation what would it be?
- Are there aspects of your experience you would classify as barriers to completion? Can you talk about your experience with those barriers?
- What are the different influences that are affecting your experience with the dissertation?

- What personality traits do you feel have had an effect on your experience?
- How would you describe your dissertation chair's influence on your experience?
- How has the functioning of your dissertation committee affected your experience?
- How has the environment in which you are pursuing your studies affected your experience with the dissertation?
- How would you classify your experience overall with the dissertation?
- What aspects would you like to see sustained in your experience?
- What areas of your experience could be improved?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?